

# Remembering the Delhi Days

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This Diwali we would be seeing a new star on the firmament. An illustrious son of this soil, K Balagopal left us quietly without any fuss, just as he had lived – hidden from the public glare, but working silently and assiduously towards a more humane world. His life and ideas are going to illuminate our path for a long time to come and just as thousands of voices proclaimed at his funeral, “long live Balagopal”, so will he continue to live in the hearts and minds of people across the length and breadth of this country. In a span of less than six months, Andhra Pradesh has lost two of its most courageous and committed activists – first G Narendranath earlier this year and now Balagopal.

## Bright Statistics Scholar

It was more than 30 years ago that I first met Balagopal. He was already at the Indian Statistical Institute, Delhi (ISI/D) for his postdoctoral fellowship in statistics when I joined ISI/D as a junior research fellow. It was a very small student community (including research fellows) of about 35 with very little extra academic activity. That was a year (1979-80) of some of the most momentous international events – Iran underwent a revolution of far-reaching consequences; the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics armies moved into Afghanistan and Rhodesia became an independent Zimbabwe. Echoes of those events reverberate throughout the world even today. Balagopal was a very quiet person even then. We often talked and also played table tennis together. However, it took some time to see the real fire burning in the bosom of then a budding and bright statistics scholar. It was only after liberation of Zimbabwe, when some posters appeared in our hostel mess hailing the socialist revolution and then hand-written pamphlets started appearing also on the walls of our hostel mess under the caption of “Marxist Forum”, that most of us learnt that this was another face of the scholarly and quiet Balagopal.

After that we came relatively close as we had more things to share. Some time after joining ISI/D, I had initiated a discussion group to study and deliberate on socio-political issues (the Silent Valley project and BHEL-Siemens deal were among hotly discussed issues then; there were also some group meetings to discuss Hind Swaraj), he would bring his penetrating analysis to these discussions. Balagopal's commitment to a humane and exploitation-free world was as unflinching as his belief that the Marxism showed the way forward. He was greatly excited as soon as he learnt that I had bought T Nagi Reddy's *India Mortgaged* and immediately borrowed it for a thorough study. This book had quite a powerful impact on him – the sharp intellect that Balagopal was, he meticulously went through the argument and the evidence provided in that statement of T Nagi Reddy and internalised much of it.

## Active Public Life

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 had no job anywhere in Andhra Pradesh when he decided to return. Yet, he did not wait to find a settled job to support him in the activities that he held dear. He just left Delhi, and indeed, it was several months before he joined Kakatiya University at Warangal. Soon, he was with the Andhra Pradesh Civil Liberties Committee. Though he was a man of few spoken words, his life has been very public from the 1980s onwards. We remained in occasional contact, till I shifted to Hyderabad about a decade later.

Balagopal was a rare combination of complete commitment to his cause, a sharp intellect and unwavering integrity.

His writings exhibit the penetrating analysis that he brought to bear on every issue of social importance that he took up – as is only too well known to the readers of EPW. His mind worked in a logical fashion, a gift which was further sharpened by his training as a statistician. He gave primacy to his heart in deciding what he wanted to pursue. But he valued analytical capabilities in pursuit of developing a deeper understanding and for guidance on path of action.

We did not always agree on what was the correct view or understanding of social reality, its underlying causes and the way forward. The understanding of the farmers' movement of the 1980s was one such issue (whether it was driven by the power of rich peasantry (kulaks) to further their interests or a broad-based progressive movement). However, such differences notwithstanding, he laid much greater emphasis on honesty, integrity and truth. Honest disagreements would not have bothered him that much.

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. He also believed in moving on and never to rest on his past achievements. He could not be bothered, for example, what kind of social and intellectual stirrings some of his articles had generated, but would look forward to what remained to be done.

And then he left us suddenly and unexpectedly. There are issues of importance that we had looked forward to discuss and share. Like with so many others, who had worked or interacted with him over the years, I too am left with a sense of loss at these unfulfilled tasks and with a sense of commitment to carry on with them.

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