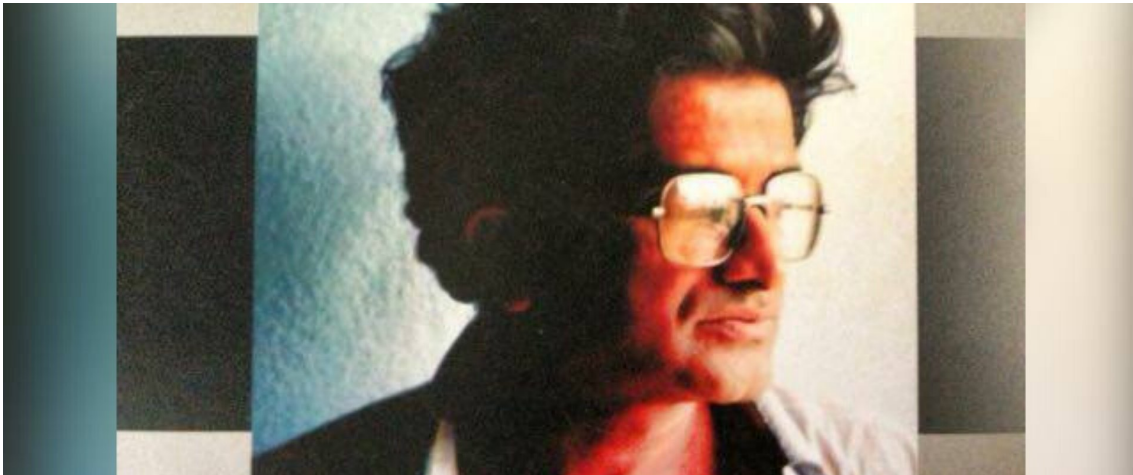


## In Memory of K Balagopal: Mathematician, Lawyer, and Social Activist

EPW ENGAGE

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*K Balagopal, through his work for the subaltern in Andhra Pradesh, has left an indelible mark on its sociopolitical landscape.*

Born on 10 June 1952, K Balagopal was a trained mathematician who left academia and reinvented himself as a human rights activist in his home state of Andhra Pradesh. His work for the downtrodden and oppressed classes of Andhra society has been well documented, and Balagopal himself was a [regular contributor to EPW](#) from the early 1980s up until his death in 2009, and never refrained from criticising both state violence as well as excesses by Maoist insurgents.

Balagopal was most critical of structured inequality, which he argued was the source of most human rights violations, and was the greatest threat to Indian democracy. He [contended](#) that fascism was on the rise in India as the state resorted to violence on the streets to quell growing public anger over its inability to expand welfare policies due to skewed economic growth. As a lawyer, he worked assiduously and tirelessly towards fighting for the rights of the marginalised. He worked extensively in the Maoist-affected areas of Andhra Pradesh, and was so well versed with the Indian Penal Code that he was often able to prove where the state had overstepped its own laws. In 1998, he helped form the [Human Rights Forum](#), which, to this day, examines the denial of human rights due to structured inequality. Thus, perhaps fittingly, he has been [described as](#) “the conscience of the collective self known as Andhra society.”

This reading list is a collection of tributes published in EPW after Balagopal passed in 2009. They cover his life as a mathematician, lawyer, and activist, and are an homage to his unwavering sense of justice.

## 1) A Reluctant Mathematician

Naresh Kumar Sharma [writes](#) on his relationship with Balagopal, which began at the Indian Statistical Institute, Delhi, where he reminisces how the “scholarly and quiet” Balagopal took on a new avatar during discussions on sociopolitical issues, where his Marxist leanings and analyses of issues indicated his commitment to an exploitation-free world.

By the middle of 1980, Balagopal was becoming very restless in Delhi. He could not see himself working only on beautiful theorems of mathematical statistics, while there was so much to do at a socio-political plane. One day he decided to go back to Andhra Pradesh and find true meaning to his life. He was in one of the best institutions in his field in the world. He could have continued to be there as long as he desired ... He lived a simple and almost frugal life. He genuinely abhorred personal accumulation. He was a brilliant high court lawyer and yet he refused to “earn” more than what would meet the needs and help him in carrying on with the cause of human rights

## 2) ‘To Condemn Oppression Is to Condemn at least a Little Bit of Oneself’

Ajay Gudavarthy [writes](#) that Balagopal believed that an exclusively critical attitude was counterproductive to any transformative activity. As a civil rights activist, Gudavarthy states that Balagopal held himself to an unflinchingly high standard when criticising the state, even when the consequences were grave.

The willingness to pay the price was alone capable of absolving one from the negativity (and the accompanying self) hidden in the act of criticism, resonating a classical Gandhian moment. He was all alone in the forefront in naming police officers in Andhra Pradesh involved in extra-judicial violence and in demanding that murder charges be framed against them, in pointing to the hidden role of mafia, mercenaries appointed by the police, and their nexus with land mafia ... His unwillingness to slow down was as much about his concern for the growing forms of violence, from state initiated to the more insidious ones, as it was about making sure of the absent self that seemed to be patiently waiting to make a comeback, just in case.

## 3) An Unflinching Stance on Human Rights

As the general secretary of the Andhra Pradesh Civil Liberties Committee, Bela Bhatia [writes](#) that Balagopal was fearless in his criticism of the organisation, asserting that a human rights organisation had to struggle against not just class dominance, but also against the non-institutionalised forms of dominance, and which thus worked with all democratic movements.

Till today many of his friends who are closer to the other stream have not forgiven him for speaking out and calling a spade a spade. In 1998, after five years of democratic debate within the APCLC, Balagopal and other like-minded members left APCLC and formed the Human Rights Forum (HRF). In the last decade, HRF has expanded from a 32-member organisation to a 300- member organisation with a presence in nearly all districts of Andhra Pradesh. At the theoretical level, HRF thinking represents a third perspective on human rights in India (the first two being represented broadly by the People's Union for Civil Liberties and the People's Union for Democratic Rights, respectively, along with similar thinking organisations).

Furthermore, as a lawyer, Bhatia [says](#) that Balagopal only took up cases of the marginalised sections of society: Dalits, Adivasis, minorities, and women, charging them only a nominal fee.

He typed all the petitions himself—with only his index finger—so that his clients were not burdened with the extra cost. In the last decade of assiduous practice I am not sure how many cases he handled, but they must have been many judging from the fact that he has left behind 800 pending cases. His effort to use law for justice paid off in many cases in getting significant orders, for example, that only adivasi teachers would be appointed to teach in the schools in adivasi areas in Andhra Pradesh or that reservations for the backward castes among students as well as teachers had to apply also in the universities.

#### **4) Balagopal, the Lawyer**

Vasudha Nagaraj [writes](#) that Balagopal's work as a lawyer fighting for employment rights of labourers often pitted him against formidable opposition, whom he faced unflinchingly. Such cases involved challenging the retrenchment of workers, non-payment of salaries, and the right to go on strikes in factories, clubs, and in five-star hospitals.

He chose to practise on behalf of labour, and thereby, had a considerable filing in the labour courts, Andhra Pradesh administrative tribunal, central

administrative tribunal, central government industrial tribunal and labour commissioner's office ... Balagopal faced not just formidable legal opposition, but several levels of unscrupulous practices by lawyers engaged by the managements of these workplaces. They would often indulge in the popular practice of taking several adjournments and filing unwarranted petitions to wear out the opponent. Balagopal would be quite unfazed and not allow these unscrupulous practices to deter him from pursuing the case. He would hold on to the case through these long and tiring adjournments and counsel the client that such is the practice of law.

Balagopal also fought for the rights of the marginalised. His colleagues estimate that Balagopal, through his work in the high court, managed to secure thousands of acres of land for tribals.

He used the writ jurisdiction in countering the state's actions in promoting the interests of the non-tribals in grabbing tribal lands, business propositions and employment opportunities that were originally meant for the tribal community. In many of these cases the enquiry had to be reopened to correctly represent the claims of the tribals ... In the area of education and employment, he took up a number of service sector cases, where he defended scheduled caste/scheduled tribe (SC/ST) employees who were not considered for employment/promotion and fought for the right implementation of the provisions of reservations.

## **Read More:**

1. [Maoist Justice vs Liberal Justice: A Tribute to K Balagopal | Tanay Balantrapu, 2019](#)
2. [Maoist Movement in Andhra Pradesh | K Balagopal, 2006](#)
3. [Justice for Dalits Among Dalits | K Balagopal, 2005](#)

## **Image-Credit/Misc:**

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*The earlier version of this article had an error regarding K Balagopal's birth date. This has been corrected. The error is regretted.*

# Economic & Political WEEKLY

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ISSN (Online) - 2349-8846

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