

little favour for a big cause--G S Vasu

As I walked down to the parking space in my apartment this morning and looked at my 25-year-old motorbike, I did not attempt to control the tears that rolled down my eyes. Lying unused for some years now, the bike was mute testimony to the hundreds of kilometres that I travelled as a youngster with Dr Kandadai Balagopal in the late '80s to probe instances of violation of human rights in the rural areas of Andhra Pradesh. And if there was one report that I hated to file in my 22-year career, it was the one that I did on Thursday night following the sudden death of one of the most respected human rights activists the country has ever produced.



My years of active association with Balagopal were few, as growing professional demands kept me away from other activities. My only contribution to his work lay in ensuring that his waitlisted railway tickets were confirmed so that he could travel wherever he wanted in the relentless pursuit of human rights protection in which he engaged himself for three decades.

For the civil rights movement in the country, Andhra Pradesh in particular, Balagopal was not just an individual. He was an institution. Born into a traditional Brahmin family in 1952, he was a brilliant student of mathematics in which he obtained a doctorate. He went on to join the Indian Institute of Statistics for a post-doctoral but gave up midway, frustrated after one of his teachers was said to have taken credit for what was essentially his work.

He returned to Warangal in the early '80s to teach mathematics at Kakatiya University at a time when the Naxalite movement was at its peak. “Encounter” killing of Naxalites, a majority of them mere sympathisers, was routine. Beating up people who gave shelter or food to Naxalites was another method employed by the police. Quite a few were picked up and their whereabouts were never known in what were then described as “missing cases”.

A Marxist at heart, it did not take him long to decide what he should do — he gave up teaching and transformed himself into a full-time activist of the Andhra Pradesh Civil Liberties Committee (APCLC). From then on, life changed for him while the poor and the oppressed found their voice in him.

Over the years, there was perhaps not even a single incident of alleged human rights violation that Balagopal did not take up. He would religiously visit each and every place where such incidents took place in remote areas, talk to the victims, prepare a report and then highlight it to seek redress. All through, he remained a simpleton to the core and never sought material comforts. A couple of shirts and trousers and just enough money to travel in a state-run bus, and he always had people waiting to offer him a cup of tea or food. Hundreds of “encounters” in the state would have been legitimised but for the work by him and his human rights colleagues. The state tried everything that was possible, yet he did not give up. He was beaten up on more than one occasion, including once in my hometown in Khammam district, in an attempt to stifle voices from questioning what the establishment did to control the Naxalites.

Apart from being arrested and sent to jail, he was even kidnapped once by members of a self-styled organisation called “Praja Bandhu”, but believed by many as a front of the police force. After three days in captivity, he was let off near the Express office in Hyderabad, perhaps as a mark of protest over the manner in which the newspaper highlighted the kidnap episode.

By the mid-90s, however, the framework of the civil rights movement had undergone a change and this is perhaps Balagopal’s single biggest contribution. As Naxalites began killing individuals branding them informers and resorted to kidnap to get their demands

fulfilled, he felt the civil rights movement should not be limited to taking up issues of state violence against civil society. He vehemently questioned the acts of the Naxalites, broke away from APCLC and formed a separate outfit — Human Rights Forum (HRF).

From then on, he consciously expanded the human rights movement beyond the Constitution. He took up the plight of beedi workers who were paid ridiculously low wages and espoused the cause of Dalits and tribals who continued to be exploited by various forces. Cases of women who faced harassment at home and ended lives in what were routinely dismissed in the media as “dowry deaths” did not miss his attention either. As economic activity grew and in the process threw up new issues, he was up to it, highlighting the cause of those displaced by Special Economic Zones in Nandigram in West Bengal or the coastal belt of Andhra Pradesh.

This is apart from the numerous visits he had made to Kashmir and Chhattisgarh to highlight the plight of those sandwiched in the fight between State vs Maoists. He did all this even as he donned the role of a lawyer a decade ago as a part of which he fought hundreds of cases in the High Court, free of cost, on behalf of the poor. If he was preoccupied with legal work from Monday to Friday, the weekends were reserved for his field visits. He would type the petitions himself so that his clients were not burdened.

A man of unquestionable integrity, what also makes Balagopal stand out from other activists was the fact that he never indulged in rhetoric or limited his activity to lectures in auditoria. A barefoot activist firmly rooted in grassroots activism, he studied issues in-depth and came up with unimpeachable data in support of his arguments, which even his opponents would accept in private.

Thus, his incisive analysis of social and economic issues in the Economic & Political Weekly or the articles he wrote for newspapers in the state were always taken with the kind of seriousness that they deserved. No wonder, when he was kidnapped in 1987, his colleagues at the Indian Statistical Institute sent a letter to EPW highlighting how brilliant a student he was though his stint there was short.

It was only a few days ago that he called to enquire about my health even as he requested for, what turned out to be the last time, confirmation of a train ticket to Anantapur where

a conference of HRF was scheduled. Neither of us had any inkling about what was in store for him. Of course, he never cared about himself. As a dutiful father, he used to teach his only son every day just as he chose to do it even on Thursday despite ill-health when he collapsed.

For years, he lived with unrest in his mind over things that he had seen. Perhaps his blood vessels couldn't take it any longer and burst. I will surely miss the little favour that I was doing him for a bigger cause. And, on a larger scale, it will be long before the human rights movement finds such a committed activist.