

Quintessential Intellectual-Activist

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K Balagopal's role as a civil liberties and democratic rights activist had two phases – the first, when the opening sentence of the *Communist Manifesto* and Marx's last thesis on Feuerbach guided his life's activity, and the second, when, even as he gave up on these precepts, he continued in the tradition of practical humanism.

K Balagopal passed into the annals of history on 8 October 2009 at the age of 57. He was a doyen of the civil liberties and democratic rights (CL&DR) movement in India.

As a student Balagopal was not involved in public activities. He did his post-doctoral research at the Indian Statistical Institute, New Delhi. While at the institute, he wrote a paper on a subject in mathematical statistics which was widely acclaimed in specialist circles. Balagopal had huge prospects anywhere in the world in his specialised field of study. He, however, made a conscious decision not to tread the careerist path to personal-professional success, coming back to Andhra Pradesh and joining the Kakatiya University in Warangal, among the most backward districts in the state. Simultaneously, he joined the CL&DR movement with fervour and devotion.

The Radical

In 1983, the Andhra Pradesh Civil Liberties Committee (APCLC) elected him as its general secretary, a post he consecutively held until he resigned in 1998. Balagopal underwent several ordeals when he was the APCLC general secretary. Once, for instance, the Andhra Pradesh police abducted and blindfolded him and took him to an

unknown place. In his presence the policemen discussed how and when to kill him and the details of the press release which they would issue claiming that he was killed in an encounter. He was imprisoned more than once in the course of which he lost his job at the Kakatiya University. He braved all and continued to document the character of state power, the brutality, the lawlessness, the ruthlessness with which it dealt with the Naxalite/Maoist movement in Andhra Pradesh.

Cooperating with the counterparts of the APCLC in other states, he travelled throughout the length and breadth of India, not as a tourist but as a member of joint fact-finding teams. The fact-finding teams documented the violations of CL&DR and presented them before the general public as they had happened. All the fact-finders focused on what is popularly known as human rights. "Human rights" effectively mean facilities which will enable human beings to live with dignity and self-respect. And nobody can live with dignity and self-respect unless one has food to eat, clothes to wear, a house to stay, resources at one's disposal to educate one's children and wherewithal to get access to medicines and medical treatment when one and one's family fall ill. The vast majority of people in India do not have these facilities. Devoid of such provisions, ordinary people ultimately rise in rebellion and the government unleashes the police and the armed forces on them. This is what the fact-finding teams reported on. They reflected the reality of India.

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Another aspect which the fact-finding teams dealt with was secularism. The last joint fact-finding team, of which Balagopal was a member, went to Karnataka and Orissa to study, bring to light and expose the attacks on Christians. They published a report in March 2009 titled "From Kandhmal to Karavali: The Ugly Face of Sangh Parivar".

The CL&DR movement in India has two distinct stages. The first one started in 1936. Prominent persons such as Rabindranath Tagore, Jawaharlal Nehru and Sarojini Naidu came forward and formed the Indian Union of Civil Liberties (IUCL). The objective of the IUCL was, in the words of Nehru, to document and present before the general public the violations of CL&DR which took place in the course of the freedom struggle. This stage came to a halt in 1946 when Nehru formed the interim government. The second stage had its beginning in the early 1970s when organisations like the APCLC and the Association for the Protection of Democratic Rights (APDR) were formed. It was the Naxalite/Maoist

movement that triggered this stage. This movement attracted a lot of youngsters in India. Thousands of them were, legally or illegally, put behind bars. They were tortured and their bodies were mutilated. Some of them were made to stand against walls and shot dead point blank. This was hardly known to the Indian people. The mainstream media first covered it when Khushwant Singh wrote about it in the *Illustrated Weekly of India* in the middle of the Emergency. The history of this second stage will never be complete without Balagopal.

Whether it was the violations of the democratic rights, including the right to life, of the poor peasants, agricultural labourers or the tribals by the rural gentry in Adilabad, Anantapur, Karimnagar, Warangal or Srikakulam or by the police in encounters and deaths in custody, Balagopal and his APCLC comrades were among the first to document and bring to the notice of the public what was going on there.

But more than ever before, in Balagopal the movement for CL&DR had found the

quintessential intellectual-activist. Here, unlike the usual run-of-the-mill Marxist academics, with either their empirical paraphernalia, or high theory – often armed with the three volumes of *Capital*, some of them preferring the original German language edition, and the *Collected Works of V I Lenin* – in search of doubly free wage labour, re-investment of the surplus value, and the development of the productive forces, Balagopal wrote in the "Commentary" section of the EPW. In his articles he depicted social relations in the course of people's struggles (in the process of transformation) in Andhra Pradesh, seen through the lens of the exploited, the dominated and the oppressed.

Indeed, the mode of production debate that appeared in the "Special Articles" section of this magazine had – as the very perceptive R S Rao of the Sambalpur University put it more than two decades ago – not a footnote to the agrarian class struggles then under way. The latter were covered in the "Commentary" section of the weekly, written by correspondents – like



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CDS-IIFT-RIS National Seminar on ASEAN-India Free Trade Agreement & Way Forward

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The recently signed ASEAN-India Free Trade Agreement (FTA) has had mixed responses. While it has been hailed as the beginning of the end of India's isolation from major trading blocs and a firm step towards Pan Asian economic integration, the Agreement has been opposed in some regions and by a few sectoral interests in India which feel threatened because imports from the ASEAN would be promoted. Given the sensitivities of the issues involved, there is a need for systematic analysis of the implications of ASEAN-India FTA for India.

Against this background, the National Research Programme on Plantation Development (NRPPD) at CDS jointly with the Indian Institute of Foreign Trade (IIFT) and Research and Information System for Developing Countries (RIS), propose to organize a national seminar with a view to promote discussion based on theoretically informed empirical analysis. The objective is to identify the real threats, highlight the opportunities and facilitate policymaking.

We invite research papers on the macro and micro aspects of ASEAN India FTA. Contributions on sector-specific (e.g. Plantations and Fisheries) and region-specific (e.g. North East Region, Kerala) issues are especially welcome. **Important dates: Detailed abstracts (500 words): December 1, 2009. Final Papers: January 30, 2010. E-mail: nrppd@cds.ac.in**

Balagopal – from Punjab, Haryana, Bihar, Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal, among other provinces, precisely the areas of “capitalist” or “semi-feudal” relations of production in Indian agriculture, but the various academic-left economists in the high-flown debate, ostensibly holding forth on (Lenin’s) the “moment” and the “trend”, did not seem to care less about such history in the making. Indeed, some in the left establishment were upset at the EPW’s then editor, Krishna Raj’s decision to treat Balagopal as a regular correspondent. One of them, and we have Krishna Raj’s word for this, in order to get the EPW to drop Balagopal, used to say that if only he had the time, he could demolish everything that Balagopal wrote. Later on, as more water flowed down the Krishna river, this worthy’s ambitions were not of an order the left establishment could possibly gratify; he soon deserted the left ship and pledged his loyalty to the regent chosen by the empress of the Congress Party, making his way into the charmed circle of the Delhi *durbar*.

But Balagopal continued on the radical trail nonetheless. Following in the tradition of the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) (People’s War Group), he did not split hairs on whether the very poor in rural India were “agrarian proletariat” or “landless peasants” or whether the rural upper-upper crust were “capitalist” or “semi-feudal” landlords, or whether the moneyed section of the actual cultivators, those who actually worked the plough so to say, were capitalist farmers or rich peasants. The concrete had to be changed, not debated.

The mode of production debate really began not in the pages of the EPW but in *Frontier* in an article by Amit Bhaduri (Vol 6, Nos 25-27, Autumn Number, pp 11-15). Had it remained there, what Balagopal wrote, or what his senior counterpart, KVR (K V Ramana Reddy), the founder general secretary of Virasam (the Revolutionary Writers’ Association), jotted down in *Frontier* (under the pseudonym Sudarshan) about concrete social relations in the course of class struggles, and the nature and character of state power in its response to such conflicts would have been deemed relevant to the war of words. As R S Rao once put it, the first sentence of

the *Communist Manifesto* and the eleventh thesis on Feuerbach were always uppermost in Balagopal’s writings of those days. He captured police brutality unleashed on the oppressed in a way few writers had ever done – through the eyes of ordinary people who had witnessed such savagery. Let us illustrate this last point with an instance from his writings in the EPW.

Through the Eyes of the Oppressed

Being the multicultural, multilingual and, indeed, multinational country that India is, we seldom get a feel of the best of what appears in the various regional languages. The renowned Telegu poet Varavara Rao’s poetry has often been proscribed by the powers-that-be in Andhra Pradesh; indeed, unbelievable as it may seem, the famous Secunderabad Conspiracy Case in 1974 was against poets and their poetry. Balagopal wrote a hard-hitting piece (EPW, 28 March 1987) when a collection of the poems that Rao wrote when he was in jail in the mid-1980s was banned by the N T Rama Rao-led government; surely it touched a raw nerve somewhere in the corridors of power. In this piece he translates a poem entitled “butcher”. The background to the poem is the tale told by a Muslim butcher who was witness to the killing of a radical youth in Kamareddy town on 15 May 1985. The youth was apprehended by the police when he was going around asking shopkeepers to pull down their shutters in protest against “encounter” killings. The police took the boy to a busy crossroads, and there, in the public view, beat him to pulp with their rifle butts the way people who are afraid of a poisonous snake crush it to death with weapons readily at their command. Varavara Rao’s poem – the thoughts are the butcher’s, who deposed before the subdivisional magistrate at Kamareddy – as translated by Balagopal, says:

*I am a vendor of flesh
If you want to call me a butcher
Then that is as you wish
I kill animals every day
I cut their flesh and sell it.
Blood to me is a familiar sight
But
It was on that day I saw with my own eyes*

The real meaning of being a butcher

I too take lives

But never with hatred

I do sell flesh

But I have never sold myself

To me who kills goats every day

The meaning of the cruelty that

Combines and conspires to take a life

Was revealed that day.

Truly extraordinary, isn’t it, the butcher’s deposition, the poet’s sensitivity and anger, and the translator’s bringing it all before us?

Balagopal also wrote about his comrades – a piece (EPW, 13 December 1986) about his APCLC colleague, Japa Lakshma Reddy, whom not many outside the CL&DR and the Naxalite/Maoist movements in Andhra Pradesh might remember, a senior civil libertarian and state executive committee member of the organisation, who was killed at his home in Karimnagar by plain clothes policemen in November 1986, reflects the fondness and the admiration he had for them. There is also this piece he wrote at the passing away of the radical Telegu poet Sri Sri, founder-president of Virasam and of the APCLC. Here Balagopal brings us one of Sri Sri’s most powerful poems written after 1970 (when Sri Sri made explicit the side he was on), when Nagbhushan Patnaik was sentenced to death (later on commuted to life sentence). Sri Sri says, as translated by Balagopal:

The white man then called you

Bhagat Singh

The black man now calls you

Naxalite

Everyone will tomorrow call you the

morning star,

Inquilab, Inquilab, Inquilab

Zindabad!

Balagopal also wrote about the ruling classes, their conflicts and crises. The piece at the passing of Indira Gandhi (EPW, 23 March 1985) might be an apt one to remember, now that it is 25 years since she left the scene, and the stenographers of power are bringing out their paeans of “India’s Iron Lady”. There a paragraph in the concluding section that goes like this:

By the time of her death she had completed the destruction of the ideological overgrowth

of the system. There is no more talk of socialism, which is declared to be alternatively un-Indian and outdated; as for land reforms, there is no more land to be distributed, as everybody knows; secularism she laid bare by making it a point to visit every temple, every dargah, every church and every gurdwara she found on her way, and even more blatantly by inciting Hindu communalism in Jammu and Muslim communalism in Assam; liberal democracy was buried by the forced charade of elections in Assam, and the incredibly undemocratic Terrorist Affected Areas Act, following upon the massacre in Amritsar (parenthetically, it is the final sign of the demise of the liberal, intelligentsia of this land that such an Act is allowed to govern 15 million Punjabis without more than a murmur of protest elsewhere); anti-imperialism is a virtue that she herself regarded with a certain amount of contempt in her last days, though Moscow and its fellow-travellers continued to credit her with it.

The Reformist

Balagopal's role as a CL&DR activist had two phases as the CL&DR movement in India itself had two stages. In the first phase, he passionately and incessantly

wrote and spoke about incidents which were directly or indirectly linked to the Naxalite/Maoist movement in Andhra Pradesh. At a later stage he developed differences with the movement which led to his resignation from the APCLC in 1998 and his forming a different organisation called the Human Rights Forum.

This marked a basic shift not only in Balagopal's priorities and world view but also in the way the authorities treated him. He was no more an enemy of the state. The intellectuals of the establishment sang paeans in his favour. Balagopal himself began to treat the violence of the state and the counter-violence of the Communist Party of India (Maoist) (CPI(Maoist)) on an equal footing. His basic analysis tended to show that the violence of the state was preceded and provoked by the violence of the CPI(Maoist). This is a topic which has been raised and debated on several occasions in history. For example, during the Vietnam war there were some who morally equated the guerrilla actions of the Vietcong with the

war crimes committed by the US armed forces. Responding to this, Bertrand Russell said that it was untenable to find moral equivalence between the violent actions of the aggressor and the aggrieved. Those who claimed that they were equidistant from the aggressor and the aggrieved were on the side of the aggressor – it was their class bias that made them assess the two with the same yardstick. The violence of the state forces in Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Orissa and the violent resistance of the tribals (under the leadership of the CPI(Maoist)) whose land had been taken, livelihood destroyed and who had been thrown into the wilderness of destitution, despair and hunger cannot be morally equated.

With the change in his world view, Balagopal's writings too lost their forcefulness; the poignancy however remained. For instance, writing on the "Maoist Movement in Andhra Pradesh" in the EPW special issue on the "Maoist Movement in India" (22 July 2006) he lamented the loss of the lives of the "organic leaders" of the

Mahalanobis Memorial Medal (MMM Award: 2008) (National Award in Quantitative Economics)

To encourage high quality research and to recognize the young talent in the field of Quantitative Economics, the Indian Econometric Society has instituted the Mahalanobis Memorial Medal, in memory of Prof P C Mahalanobis, for researchers below 45 years. This award is given once in two years for Indian researchers and once in four years for international researchers.

Currently TIES Trust has constituted a high level expert Committee, under the Chairmanship of Prof. V.R. Panchamukhi, Chairman, TIES Trust, with the objective of identifying suitable scholars for the award of the Mahalanobis Memorial Medal – National award for 2008.

Dr N R Bhanumurthy, National Institute of Public Finance and Policy, Delhi, and Secretary, TIES, will receive the nominations and coordinate with the committee for selection of candidates for the Award.

The Committee hereby invites nominations for the Award on the basis of which recommendations will be made to the President, TIES. Kindly note the following:

- A. Eligibility requirement:
 1. The candidate for the Award should not have been above 45 years of age on January 1, 2009;
 2. Research Work, which is to be considered as the basis for the Award, should be in the area of quantitative economics and should have been carried out in India;
 3. Contributions made by the nominee should be of high quality.
- B. Nomination should give full CV of the nominee which should include the following information about the nominee:
 - a. Name in full;
 - b. Date of birth;
 - c. Educational Qualification;
 - d. Present position and earlier institutional affiliations;
 - e. A list of major publications, with focus on the significant contributions, which could be considered as the basis for the Award;
 - f. Copies of some select Publications;
 - g. Any other relevant information;

Incomplete information will not be entertained. All nominations must be received by **8th January 2010** and addressed to

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“most oppressed” as a result, in his view, of the violence by the Maoists and the state’s brutal counter-attack. “The daily loss of such persons is a sacrifice the oppressed cannot be called upon to put up with indefinitely”, he says. Other than the implicit advice to the Maoists to renounce violence, Balagopal does not suggest an alternative. The alternative of the Maoists extending their mass base through

non-violent means to the point where the ruling classes are forced to concede state power to them simply does not exist, as Balagopal, more than any other intellectual, knew better. (He, more than anyone else, knew the whole truth about state violence against the legal mass movement in the districts of Karimnagar and Adilabad in the early years of his first phase of CL&DR activism.)

In the second phase of his activism, Balagopal had given up on the *Communist Manifesto* and the last thesis on Feuerbach as guides to his work. However, this does not negate his historic contribution to civil liberties and democratic rights. Indeed, as we stated earlier, the history of the second phase of the CL&DR movement would be incomplete without an account of Balagopal’s role in it.