

**TEACHER, ACTIVIST AND LAWYER: REMEMBERING HUMAN RIGHTS
ACTIVIST BALAGOPAL**

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The News Minute; 09 October 2020



NEWS TRIBUTE FRIDAY, OCTOBER 09, 2020 - 08:18

It was 11 years ago that K Balagopal, a fierce human rights activist, lawyer and a profound intellectual, passed away. More than a decade later, there is not a single people's movement that isn't feeling the void of his absence. Be it the rights of Adivasis, atrocities on Dalits and question of caste and displacement in the name of development projects, Balagopal walked to each corner of the Telugu land and other conflict zones in the country, wherever he felt his voice was required.

Balagopal was born to Kandalla Parthanatha Sarma and Rallapalli Nagamani in Ballari of Karnataka. A brilliant student in Mathematics, he completed his primary education in different towns in Andhra Pradesh and completed his graduation at Tirupati. Later, he studied MSc in Mathematics and did his PhD in Warangal's Regional Engineering College, which is present-day National Institute of Technology (NIT).

He returned to Warangal's Kakatiya University to teach mathematics after completing postdoctoral studies in Delhi, where he began associating with the Andhra Pradesh Civil Liberties Committee. It was in 1985 that he quit teaching, to dedicate himself to civil rights activism.

In 1998, the Human Rights Forum (HRF) was formed by as many as 35 people including Balagopal, following a meticulous debate for six years in civil rights circles on the role of the state, understanding Marxism and the question of violence and caste in Indian society.

From common people to renowned personalities, Balagopal was a familiar person as an activist and a lawyer. His voice echoed in many Adivasi hamlets when they were hit with calamities or when there were Naxal encounters.

Balagopal also wrote several books and essays in noted dailies and in publications such as Economical and Political Weekly (EPW) on different issues concerning the most vulnerable sections of society. His intellectual arguments on reservations for Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) and Other Backward Classes are still relevant and continue to be cited.

"Questioning power from wherever we are. Meaningful defiance. He taught this philosophy to a generation of rights activists before leaving," these lines in an HRF bulletin, a year after his demise, sum up what he strived for and what he wanted his allies to do.

Jeevan Kumar, senior activist of HRF and long-time associate of Balagopal remembers him as the person who drove human rights activism in the legal framework as well.

"Besides putting up petitions, campaigning with pamphlets and organising public meetings, Balagopal started going to the courts in Warangal," he says.

Be it his observation of communalism or the human rights violations in Kashmir, if one reads Balagopal now also, we feel that those pieces were recently written, though they are one or two decades old. Such was his foresight on politics that was shaping India. His three decades of activism was never confined to limited issues as he even talked about the categorisation demand within SC reservation as much as he talked about atrocities on Dalits as a whole.

For his writings and legal work, he often faced attacks and threats by known and unknown organisations.

A simple man

Many recall his down-to-earth working style and remember him as a person who never expected or wanted special treatment as a senior functionary in the organisation.

Jayashree K, HRF General Secretary and a long time associate of Balagopal from 1988, recalls him as a most "humane intellectual".

Jayashree, based out of Kadapa, remembers how Balagopal brought the violence of factionism in the region, into the purview of human rights violations. In a brief conversation, she said, "Be it the encounters or factionism that ruled the roost in erstwhile Pulivendula or even a case of dowry harassment, he looked at every case as important. He never had any limitations about what issues only one should look at as a human rights advocate."

When asked about what is the most memorable event that strikes her about Balagopal, she says, "In 1990, a middle-aged woman's husband was picked up by the police and his whereabouts were not known. After knowing that she should go to the High Court to file a petition, she reached Hyderabad, where she met Balagopal."

He gave a letter to the woman asking her to give that to Jayashree in Kadapa, in which he asked her (Jayashree) to check with the local police inspector about the whereabouts of the woman's husband. Soon after she enquired, the local police had to produce him before a local court.

Jayashree recalls, "He will come down to the level of the person he is talking to, speaking with people in their own language and listening to whatever they say, irrespective of their age or so called intellectual position, which was a rare quality."

'If Balagopal was alive!' is a common phrase that is still used in intellectual circles of progressive movements even 11 years after his death. Many say that Balagopal's ideas and ideals continue to stand out even today.