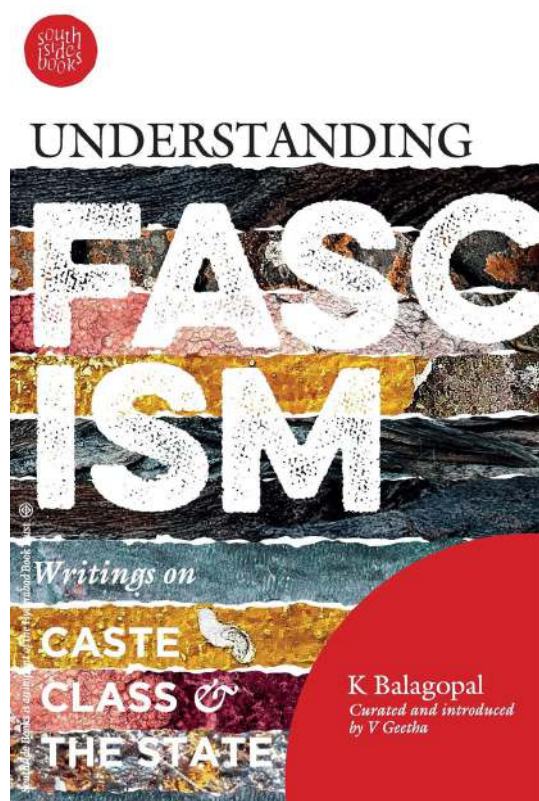


Understanding Fascism: Writings on Caste, Class & The State by K. Balagopal. Curated and Introduced by V. Geetha. Hyderabad: South Side Books, 2023, 241p.

Jairus Banaji



K.Balagopal was a civil rights activist and Left-wing intellectual who was mainly active in Andhra Pradesh from the 1980s down to when he died in 2009. In the 90s

he became increasingly critical of the People's War Group,^[1] with which he had been associated, and developed those criticisms at length in a famous Telugu essay called *Cheekati Konalu* ('Dark Corners', but usually paraphrased as 'The Darker Side of the Naxalite Movement').

The 16 essays and articles in this collection straddle the decades from 1985 to 2003. Those were years that saw growing caste violence against the rural poor, strident middle-class campaigns against 'reservation', the renewed consolidation of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) as a mass political force working to transform India into a 'Hindu State', and a steady increase in State authoritarianism.

Caste, communalism, and India's increasingly authoritarian State therefore seem like the natural rubrics under which to organise the articles, and this is what the editor V. Geetha has done. With a final exception, Balagopal's endorsement of *Communalism Combat*, all the articles were published in the *Economic and Political Weekly* of India (EPW). It is worth noting that all the EPW articles were published when Krishna Raj was editor of the journal, that is, before his untimely demise in 2004.

Balagopal had an uncanny sense for the way the political landscape of the country was being radically reshaped in the 1980s to allow for more rampant cultures of repression. The major one of these *not* covered by any of the essays is patriarchy and its pervasive presence in Indian society.

The pattern of caste violence described by Balagopal in the first two articles contains features which are worth highlighting: the atrocities occurred in the economically advanced coastal districts of Andhra where Kammas are the dominant agrarian community; the violence targeted Madigas and Malas, landless communities who work as farm servants and agricultural labourers, even though they “are better educated, assertive and identity-conscious than other dalit communities there or elsewhere.” (23) Politically, the landed classes backed the Telugu Desam and its allies on the Left and far Right, while the dalits supported Congress (I).

In Karamchedu in July 1985, a 3000-strong mob of caste Hindus (viz. Kammas) assaulted the Madigas *en masse*; women were dragged out of their homes, stripped, and molested or raped; at Chundur the police were “mute spectators” to the massacre that occurred in August 1991.

[T]he younger generation has started rejecting the social and political subordination to the forward castes that has traditionally been the lot of the Dalits ... It is this ... assertiveness of the Malas and Madigas that the forward castes find so intolerable, leading to assaults such as Karamchedu and Chundur” (23) ... Chundur happened not because the dalits of Guntur (district) are more oppressed than elsewhere, but precisely because they have fought oppression, through Christianity (all the victims of Chundur as of Karamchedu are Christians), through education, through entry to government jobs using reservations. (26-7)

And by the 1990s Balagopal had come around to the view that “[t]he immediate political need is a militant organisation of dalit self-defence, village by village.” The conventional Left slogan of a class solidarity between peasants and workers was dismissed outright. Caste weighed too heavily on rural social relations to allow for that — “The alternative, of trying to convince the lower middle class and middle class *savarna* farmers that their material interest lies in a class unity with dalits, is a fruitless and pedantic solution. They [middle class farmers] do not think so” and would not think so until “a militant political movement wedded to the annihilation of caste” emerges (39). This was said in 1991.

Turning to the issue of reservation, Balagopal surmised in 1986 that well over half of Andhra’s population consisted of the so-called Backward Castes (BCs). So, when a Commission appointed in 1982 eventually recommended that the State’s backward caste reservation share should be raised from 25% to 44% (assuming that 8% of those castes could fend for themselves in their competition with the forward castes), this sparked outrage among the forward castes.

Of course, ‘outrage’ of this sort is never spontaneous and has to be contrived or conjured, and it was the BJP that used the anti-reservation campaigns both here and in Gujarat to build a base among the urban middle class. Students in the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP—affiliated to the RSS and pro-BJP) constituted the bulk of the anti-reservation agitators in Andhra, with their own base in the medical and engineering colleges.

The landed upper caste families these students came from, had by now coalesced into what Balagopal describes as a “new rich Provincial Propertied Class”. This new provincial bourgeoisie drew its wealth from both agriculture and trade. More important, it was far better *organised* than the backward castes because the forward castes of which it was made up were more widely spread across the state; and used their extensive *caste* links to mobilise their lower middle-class caste-fellows as the mass base of resistance to positive discrimination. “Foot soldiers of fascism” was how Balagopal describes the latter in probably his earliest reference to this.

Four years later an article titled ‘This Anti-Mandal Mania’ he shows how reservations were viewed as so threatening because they attacked the caste system. “For four full decades it is the forward caste Hindus who have dominated every aspect of life in the country. They have held all the land, all the capital in trade, finance and industry, all the top positions in administration, education, science, technology ...” (54). He goes on to explain:

Caste is juridically dead, but very much alive politically and ideologically ... Tickets to the Assembly or Parliament at election time, public works and excise contracts, co-operative loans, industrial licenses, supply contracts, managerial jobs in the private sector ... not one of these is obtained without the use of caste (58).

Moreover, caste, Balagopal argued, was a mode of reproduction of India’s ruling class, an “unwritten reservation that the forward castes enjoy in the form of ‘connections’” and incomparably more powerful than any of Mandal’s recommendations.” (59) But of course, “[t]he casteism of the forward castes is never seen as casteism.”

Balagopal used this analysis of the functionality of caste to the governance of class relations to defend the sort of identity politics that would emerge in the 1990s. “It remains ... the political duty of the poor and the deprived *to use their caste identity in the struggle for their liberation.*” Caste and class struggles were “closely interwoven and coterminous struggles.” (63) If caste was

used to “incite the middle classes among the forward castes against the poor ... [s]uch a caste mobilisation can only be fought in caste terms.” (64)

Of the five essays that confront ‘Hindutva’ in part two of the book, much of the focus is on the Indian lower middle class. The cult of Ayyappa, “the latest mass-god of Hinduism”, was grounded socially in a growing lower middle class whose insecurities, Balagopal sensed, were fuelling all manner of reactions, from the proliferation of cults “outside” the establishment to the rise of mafias and gangsterism in the towns.

Balagopal was a prescient writer and anticipated the way these various rebellions could be absorbed and reintegrated in the groundswell of what this article describes (in 1989!) as “emerging fascist trends” and “developing fascism”. He referred to cults such as that at Sabarimalai being appropriated for “communal purposes”, to the influx of agrarian wealth into the commercial hub of Vijaywada creating a fertile basis for the operation of mafias in real estate and finance, and to the class hatred unleashed by the “vulgar new rich of coastal Andhra”, with the trail of anti-Kamma violence left behind by riots.

And the 1980s, Balagopal suggested, saw a proliferation of repressive laws that only reinforced the “gradual demise of every one of the institutions of bourgeois democracy.” (93) Of those laws, the Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act of 1987 (TADA) was the most notorious, entailing the arrest of over 75,000 individuals from religious minorities, tribals, separatists of one kind or another (Sikh, Kashmiri, Naga), and the rural poor of states where Naxalite ‘armed struggle’ was deadlocked in ferocious counter-insurgencies.

Balagopal’s 1993 piece on the demolition of the Babri Masjid is probably where his conception of the *nature* of Indian fascism comes through most clearly. This was where he argued that Hindutva “has its origin in a political need to *counter aspirations for democracy*” (99). Its mass base was constructed out of the “resentment and frustration born in reaction to the space conquered by the oppressed and the underprivileged in India’s political universe.” (106)

Although he insisted that there was no *revolution* going on in India to warrant describing Hindutva as a “counter-revolution”, he pointed out that “there has been a tremendous expansion of democratic and egalitarian aspirations among the oppressed people.” (106) In other words, if Indian democracy’s right arm was fettered to a State apparatus that thrived on a

culture of repression, its constitutional left arm allowed for a culture of freedom that nurtured aspirations for equality, justice, and self-respect among the mass of working people.

If Hindutva was nonetheless capable of attracting “significant support” at the “middle and lower levels of society”, this, Balagopal suggested, was because society was characterised by a pervasive sense of hierarchy more than it was by any simple bipolarity. For example, “[t]he smallest farmer thinks he is superior to the wage labourer”, and the BJP was adept at making this sense of hierarchy (recursive inequalities) a source of resentment at the alleged “pampering” of workers, women, untouchables, Muslims, and so on.

Whatever one thinks of this explanation, by 2002 it was not resentment but outright hatred that loomed large in Balagopal’s analysis of communalism. “The common Hindu’s hatred for anything to do with Muslims ... is the only thing alive in Gujarat today”, he wrote in June that year. Indeed, “a very large number of Hindus all over the country harbour an extraordinary hatred for Muslims.” (136)

Balagopal’s reflections on the ghastly pogroms that tore through Gujarat in 2002 are an extraordinary piece of writing – not just for the rawness of the emotion expressed there but because, to his credit, he was willing to confront what he called “uncomfortable questions”. “The participation of adivasis and dalits in the rioting, looting and killing is one such [question] ... In all the areas along the north-eastern border of the State ... there was sizeable participation of adivasis along with non-adivasis in the violence. The two were part of the same mob in most cases.” (130) So too with dalits: “Dalit participation in the violence at Ahmedabad is even less ambiguous. A large number of dalit youth took direct part in the gruesome violence of that city.” (133).

This was a frontal challenge to the unrestrained defence of identity politics Balagopal had advocated as late as 1990 and to essentialist constructions of “the” adivasi and “the” dalit. The manipulation of identities is of course at the heart of fascist politics and Balagopal knew that the “participation” of adivasis and dalits in the pogroms had everything to do with the organising drives of the Sangh Parivar.

“The Vanavasi Kalyan Samiti of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad has made considerable inroads into the adivasi areas ... every adivasi village has at least one VHP activist.” (132) The adivasis are “made to feel that they are Hindus.” Indeed, Balagopal even went so far as to suggest that had it not been for the VHP’s involvement,

“many of us [on the Left] would have interpreted the adivasi violence against Muslims in rural Gujarat as class struggle.” (134)

The collection ends with Balagopal’s scathing critique of the ineluctable ways in which the once beating heart of India’s democracy has been progressively stifled by a slew of laws and repressive practices that have systematically undermined the rights of individuals under India’s Constitution. “The terror emanating from minorities alone is depicted as terror”, he wrote about both TADA and the Law Commission’s replication of its political and communal biases (196).

So how do we blend these different strands of the argument into a coherent idea of Indian fascism? To my mind, the conception that best captures what Balagopal was driving at is Marcuse’s notion of fascism as a “preventive counterrevolution”.

Alberto Toscano has foregrounded this in a fascinating chapter of his recent book *Late Fascism* (Verso, 2023). All of the moments that Marcuse listed in a 1970 interview with Hans Magnus Enzensberger as markers of an incipient fascism in the US – “the gradual or rapid abolition of the remnants of the constitutional state, the organization of paramilitary troops ... granting the police extraordinary legal powers ... the court decisions of recent years’, and last but not least, “the almost direct

censorship of the press, television and radio” – all of these have been pivotal moments in India’s political transformation since the 1980s.

The point of this unlikely comparison is not the analogy *per se* but the insight it offers in suggesting that like the US (or Israel for that matter), India has its own version(s) of “racialised state terror” (Toscano, *Late Fascism*: 41) and this or these versions is where we must start in trying to “understand fascism” in India. Viewed in this light, Balagopal’s essays, and the editor’s work in putting them together in this way, become original contributions to grasping the nature of fascism in India.

Jairus Banaji is with the Department of Development Studies at SOAS, London University. His many publications include the edited collection *Fascism: Essays on Europe and India (Three Essays Collective, Gurgaon 2016)*.

Editors’ Note: A shorter and slightly different version of this book review first appeared in *The Wire* (New Delhi).

Notes

[1] Prasad, Rajendra. (1997). “The People Behind the People’s War”. *Himal Southasian* (01 September). Available at <https://www.himalmag.com/cover/the-people-behind-the-peoples-war>



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