

AN INSPIRATIONAL TEACHER WHO RADICALISED THE CONCEPT OF PEDAGOGY

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The sudden and unexpected death of Dr. K. Balagopal left many in the country in a state of absolute disbelief and shock; It has also generated a wide variety of responses and personal postings— ranging from wide reportage in the print and electronic media to personal postings on network sites, blogs etc. While the bereaved family and the entire fraternity of human rights movement in India, and also elsewhere, will take some time to come to terms with the enormous loss and void created by his death that cannot be adequately captured in words or expressions, the enormity of human solidarity and warmth of outpourings of memory and acquaintance that his death could generate stands testimony to his towering influence not just on human rights movement but also on a wide range of social concerns.

Balagopal was known to many of us as a reserved person, always preferred deeds to words, hardly ever spoke about himself even when he was prodded to reflect on himself, spent significant time in thinking and writing in solitude, or quietly, yet solidly, in building civil liberties movement in the state of Andhra Pradesh, first APCLC and then HRF. As some of the outpourings recollected, for many of us he always reminded the ‘humble extraordinary’. But the realisation that Balagopal is no longer the name of an individual that we knew but the signifier of a phenomenon of our times is just beginning to sink in, and perhaps will take a long time to capture in its entirety.

It was suggested that changes in knowledge production—both material as well as human— may be understood through the concept of ‘paradigm shift’, and by that consideration Balagopal inspired a ‘paradigm shift’ in social action in India in general and in the human rights movement in particular. The important issue perhaps is not whether such a paradigm shift should be agreeable to all or many, rather to render diverse explanations as to why and how his individual views could generate a paradigm shift.

First and foremost, Balagopal will be remembered as an inspirational teacher who radicalised the concept of pedagogy and inspired a wide range of younger students and activists. Radical moments have always imagined social action processes as sites of radical pedagogy. The far-left traditions of social action in Andhra Pradesh have no doubt continued that imagination. However, Balagopal's approach to pedagogy differed on two fundamental counts. First, that strong disagreements in understanding social reality need not lead to judging other's understanding as 'erroneous', and second, democratising sites of radical thought and action, which is a fundamental requisite to make the 'radical' nature of those sites sustained and lasting, demands reflexive modesty and 'teaching by inspiration', but not by imparting. Since the early days when he authored the APCLC manifesto, 'what are civil rights?' way back in 1981 till his last breath Balagopal took his reflexive modesty seriously. Not only that he never was concerned about 'authorship' of many writings that he generously contributed to the movement, but also more fundamentally never lost sight of the need to be perpetually reflexive to explore newer explanations and understanding in the light of emerging social realities. He thus demanded opening up of a number of key categories of social analyses, which otherwise acquired unquestionable status within the radical movements in the country. The point however is not as to whose view point is the 'right' view point, rather the fact that through his efforts that he could force the social movements to further reflect on those key categories in itself is a step in the direction of democratising the sites of radical action.

Further, Balagopal demonstrated to many ordinary Indians that all of us potentially capable of contributing, silently yet firmly, to the process of democratising—both the structures of governance as well as sites of radical action and thought—by embracing integrity in thought and practice and never giving up on the daunting demands of reflexivity in action. For example, by his uncompromised critical analyses of radical social action processes without either losing faith in radical social action itself, or becoming judgemental of the methods and means of radical action (as opposed to contextualised criticism of acts of violence), Balagopal had shown that debate on violence in social action needs to go beyond the enlightenment problem of 'taking sides'. Even his latest reflection 'beyond violence and non-violence' is a measured and qualified reflection that reiterates the need to go beyond taking sides.

Balagopal will also be remembered as a key architect of building an independent or autonomous human rights movement in the country, especially in the state of Andhra Pradesh. From the very beginning of civil liberties movement in India, ever since the Indian Civil Liberties Union in 1936, autonomy (from political movements/parties) has been a perpetual issue, notwithstanding the colour and creed of the political parties associated with the activity—initially Congress, then Socialists, then the Jan Sangh, then the Left parties and then finally the far-left parties. There were many voices that both advocated as well as tried for building an autonomous civil liberties movement. What makes Balagopal's contributions in this direction somewhat unique is on two counts. First, he carried forward the historical concerns around utilitarian expedience of political parties versus normative principles of the civil liberties movement, and widened the horizons of that debate. One of the first things he did in strengthening the structures of APCLC in the early 1980s was to attempt series of clarifications on the 'normative framework' of civil liberties movement and the need to analyse social events in the light of those norms rather than the frameworks or strategic positions of political movements/parties. The normative understanding need not necessarily be uniformal, but the terms of engagement must be normative. Similarly, his contribution in acknowledging and rectifying the hitherto unreflected and exclusionary perspective of civil liberties movement on issues of caste and gender in the mid 1980s is both noteworthy as well as reiteration of the need for movements to be self-reflexive in order to remain democratic. In a sense, Balagopal demonstrated that 'autonomous movement' does not mean mere disassociation from the political parties and their movements or objectives, but more substantively, is about constantly reinterpreting and widening the number of social concerns that the human rights movement should include into its activities, and thereby widening the human rights perspective.

Second, perhaps the most unique contribution is to create organisational structures of the movement that are sufficiently decentralised and grassroots oriented. The fact that he was in the forefront of two key organisations, APCLC and HRF during the last three decades in the state of Andhra Pradesh that have/had state-wide presence and activities is sufficient to suggest his leadership capabilities as well as his commitment to make the human rights movement organisationally sustainable.

In descriptive terms, thus, the ‘paradigm shift’ that Balagopal seems to have propelled in the human rights movement is at once, normative, organisational and pedagogic that made the human rights movement acquire a radical and unprecedented trajectory of its life. It is impossible to think about serious human rights activism today without reference to these three dimensions. Considering that he was rather reserved and relatively invisible face of the movement, his contributions demonstrate that he was truly a quiet colossus, a silent tide, an unassuming phenomenon! The serious human rights movement will miss him rather dearly in these crucial times of new challenges. A fitting tribute to such a leader would be not just carrying forward his work, but carry forward in a way that can propel yet another paradigm shift in human rights movement. Carrying forward Balagopal, however, we must remember, is not either in agreement with his views or believing what he said—rather it is embracing the key values he lived by, namely critical pedagogy, reflexive modesty and commitment to building organisations.