

REMEMBERING BALAGOPAL: THE MAN WHO EXPOSED THE BRUTALITY OF ANDHRA'S ENCOUNTER KILLINGS

Pavan Korada

The News Minute; 18 October 2016



A tireless defender of the rights of the oppressed, he was one of the greatest human rights and civil liberties activist the world has ever seen. Revered by his followers, he was admired for his intellectual originality and moral courage even by the enemy. At a time when fake encounter killings were not even morally unsettling, forget also being illegal, Balagopal as part of the APCLC questioned the atrocities of the state.

So much so, that the Andhra police, who did not even answer to their political masters, went to great lengths to fabricate evidence to prove that these encounters were not fake. In a rare interview, with his disarming smile that often appeared when he was abashed, Balagopal admits that these — the fact that encounter

means murder and forcing moral accountability from the police — are the two greatest contributions of the Human Rights movement in Andhra Pradesh.

Balagopal grew up reading essays on socialism written by Bertrand Russell; and, in his own words, inculcated roughly the same attitude as Russell's, that 'communists are good in the heart, but wrong in the head'.

But the experience of the Emergency changed him. First, nothing in Russell's philosophy could explain the Emergency, therefore, he was looking for answers. Second, his introduction to India's greatest historian, and the other mathematics scholar (Balagopal, by then had a PhD in Mathematics in Probability theory and was teaching at Warangal University) DD Kosambi. In the introduction to a book that he has written to introduce Kosambi to Telugu readers, he confesses that he declared to himself that he is a Marxist after reading an essay by Kosambi on the Bhagavad Gita.

Later on, as a consequence of his engagement with the Maoist movement, he, as any true Marxist would (here I do not mean the dogmatic variety), raised questions about its philosophy. His fundamental critique was that instead of understanding socialism — which is the idea of an 'equal society' — as a conscious aspiration that is historically tied up to the evolution of material life forces, it has and is being understood as an involuntary aspiration which is born out of inevitability from the material conditions of certain classes. But he continued to be a sympathiser in a more humanist tradition.

Commemorating his 7th death anniversary, the Human Rights Forum, which he setup in 1998, organised an event in Hyderabad on the October 9, inviting speakers from various backgrounds to speak on issues dominating social reality in our country. A quote, simple yet profound, by Balagopal on the event poster captured my attention: "The essence of human rights is the notion of equality in human value and worth".

My first memory association, after reading the quote, was something I read in Sudhir and Katharina Kakkar's book *The Indians — Portrait of a People*. In the first chapter, titled 'Hierarchical Man', they talk about how a person's self-worth is exclusively determined by the rank he occupies, alone or as part of his family, in the profoundly hierarchical nature of Indian society. This deeply hierarchical principle subconsciously, is always invoked in most, almost all, interpersonal

interactions. They further go on to say, quite rightly, that Indians are perhaps the world's most undemocratic people, living in the world's largest and most plural democracy.

This problematic aspect was reflected in every theme addressed by the speakers during the event. Umar Khalid, from JNU, spoke about the stifling of dissenting voices in the country but letting Gau Rakshaks — turned lynch mobs — to run scott free, simply because they disagreed with the State's ideology; the inequality and perversion of the right to freedom of expression. Lamenting on a similar, but more primitive and bloody scenario in Bastar, Manish Kunjam, from the Adivasi Mahasabha, spoke about the inherent State and corporate ideology of considering the loss of rights and lives of the tribals as an unavoidable part of India's development; 'expendable' tribal lives do not have equal worth as the others.

Prof. KY Ratnam, from the Hyderabad Central University, spoke about caste discrimination, which obviously has its basis in a hierarchical worldview, in educational institutions. Khurram Parvez, from the Jammu and Kashmir Coalition of Civil Society, who was supposed to speak on the Kashmir problem, was replaced at the last moment because he was arrested by the State under the notorious Public Safety Act in New Delhi. I don't think anything more needs to be said regarding this matter.

In a society, which reveres both the Manu's Dharmasastras and the Bhagavad Gita — both at the core of its social psyche — which, in no uncertain terms, uphold the idea of social 'harmony' rather than the idea of social 'equality', merely speaking, forget relentlessly fighting for it like Balagopal, about 'equality in human value and worth' is in itself a radical act.

It is important to say a few words about the determination of Balagopal. When asked in an interview, by Deepa Dhanraj, as to why he is doing whatever he is doing, he proffers a very mechanical explanation instead of a teleological explanation, which is usually the norm. He says he could, in terms of ordinary analysis, rationalise and say that he has a deep commitment towards Human Rights. But in doing so, he wouldn't be completely honest; he cannot stop this and become an ordinary lawyer because if he does not do this work he would lose all sense of reality.

Balagopal did not die of some major illness; a tiny ulcer in the stomach, caused due to irregular and neglected food habits killed him. Socrates, in the Phaedo, developed the implications of his ascetic morality. He says the philosopher will not abstain from the pleasures of sense, but will be thinking of other things. Balagopal was, according to his friends, was so completely lost in work that he always forgot his meals. Balagopal was acting, as Plato would say he should: he was not abstaining from food by means of a moral effort but was more interested in other matters; with a razor sharp precision and single-minded focus.

Balagopal is easily one of the most original thinkers and inspiring activists this country has ever produced.