

We Will Miss Balagopal Dearly

————— Debaranjan Sarangi, Social Activist, Orissa

I was shocked on hearing of his demise. I simply refused to believe it. I could not gather the strength to call his land line or speak with Vasantha over her mobile. I called Visakhapatnam but Krishna had already left. I tried Warangal only to learn that Ramulu had also gone to Hyderabad. This was confirmation that he had left us. He was no more.

Was he killed? If so, then it was definitely by the police, I told myself. There was always the possibility. As an activist in a mass movement, I had felt the same way. When we are up against strong vested interests -- the corporates and the State, whose respect for democratic values is pathetic -- being killed is a distinct possibility. I had seen Balagopal's courage and single-mindedness of purpose in Kandhamal during our visit to that troubled district in September 2008 and our 4-day trip later on in May 2009 to south Orissa. He was a reticent person. He had written: *"If you have been a human rights activist long enough, you have come to terms with the idea that you could be killed some day"*.

We knew each other since a little over four years. Ever since, I would often tell friends: "There is a person you can contact any time you are in need". Balagopal was such a person - not confined to his State of Andhra Pradesh, or to his organisation - the Human Rights Forum. His canvass was much wider. He was absolutely clear and cogent about his ideology - protecting and

enriching the human rights of every individual as well as community rights. What 'ism' did he belong to? Was he a Marxist? He was not a Marxist in the strict political sense but he had deep respect for all egalitarian and democratic political ideologies and movements. What marked him was a profound ethical concern. He was extremely critical of the politics of the Sangh Parivar describing it as a vicious threat to the very notion of democracy.

It was in the summer of 2005 that we got to meet him though I was already familiar with his excellent writings in the *EPW*. We came across each other during the worst days of the Kashipur struggle against bauxite mining in Orissa. State repression on the Kashipur movement was at its peak and we were going through very hard times. Informal sections of the media and the smaller magazines were highlighting the ground-level situation truthfully. They reported on the adivasi anger over the project, the presence of paramilitary forces and how our activists were being picked up from the street, by the river side, from villages either at dawn or late in the night. The big media was by and large pro-corporate.

We had never thought that a 'democratic State' could behave with its citizens in such a brutal fashion. It did and it continues to do so. The post liberalization phase of the national economy had clearly changed the manner in which the State and its intruments dealt with the common people. Those close to power like ruling politicians, bureaucrats, policemen and even members of the judiciary hungrily lined up for easy corporate money. The corporates, on the other hand, often determined the course and tenor of State repression.

I remember that dusk in May 2005 when Balagopal and his committed team of HRF colleagues reached our main village Kucheipadar in Rayagada district. That was a time when we were virtually surrounded by all kinds of armed forces deployed by the State. Though we could not initially recognise him, the conversation went on and on. Both tribal men and women of the village sat late into the night and participated in the discussion.

Balagopal's words were marked by deep empathy for our struggle and we gained confidence: "Yes, he is our people", we told ourselves.

In 2006, as part of the Kashipur struggle we were thinking of taking up arms and joining the Maoists. This idea was a product of sheer desperation. The subsequent interaction for a year with Balagopal brought about a big change in our thinking. Before his arrival the Kashipur movement had decided to explore the path of violence. Earlier, we held a critical opinion about Maoism as well as Marxism. The identity politics of adivasis (also of Dalits) were looked upon by Marxists as a hindrance to the larger unity of proletariat struggle for the ushering in of the revolution as they envisaged it. But in 2006 when discussion started inside our organisation, we had two views within the leadership: to take to arms or not. We came in touch with Balagopal at that point and we shared our thoughts with him. Meanwhile, he had written in the *EPW* during 2006: "*The practice of the Maoists has been taken up by the guerrilla struggle against the State aimed at weakening its hold to a point where the area can be considered a liberated zone. This requires a range of acts of violence which have no direct relation to the immediate realisation of any rights for the masses, though the resulting repression invariably hits at the masses.*"

The radical Left, which had very little presence up to 2000 in Orissa, was barely involved in the many anti-displacement struggles going on at the time. Had we decided to join the radical Left, we would have been the first mass movement opposing a big corporate (opposing mining-opposing displacement) to do so. As Balagopal rightly pointed out: "*There was a ground situation that made the choice a rational possibility and therefore the theoretical belief persuasive.*" We eventually decided in late 2006 not to go in for the armed option. We realised that the centralised structures of decision making within armed political processes would not listen to us and afford us proper space. According to him: "*Perhaps the highly centralized nature of the Bolshevik*

model that has become the norm of Communist organisation is itself a hindrance to innovativeness, while it may certainly have virtues of a military nature.” We were unwilling to invite more repression upon us.

Orissa has a history of struggles against displacement by mega projects. Angry opposition to such projects was seen the first time in 1985-86 when Balco company (then in the public sector) wanted to mine bauxite from the Gandhamardan hill range in the Fifth Schedule parts of western Orissa. There were similar sustained struggles launched against the Baliapal Missile Testing Range, Tata Prawn Cultivation Project in Chilika, Tata Steel Company at Gopalpur and the UAIL Bauxite Mining and Alumina Project at Kashipur.

Surprisingly, the Naxalite movement in the 1960-70s in neighboring West Bengal had no impact in Orissa. There were some who did join it and tried to 'bring the struggle here', but it failed to take off. In the 1980s when the Naxalite movement's second phase spread in Andhra Pradesh, principally the Telangana region, and there was a solid Dalit uprising post-Karamchedu in 1985 that too failed to create any wave in Orissa. Even extreme poverty in Kalahandi and Bolangir districts containing 'objective conditions' did not usher in processes that the Marxists usually believed in. Orissa's political culture was mostly influenced by Gandhian and socialist ideology for a long time. Slogans like 'land to the tiller' and 'caste discrimination' failed to have an impact, but anti-displacement struggles unleashed energies and hope in mass political movements. Even parties like the CPI were forced to oppose the Tata steel company at Gopalpur in 1995 because of the involvement of their local cadres in the struggle against the project. The Kashipur movement was significant also because functionaries of various struggles that had predated it were called 'comrades or sangrami' by the Kashipur adivasis and Dalits. I had also become part of those full time sangrami within Kashipur struggle having earlier been involved in the anti-Tata fisher-folk struggle in the Chilika Lake.

However, the combined efforts of all those mass organisations and political parties (who had succeeded in their respective areas and several big projects were stopped) was not enough to sufficiently pressurise the government, given a post-liberalisation context, to respect our demands in Kashipur.

It is true that today's brutal State is rapidly closing in on spaces for democratic struggles, often jettisoning the rule of law. Otherwise, in Narayanapatna of Koraput district in southern Orissa, the tribal leaders would not have been branded as Maoist. Tribals in those areas started their struggle in 2005 and the next year their leader Nachika Linga was caught by the police. He was charged with 'conspiring against the State'. Significantly, the sessions court of Koraput cleared him from the charges stating: *"(what) they wanted (Chasi Mulia Adivasi Sangha) to achieve was a private or particular purpose i.e. to prevent exploitation of adivasi people and usurpation of their land by non-adivasi people. It has a political hue. The very fact that the accused Nachika was a people's representative (then a Naib Sarpanch) would show that he had respect for democratic institutions so also law of lands, contrary to what is being said about him."*

The adivasis of Koraput continue to struggle for realising their just demands. We went to the area in May 2009 along with Balagopal, traveling as part of a fact finding team looking into violence by the paramilitary forces as well as arbitrary killing of civilians by the Maoists. We went to Narayanpatna because a few days before the tribals had burnt the houses of Dalits alleging that the latter were grabbing tribal land and selling liquor in adivasi villages. There was a huge contingent of the CRPF in the town area of Narayanpatna. We went to Baliaput to meet Nachika Linga who was then president of the Chasi Mulia Adivasi Sangathan. We learnt that government officials including the District Collector and Revenue Divisional Commissioner of south zone had gone and met the leaders at their village.

In our press release, written by Balagopal we stated: *"We made it clear to the CMAS activists that even though their griev-*

ances are very genuine, the wholesale attack on the entire Dalit community of Padapadar rendering all of them homeless is unjustified and can lead to a dangerous communal situation. It is significant that though the grievances of the adivasis are against all the non-tribals, and the caste Hindus are guiltier it is only the Dalits who have been attacked, maybe because they are a relatively easy target. This is what happens when socio-economic issues are communalised.”

While welcoming the government's initiative in appointing land officers to settle the land issue, we advised them: “*Instead of sitting in the tahsil office waiting for the tribals to come and spell out their grievances, let the officers reach the people and organise a camp court at the panchayat level to settle the issues*”. But ultimately the land officers came back to the district head quarter and the CRPF (and now the Border Security Force as well) have reached the interior areas of Narayanpatna. Repression has intensified manifold and the forces are going all out to nab adivasi leaders. In due course, the government deliberately described the entire struggle of the adivasis as a Maoist effort and the mainstream media played along. The land issue is yet to be settled but ‘operation tribal hunt’ has started in earnest. Now hundreds of tribals are in jail with many more hiding out in the forest. The ground situation is changing rapidly and it is difficult to predict what course future events may take.

In Orissa the first generation of civil rights' activists were the Gandhians. Malati Choudhury and Nabakrushna Choudhury were prominent figures of the civil rights movement in 1970s. They formed the Orissa Nagarika Swadhikar Samiti and worked on issues related to police brutality. They opposed ‘encounter killings’ of Naxalite cadre in Orissa by the police during that decade. (The Naxalite formation owing allegiance to T Nagi Reddy was active in some parts of south Orissa that was close to Srikakulam). Post-Emergency, PUCL formed its Orissa branch and many more independent organisations like Ganatantrik Adhikar Surakshya Samiti and Swadhikar came into being.

However, they focused on highlighting State violence on people's movements but failed to look into other forms of rights violations particularly issues related to poverty, migration, caste and gender.

Which was why, we who were part of a mass movement were expecting civil rights activists to raise our concerns and condemn State atrocities on our struggle. Though mass struggles are not aimed at overthrowing State power but to achieve immediate demands relating to immediate problems of the masses, the response of the State is to unleash repression and try to crush them. The leaders of these mass struggles sometimes have a 'long term plan' seeking to bring 'emancipation' as per the ideology they believe in and State power fears that. The police is frequently and ruthlessly used as a weapon to 'usher in peace' in the area. Did the human rights movement have a separate ideology of emancipation or should it play only a supportive role to the mass struggle? For a long time this question was haunting me. I could not get time to ask Balagopal. In fact I was preparing myself for a long interview with him but it was not to be. In his writings he had espoused a strikingly original theory of the human rights movement:

“All political movements of the deprived and the oppressed, whatever their politics and whatever their form, are in a sense movements for rights, and many of them are quite substantial in their strength and spread. But the rights movement as such, constituted by the various civil, democratic and human rights organisations, is numerically slight and scattered in its spread. Why should it presume to duplicate the work of bigger and better organised Dalit, women's, adivasis and workers' organisations? The only possible answer to this question lies in recognising that a right has a civilisational significance over and above the gap it fills in the existence of the people who demand it at a given point of time. This is by no means to suggest that such people invariably and inevitably construe the rights they demand as narrow needs and not as values. Some times they do, and we

seem to be going through a phase of history when such narrowness is more than typical. But it need not be so, and is not always so. Nevertheless, there is a distinct task of the espousal of a right as a civilisational value over and above the immediate demands that it is articulated to. Such espousal, to begin with, makes the value in question an element of social consciousness in general. From there it can be articulated to other needs and situations not dreamt of by the people whose struggle gave rise to it in the first place”.

“The Dalit movement, in its emphasis on the equal worth of all human beings, stresses a norm without which civilisation can hardly be complete, in India or any where. Only, it took a people systematically denied worth to recognise that such a principle underlies any respect-worthy notion of civilisation. Babasaheb Ambedkar encapsulated it in his memorable formula: one man one value. It took a Dalit to formulate it in such terse language, but once it is so formulated it is easily identified as a principle whose reach goes well beyond the movement for the annihilation of caste. To take it beyond and help its reproduction in other relevant contexts is a task in itself. The women's movement has focussed, among other things, on authority and power in interpersonal relations, and on human relations in general. That women are subjected to such authority and power every moment of their existence makes it apt that the questioning of authority as a human relation should come from the women's movement, but once it is made explicit, it ceases to be a matter of concern for women alone and becomes a matter of general concern for any democratic definition of civilisation. It lights a torch that will thenceforth look at every realm of human existence to ferret out symptoms of power.”

It was Balagopal who brought the issues of caste, gender, region, environment, self-determination, migration, starvation deaths, uneven development, farmers' suicide and minority rights to the fore in a forcefully persuasive and convincing manner and over the years made them acceptable concerns of the

human rights movement in India. His insights are invaluable. Distinguishing between struggle and life situations he says: *“The rights movement has paid disproportionate attention to struggle theorizing that it is struggles that change the world. ...Perhaps the majority of human beings at any given time are not organised, and more unable to organise themselves and unorganised people require different types of assistance.”*

His idea of human being is: *“As a human being one is entitled to equal worth, equal status and equal opportunity. One is entitled to freedom, of conscience, thought and action. One is entitled to life, a healthy, dignified and fully rounded life”*. Stressing on the need to take democracy seriously, Balagopal quotes from Ambedkar: *“Democracy (the Communists describe it as bourgeoisie democracy) presupposes a vibrant community of people who communicate with each other, share other's life, and as a genuine collectivity decide by a consensus or a majority what is the best for them all”*. And he adds: *“Democracy, to be a healthy growth, requires active political participation in debating the problems of society and in seeking their resolution”*. He has an agenda for every citizen to contribute to a ‘meaningful democracy’ and ‘constitutional governance’ without which a responsive democracy is impossible.

Chidambaram, the present Home Minister sometimes speaks of his tolerance for human rights and says that ‘it should not come in opposition to double digit growth rate’. A condition is set out, beyond which State power would not tolerate us - neither to be Ambedkar's vibrant community or of Balagopal's active political participation. It could be true that this terrible repression let lose by Chidambaram is to pave way for those mining companies who are facing resistance from tribals e.g. Hindalco (in Narayanpatna), Essar and Tata (in Bastar of Chhatisgarh), Mittal and Posco mining site (in Keonjhar of Orissa) and such others.

Also, the politics of the Sangh Parivar is gaining wider currency in Orissa as well as all over India. Extremely worrisome is

the adoption of its divisive worldview by sections of tribal and Dalit communities - rendered most vulnerable by the same upper caste Hindu society. In the Kandhamal communal violence tribals in large numbers participated in looting and destroying the houses of the same tribals as well as Dalits only because they were Christians. Where does this hatred spring from? In a sense, Kandhamal shows up the weakness of the Dalit and tribal identity struggles in the State. Were these strong, they would have targeted Brahminism and the Hindu Right much before. When we were pondering over the absence of identity movements, Balagopal was onto a broader democratic articulation. He stated: *“The fight against the Sangh Parivar, whether on the political terrain or in civil society, whether in the realm of power or that of values, is the fight over the idea and the reality of the India we want. A human society committed to political, social and economic justice, freedom from fear and want, liberty of thought, belief and practice, inalienable dignity of person, opportunities of equitable growth, peace in its relations with other societies and nature or an aggressive power-mongering polity based on a hierarchical and monolithic society?”*

Dwelling on the rights of the individual as well as community rights and what was to be done when the two came into opposition, Balagopal writes: *“The distinction between individual-centered and collectivity-centered rights is not absolute or mutually inimical. Individual centered rights entail certain rights of collectivities, and the logic of the former can form a philosophical basis for the justification of the latter.”*

Orissa is witnessing large scale displacement and violence due to retrograde policies of the government and we are trying to work towards a better and responsive civil society. Apart from protesting rights violations, a vibrant and democratic-minded civil society can create pressure on the government and bring out into the open people oriented issues for debate and discussion.

Balagopal's many visits to Orissa over the past few years were helping us in that direction. His sudden death is a big shock to all of us and leaves a huge void. The ongoing struggles, whether of the adivasis in Narayanpatna and Kalahandi, or of the Dalit victims of Kandhamal, the peasants of POSCO area or Dalits and tribal peasants of Kalinganagar and Kashipur, have all lost a dear friend and inspiration.

