

## STF AND BALAGOPAL'S KIDNAPPING

- A Postscript on Civil Rights Under NTR Regime

On the evening of 28 August, Dr. K. Balagopal, general secretary, Andhra Pradesh Civil Liberties Committee (APCLC) was kidnapped near Khammam. The kidnappers imposed two conditions for his release; that the two constables earlier kidnapped by the Naxalites should be released and that no habeas corpus petition should be filed in the court. The Naxalites, fortunately released the two constables. Subsequently, Balagopal himself was released. The entire drama of kidnapping of Balagopal was done by a hitherto unknown organisation that calls itself Prajabandhu.

The condition of the kidnappers that habeas corpus should not be filed raised suspicions that it was done by the police. The account given by Balagopal himself confirms the suspicions. He was clearly told by his captors not only that they were from the Special Task Force (STF) but also that they were acting under instructions from above. Dr. Balagopal was blindfolded, gagged tied up and was taken around to different police guest houses in Khammam district till he was let off, after 58 hours at the gates of Indian Express office, Domalguda, Hyderabad.

The Special Task Force (STF) is part of Andhra Pradesh State Intelligence. Formed five years ago to counter Naxalite violence, it is presently headed by a DIG (who was earlier involved in the notorious case of tonsuring women in the lock up of Vijayawada police station). It is widely believed that the STF functions directly under the Chief Minister and even the Home Minister has no knowledge of activities. In the process of countering Naxalite violence, the STF has become a law unto itself. Moving in plain clothes, carrying sophisticated weapons and travelling in jeeps of government departments other than the police, the Force picks up suspected young men and women, takes them to nearby police or forest guest houses and tortures them. In many cases the people picked up by them remain missing thereafter. Suspicions that such a clandestine outfit of the police is in operation have been in the air for quite sometime. Mysterious disappearance of people after their arrest, their corpses turning up at odd places (See the photograph of one such person, Meghyam, hanging from a power transformer in Warangal) have strengthened the suspicions. The details given by Balagopal now confirm the suspicions.

The emergence of STF raises a number of questions. Firstly, these kind of tactics can counter any extra-legal force like the Naxalites is a moot point. It often breeds further violence. It is significant that in almost all of the spate of kidnappings by the Naxalite group (that includes a murder) the major demand relates to the activists earlier kidnapped by the STF. Secondly, if the state agencies themselves violate law and go against constitutional norms then the legitimacy and

moral authority of the democratic system will be eroded. Once the state allows the institutionalisation of a clandestine armed group, there is no guarantee that it will stop at Naxalites. The abduction of a leading civil rights activist and a well known intellectual like Balagopal is a pointer. That a democratically elected government should give a consent to operations of an armed group that is not accountable to any administrative wing, law or constitution but only to an individual, is dangerous.

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In May 1988, Meghyam, a young activist was picked up by the police (believed to be STF) in Mustyalapalli, Warangal. A few days later his body was found hanging from the power transformer at Hanumakonda Chowrasta, Warangal.