

## Will They Follow Kalam?

**T**he fake often deceptively resembles the original. Consequently, like fake Gandhis and Gandhians pass off as genuine, fake Gandhian protests too resemble genuine ones. See the original Gandhi and his protest. On March 30, 1930, Mahatma Gandhi set out on his salt march from Sabarmati to Dandi accompanied by just 78 satyagrahis. His own sceptic colleagues were laughing within, the media openly, at his march for the 'trivial' salt. The British had dismissed the march. But, within hours, things changed. Over one lakh people greeted the march between Sabarmati and Ahmedabad. The first day's march ended at Aslali, a village where Gandhiji addressed over 4,000 people. He asked them for food. They supplied it with pleasure. He asked them to register as satyagrahis. They volunteered with enthusiasm. Village after village fell for him. When the 390-km march ended at Dandi, it was over two mile long; the satyagrahis had swelled beyond 50,000!

At Dandi, Gandhiji symbolically defied the salt law, lifted a handful of salt and sold it for ₹1,600. A sovereign of gold then cost ₹2. On the gold index, ₹1.6 crore now would translate to ₹1600 then. This brought the British to their knees with not a stone thrown, nor a baton wielded or a bullet fired. There were no 24x7 television shows then to popularise Gandhi's march, or to excite people to join or to inform those far off. Gandhiji did not instigate any faceless crowd, hiding behind; he led them from the front. The 50,000 satyagrahis were registered by name, not a crowd blind-folded or nose-led into march. Gandhiji combined common people and common salt effectively to communicate people's disaffection to rulers. Powerful movements led by men of high ideals have always been symbolic. Never physical. They never held anyone captive, nor targeted any property. They exerted moral pressure. Not physical. They were genuine. Not 'paid' agitations. The movements led by Jayaprakash Narayan in the 1970s, or by Anna Hazare now, against corruption are genuine. But, the establishment always dreaded genuine movements. It used brute Emergency powers against the JP movement. The frail and ailing JP himself would have been killed in the brutal lathi-charge on peaceful protesters at Patna in 1975, had Nanaji Deshmukh, his younger colleague, not taken the blow on his forearm, which broke by the impact. Even recently the UPA government unsuccessful-

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fully tried to break Anna's fast; but brutally broke Ramdev's by resorting to midnight violence.

Now move on to the Koodankulam stir, the opposite of — yet resembles — the genuine. Instigated from behind by forces with hidden and questionable intentions, it mirrors global anti-nuclear forces. Paid agitators, blindfolded into the stir, have virtually taken over the Koodankulam plant captive. Maintenance officials are prevented by threats and violence from entering the plant. The stir is at the plant's jugular, it is deadly and therefore noticed. It would never have been if it were in Chennai or Delhi. Thanks to an overexcited media, unbalanced even now, the fake Koodankulam stir passes off as genuine. The result is that, politically, it has become unpopular to talk against the agitators or defend the Koodankulam plant; the elite find it unpopular to defend nuclear energy itself. And the debate over nuclear energy is reduced to a subject of street duel, with criminal duress, not logic, as the arbiter.

Times like this need tall men to stand up to blackmail. Just as tall men like Gandhi and JP can only be trusted to lead genuine agitations, only equally tall men can be trusted to take on the fake ones. Simply being in power does not make one tall. Only those who risk unpopularity to tell the truth are tall men. Here is a poetic description of who is tall. When United States President Richard Nixon was being probed on the Watergate scandal, a US senator recited to the committee on Watergate a poem by Josiah Gilbert Holland, an American writer, who prayed to god for tall men whom "the lust of office does not kill" and the "spoils of office cannot buy"; "who possess opinions and a will"; "have honor"; "not lie"; and "who stand" demagogues and damn their "treacherous flatteries". Only they, sang the poet, are "tall men", "sun crowned", "who live above the fog" in "public duty" and in "private thinking". They are tall because they dare to court

unpopularity for a higher purpose. This quality is the very essence of leadership. Says Darren Hardy, publisher of Success Magazine (US), "one of the most overlooked but important qualities of great leadership is one's courage and willingness to do what is unpopular". Hardy writes, 'Abraham Lincoln, now regarded as one the greatest US presidents, was a most unpopular president in his times. He was so unpopular that a newspaper editor even "suggested someone be Brutus and stab" him'. Hardy adds, 'because he was willing to do what was unpopular....enduring malicious public abuse and the loss of friends, power and prestige, he became the man who "saved the Union" and emancipated slaves.' Hardy asks, "where would we be today if he had only done what was popular?" (<http://darrenhardy.success.com/2010/03/unpopular/>) Lincoln chose to be unpopular to protect America.

Recall Gandhi again. He courted unpopularity with ease for the nation's cause. Before his 'unpopular' salt march that later turned unbelievably 'popular', Gandhiji dared unthinkable unpopularity in 1920s when he called off the Non-cooperation Movement because it had turned violent. When a BBC correspondent derisively asked him whether his popularity had deserted him, Gandhiji replied, "popularity comes without invitation and goes without farewell". Gandhiji willingly placed the nation over his popularity index. The tradition seems to survive even now. The Koodankulam fake agitation saw a tall man — former President A P J Abdul Kalam — stand up for the nation. Amid many elites building image and popularity at the nation's cost, Kalam risked both for the nation. He chose to take on the fake agitation which most media had blindly backed. Imagine the paid crowd at Koodankulam succeeds. Would that not open a floodgate of fake agitations to stymie nuclear India? Koodankulam fake agitators and their backers want, not a safe-nuclear India, but a nuclear-impotent one. Kalam challenged it, putting his dignity at risk. As the nation's interest was at stake, he couldn't care less. That is leadership. Not winning votes, seats and elections or occupying positions of power or respect in society.

If only political leaders, intellectuals or media, ever hungry for popularity, risk a bit of it for nation's sake like Kalam did, will they not correct the nation's drift?

*(Views expressed in the column are the author's own)*