



Interview

## Dissent is vital in a democracy: V.K. Natraj

S. Rajendran

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V. K. Natraj , Former Director , Madras Institute of Development Studies. Photo: Bhagya Prakash, K.

The assassination of a well-known litterateur of Karnataka, Malleshappa M. Kalburgi, who was also the former Vice Chancellor of the Kannada University, Hampi, has come about as a rude shock, more so, given the manner in which it was executed bearing a striking resemblance to two others — Narendra Dhabolkar and Govind Pansare — who were also known for their rational thinking identical to that of Prof. Kalburgi.

The Karnataka Police (Special Investigation Team) is yet to achieve a breakthrough in cracking the murder and with the assailants leaving behind no trace, the police are looking into various aspects, including a family dispute.

Meanwhile, the Chief Minister, Siddaramaiah, has handed over the case to the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) given the inter-State ramifications. The latter, however, is yet to give its consent to investigate the case.

The view expressed in certain quarters is that should there be anger and resentment over his comments and criticism on various religious issues or should there have been differences within the family concerned, taking away a human life will not help in resolving differences. Criticising Hinduism or that of Veerashaivism was a way adopted by the late Prof. Kalburgi to give vent to his opinion. At best, people ranged against his views could have been part of a debate to argue out the issues concerned rather than resort to the dastardly act of assassination.

**V.K. Natraj**, former Director of the Madras Institute of Development Studies (MIDS), a scholar with a distinguished career of over three decades at the University of Mysore, including as its Registrar, says that if the murder was meant to silence the voice of dissent, as is being made out to be, it will not pay any dividend. Excerpts from an interview with **S. Rajendran**:

**S. Rajendran: What is your reaction to the murder of Prof Kalburgi who raised his dissent to obscurantism? It is the first of its kind in a State like Karnataka, particularly Dharwad, which is known for its rich cultural heritage.**

**V.K. Natraj:** My reaction to the murder of Professor Kalburgi is that of any normal civilized human being. I am appalled by the tragedy and condemn it totally, irrespective of the cause. Assuming that the reason was disagreement with his views on important questions relating to religion/religious practices, secularism, etc., this is no way to resolve disputes. I agree with other more distinguished academics/writers who have expressed the view that this is a threat to democracy.

Having said that, I would like to add that on the whole intolerance is on the rise and has indeed been so for quite some time now. Many others have been pilloried for their views and attitudes. Two outstanding examples are U.R. Ananthamurthy and Binayak Sen. The recent event is a more gruesome example. However, it is pertinent to observe that unless there is at least some glimmer of evidence it would be wise not to go to the media in shrill overdrive and talk as if democratic dialogue has ended.

**Will the murder have a direct bearing on eminent writers who voice their concern through their writings?**

I believe that this will not silence the voice of dissent although it may dampen it somewhat. Even fierce controversies in the recent past have not succeeded in stilling expressions of difference. It is also good to remember that all expression of difference and dissent is not necessarily the outcome of high-minded thinking. Every now and then it results from crass opportunism and sometimes plain ignorance of the complexities involved. However, even this possibility is not an argument for censoring dissent.

**A section of the Veerashaiva community was against Prof. Kalburgi given his stance against some religious practices of the Lingayats. Do you think that this could be a cause for his murder?**

What puzzles me are the following: Prof Kalburgi had expressed his views on Veerashaivas and some of the practices of the Lingayat community over a period of time. In other words, there could have been a reaction to or against him much earlier. It is not as if there was (at least to my mind) some immediate provocation. Also, differences of opinion regarding the distinction, if any, between Veerashaivas and Lingayats are not the invention of the present. Even in the popular news media the issue has figured for quite a while.

Secondly, most of the southern States do not have a record for quelling democratic dissent with such brutal finality. Related to this is the highly 'professional' way in which Professor Kalburgi was liquidated. This is not standard practice in this part of the country, certainly not in relation to impersonal social issues.

**Prof. Kalburgi was not against Hinduism *per se* as is being made out to be. He had only voiced his dissent over rituals and idol worship, and extended his support to the views of late U.R. Ananthamurthy.**

As far as the late professor's views with respect to Hinduism are concerned, he is not the first to have spoken critically. Several others have done so and I have no doubt the tradition will continue.

**Lingayats in Karnataka are upset that they have been denied an appropriate status in the list of Other Backward Classes (OBCs), (in matters relating to reservations). Prof. Kalburgi had also expressed his resentment.**

In relation to the backward class status of the Lingayats, we should first note that they are in the list of OBCs along with the other numerically dominant caste, namely, the Vokkaligas. The Devaraj Urs government, following the Havanur report, removed the Lingayats from the OBC list. Incidentally, in all the attention focused now on Devaraj Urs in his centenary year, one of his chief allies, L.G. Havanur, does not get much of a mention although he was the chair of the first Backward Classes Commission. However, they [the Lingayats] staged a triumphant return a few years later, which I once titled the "Advance to backwardness" <sup>1</sup>.

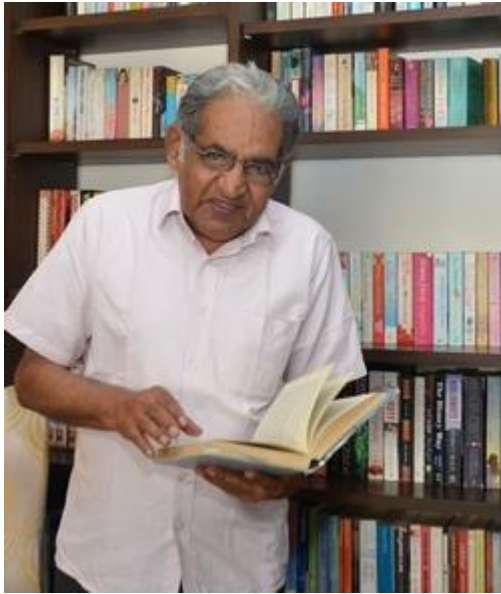
Of course they, like others in the list of beneficiaries among the OBCs, are subject to the 'creamy layer' bar. While it is hardly likely that either that caste or the Vokkaligas will countenance removal from the OBC list, it is unlikely to have a cataclysmal effect and, in any case, the situation now in evidence is not a recent development.

**What has been the importance of dissenting voices — both political and religious — in bringing about social change?**

I believe that the voice of dissent is important, indeed vital in a democracy. It is one of the principal agents for encouraging dialogue. As Isaiah Berlin remarked in his inaugural Chichele lecture at Oxford that if all members of society were to agree on social and political questions, some social science disciplines would not exist <sup>2</sup>.

Similarly, without the freedom to differ and express dissent, we shall have no growth in intellectual terms. Take this example: the present Union government, despite its awesome majority in Parliament, has climbed down on the Land Acquisition Bill mainly because of the sustained opposition to it. Let me cite an illustration. It is said that [India's first Prime Minister] Nehru wanted the country's first Five Year Plan to be critiqued by economists like Milton Friedman to whom the notion of planning was anathema. It is not even necessary to speak of the role of dissent in promoting discussion and therefore change.

**Although there is no evidence that the late Kalburgi's murder was linked to his writing, there is a chilling effect because this was preceded by murders of Narendra Dholkar and Govind Pansare. What measures should the Union and the State Governments take to dispel this fear psychosis and ensure that freedom of expression is protected?**



The fear psychosis cannot be removed by legislation, it has to be overcome by instilling in people faith in the importance of dialogue and discourse. Also, to some extent it can be promoted by the proponents of the 'progressive line' (not to be equated with the Marxian perspective) by using logic to persuade others to their point of view rather than make unsustainable claims for their stand.

For example, one does not have to call upon Hindus (I shall refrain from commenting on whether a category called Hindu exists at all) to demonstrate their secularism by renouncing their religion or by making suggestions to the effect that the entire country should become Christian or convert to Islam or Buddhism (incidentally Jainism does not get a look-in in this kind of discourse). My point is that the accent should be on tolerance and

this should apply across the board to all groups.

Of course, as the numerical majority, the Hindus will have to shoulder a larger burden in this task. There are simple ways in which we can demonstrate secularism. Why, for instance, should all functions, as we like to label them, commence with a prayer invariably to a Hindu deity and why must we light a lamp which Muslim friends say is un-Islamic? And, as an example, why cannot the head of state such as the President of the country desist from the temptation to visit places of worship. It is essential that we convert especially the youth to the centrality of tolerance and that, I believe, cannot be done through aggressive talk which precludes all discussion.

### **What is the social role of rationalists and critics of superstitious beliefs?**

About the role of rationalists I think my previous answers have touched on the issue by implication. I am slightly amused at the ease with which the media confer titles such as 'intellectual'/critic/rationalist on many whose claim to fame is based on flimsy foundations. Like all sensitive members of society they have a role to play in influencing public opinion and moulding the youth.

On superstitions I see a problem. How does one define a superstition? Equally important, can you get people to rid themselves of superstitious practices by law? Any sociologist will tell you that these are rooted in the mores of a society and merely shouting yourself hoarse is not going to usher in a new superstition-free society. Just look at sportspersons at play and you will find that a large number of them practise 'superstitious' rituals. Would you rather watch an excellent player with superstition or a mediocre one who is 'rational'?

### **Do you see a relationship between the rise of the economic right and religious right ideologies?**

This is a highly complex question, the nexus between rightist economic policies and religious beliefs.

To begin with, we should realise that the reforms, which started in 1991, were not a sudden event that transformed the economy. Although they were of epochal consequence, they too have their origins in policy changes that commenced several years before the reforms *per se* were introduced. Many in our country speak of economic reforms as though they were produced by the duo of P. V. Narasimha Rao and Manmohan Singh by a sudden wave of a magic wand.

There is ample evidence to show that these reforms have antecedents. I do wish those who wish to posit connections between globalisation and societal changes would do a little more homework before bursting into eloquent speech. At the same time, post-1991, there have been, and continue to be, considerable attempts at chipping away at the role of the state in several spheres which we once thought were among its primary duties. Education and health are obvious examples. A dimension I would like to point to is the growth of unbridled desire for accumulating wealth, the terrifying growth of consumerism and the fading away of what — for want of a more appropriate word — I shall call a moral social sense.

In that broad sense an economic ethos which focuses rabidly on accumulation may help foster a selfish social environment. And from there it is a quick leap into bigotry. The most visible evidence is the involvement of sections of NRIs [Non-Resident India] in right-wing religious organisations. And, at home too we see the middle classes, at one time described as RNIs (Resident Non Indians) readily adopting an 'apolitical' perspective to governance and development.

**How serious is the threat posed to Indian secularism both by mainstream political parties and their fringe counterparts. Should governance, and by implication politics, be separated from ideology in this country?**

From what is said above, the logical inference is that there is an unfortunate trend today towards a 'non-ideological' approach to politics. Such an approach can produce dangerous right wing tendencies. If governance and development are perceived as essentially non-political then the next step is to see the economy as one large corporate enterprise and to seek quick fix technical solutions to political problems.

#### **References:**

- 1.^ **Natraj, V. K. 1994. Economic and Political Weekly, July 9.** Last accessed September 7, 2015.
- 2.^ **Berlin , Isaiah. 1958. Two Concepts of Liberty.** (Original URL: [http://berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk/published\\_works/tcl/tcl-a.pdf](http://berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk/published_works/tcl/tcl-a.pdf)) Last accessed September 7, 2015.

*(S. Rajendran is Resident Representative, Karnataka, The Hindu Centre for Politics and Public Policy, based in Bengaluru. Until recently he was Resident Editor/ Associate Editor, The Hindu, Karnataka.*

*In a journalistic career of over 35 years with The Hindu in Karnataka, he has extensively reported on and analysed various facets of life in the State. He holds a Master's degree from the Bangalore University. The Government of Karnataka, in recognition of his services, presented him the Rajyotsava Award — the highest honour in the State — in 2010.)*

E-mail: [srajendran2009@gmail.com](mailto:srajendran2009@gmail.com)