

## **Remembering Dandi** **Venu Madhav Govindu**

The way one remembers the past is important in the making of collective identities. If coloured by partisan agendas, the past can be tinged with an entirely unreal hue. But historical facts are often moulded and distorted into servicable forms that have little to do with their original meaning. During the colonial period, our past was often remembered as a golden age unsullied by invasions. And in our times, the prime exponents of such expedient remembrance are political parties in the pursuit of power. If the BJP's rewriting of history textbooks is a prime example from recent years, the present ruling dispensation is not far behind. Back in the saddle after a long hiatus, the Congress has staked claim to the legacy of one of the most dramatic events of yesteryear - the Salt March of 1930.

In 1988 a young, dapper Rajiv Gandhi tried to capture some of the glory of this pivotal moment in our Freedom Movement. And now we are told that on the 75th anniversary of Gandhi's famous March from Sabarmati to Dandi, Sonia Gandhi and Manmohan Singh will participate "only on its inaugural leg" of a rerun of the event. Last August in a speech to the AICC in New Delhi, the Prime Minister reminded his audience that "Gandhiji showed us the power of symbols associated with the common man, *aam admi*" and exhorted that "re-living the experience of the Dandi March next year every Congress worker must reconnect with the common people of our country and relate to their needs and aspirations".

Political homilies notwithstanding our erudite PM must surely be aware that the if anything the Salt March was both a political *and* an economic statement. Manufacturing our own salt was a metaphor for India's rejection of colonial rule and the reaffirmation that India's salvation lay in economic regeneration of its villages and self-reliance of its people. As a proponent of economic globalisation and neo-liberal policies surely today's Congress cannot stake claim to the Mahatma's legacy. Across the board, its functioning is nothing but a clear repudiation of the values that Gandhi and his comrades stood for. Values for which thousands of ordinary Indians had staked everything they had.

Faced with such distortions, it is pertinent to remind ourselves of the true meaning of the March. And in this its helpful to look at the historical record of the events of 1930. The most authentic retelling is offered by Thomas Weber, an Australian, who has spent years researching and contemplating the life of Gandhi and its meaning. In 1983, unlike today's fair-weather political enthusiasts, Weber walked the entire length of the Salt March with no fanfare. And being an academic, he also diligently researched the historiography of the March. Many years later, in 1997, Weber turned all of his painstaking work into the most authoritative book on Gandhi's journey to Dandi. If you'd pardon the un-Gandhian metaphor, *On the Salt March : The Historiography of Gandhi's March to Dandi* is like fine wine that has matured over the years. By splicing the historiography and a narrative of the daily events of the March with his own travelogue, Weber provides us with a scintillating, wholesome and immensely thought-provoking read.

Given the current vaguely celebratory mood, it is important to recall that the March to Dandi was no picnic. It was seen as no less than a war, albeit a non-violent one as far as the people were concerned. Rather, the seventy-nine people who walked the 241 miles to Dandi saw themselves as India's peaceful army arraigned against the might of the British Empire. In fact many surmised that the marchers would be shot dead and the atmosphere at the start of the March was anything but festive. Over the next few months, as the mood in India changed to one of open defiance of the Government, many were brutally beaten up and some sixty thousand Indians were imprisoned. Also, as Weber clearly demonstrates, the

March would also have its share of problems as it ran the gauntlet, not of the British establishment but that of very Indian problems - caste and class, the Hindu-Muslim divide and rural life with its many orthodoxies - that continue to haunt us. But Gandhi always converted these problems into opportunities and in various speeches he dwelt on these issues. He also lost no opportunity to admonish his tired but trusted band of walkers and reminded them to practise a strict austere living. Their life was to be compatible with the stark poverty of rural India.

However to discern the true symbolism of the March as seen by its principal protagonists there is no better source than their writings in Gandhi's journal, *Young India*. Throughout his public life, Gandhi had used journalism as an instrument for propagating ideas and for engaging in an open discourse. Gandhi's inheritance of *Young India* and how he turned it into a fine platform for debate, discourse and introspection is an instructive story in itself. The finest moments for this journal were during the Salt March and its aftermath when under extremely trying circumstances, it functioned as the journal of public record for the satyagrahis.

Even a cursory glance at the issues from this period is an insightful window into the making of history itself. As the weeks pass by, the pace gathers and the pulse quickens. And the relentless flow of news is reflected in the changing nature of the reports in *Young India*. In the following paragraphs I shall outline the story of the March to Dandi as seen through the pages of this weekly. By this I hope to remind ourselves of the immense sacrifices of ordinary people and point to the complexities of the Civil Disobedience campaign.

With the declaration of Purna Swaraj at the Lahore session of the Indian National Congress the country was gearing up for a major confrontation with the British Government and Gandhi was expected to provide the lead. Soon, in the January 30, 1930 issue of *Young India* the first salvo is fired. Gandhi makes a 'childish' offer to Lord Irwin and desires reform on Eleven Points. Amidst significant issues like "reduction of the land revenue" and "abolition of the C.I.D. or its popular control" is the bland, almost innocuous demand, "Abolition of the salt tax". These demands seemed like a climb-down from the lofty slogan of Independence enunciated a few weeks earlier in Lahore. But then Gandhi was never afraid of negotiating an honourable settlement and these limited but pointed demands were a means to provide both a chance to the Government to prove its sincerity and concretise the abstract goal of Freedom.

Civil Disobedience was in the air and Gandhi was in no doubt of its outcome, hence he addressed his readers in an essay titled "When I am arrested". Soon word got out that breach of the Salt Laws was to be the means of challenging the might of the British and as Jawaharlal Nehru pointed out in his autobiography, "Salt suddenly became a mysterious word, a word of power." It is perhaps difficult to imagine today why it was the ordinary salt that stirred the minds and hearts of millions of Indians. But then the salt tax was no trifling matter.

For decades Indians were denied the liberty of manufacturing their own salt and were instead burdened with a most inequitable tax. After all, rich or poor, everyone consumed salt and as many writers sought to demonstrate, a tax of about 1000% on the cost was "the worst blot on our revenue system". An incredible 5% of total tax revenue was obtained from taxing an extremely cheap mineral easily obtainable from sea-water. Helpful readers provided Gandhi with a variety of material that was published in essays like the "History of Salt Manufacture", "Salt and Cancer" and more practically "Penal Sections of the Salt Act".

By early March Gandhi had sent a letter addressed to his "dear friend" Lord Irwin. In it Gandhi sought to impress upon the Viceroy that while he held British rule to be a curse, he did not intend any harm to a single Englishman. And he went on to explain that British rule, "has impoverished the dumb millions by a system of progressive exploitation and by a ruinously expensive military and civil administration which the country can never afford." He also explained why he was going to violate the Salt Law, "I regard this tax to be the most iniquitous of all from the poor man's stand-point. As the Independence movement is essentially for the poorest in the land the beginning will be made with this evil. The wonder is that we have submitted to this cruel monopoly for so long."

The most important March 12th issue carried a detailed list of the seventy-nine marchers. However, all was not well and Gandhi also sought to squelch the view that had gained currency that his was "a movement not for Swaraj but Hindu Raj and against Musalamans". The articles were not on ponderous issues alone. They also provide precious moments of human delight. Even before the March had begun the redoubtable Sardar Patel had been arrested and Mahadev Desai provided an account of "How Sardar was Imprisoned". The dour-faced Sardar, Mahadev said, had "a loud laugh which filled the air" and ready wit to boot. As he was led away, Patel called out, "Follow me. I am keeping room ready for you".

On April 6th, the Salt Law was broken but opinion was still divided on many issues. It is perhaps difficult to imagine today, but in the very pages in which Gandhi explained why his campaign was now inevitable, we can also read the sagely dissenter C. Rajagopalachar who warned of "The Risks of Civil Disobedience". And the Gandhian coterie of nationalists were ever alert to practical exigencies. With all this talk of breaking the law, if a reader still wondered "How to Manufacture Salt ?", Mahadevlal Shroff and K. G. Mashruvala provided a handy recipe.

The April 17th issue started a new column that reflected the darkening mood of the country. It was called "Weekly War News" and the roll-call of arrests from different provinces were featured with a sickening regularity. The British had taken a middle-of-the-road view of how to deal with Gandhi during the March. By not arresting him on his way to Dandi they hoped to make him look 'ridiculous' and for a while Gandhi was indeed stymied. The Salt Law was breached at Dandi and elsewhere but not much else happened and Gandhi was left cooling his heels at Karadi. Then Gandhi decided to raise the ante by raiding the salt depots of Dharasana. Before he could put this into action, Gandhi was arrested in a midnight swoop on the 5th of May. A previously dictated message to the nation from Gandhi was published in the 8th May issue and an unnamed assistant editor published it "as a challenge to the honour and loyalty of India to meet the fiery ordeal that now lies before her". In his message Gandhi pointed out that "Swaraj won without sacrifice cannot last long." and that "At present India's self respect, in fact her all, is symbolised as it were in a handful of salt in the Satyagrahi's hand. Let the fist holding it therefore be broken, but let there be no voluntary surrender of the salt."

With most of the leadership in jail, by the May 15th issue, there was a new editor, J. C. Kumarappa, who went on to become the greatest exponent of Gandhian values in economics and an early ecological philosopher of striking originality. But in 1930, he was a greenhorn nationalist who acquitted himself admirably well with his new onerous task of overseeing the production of *Young India* in its worst phase. By now the repression of the Civil Disobedience campaign had reached a peak with the brutal clubbing of unarmed, peaceful satyagrahis at Dharasana. Years later, American journalist Webb Miller recalled, "In eighteen years of reporting in twenty-two countries I have never witnessed such harrowing scenes as at Dharasana. Sometimes the scenes were so painful that I had to turn away momentarily. One surprising feature was the discipline of volunteers. It seemed they were thoroughly imbued with

Gandhi's non-violent creed." Kumarappa was an Indian Christian satyagrahi, a relative rarity, and in light of the painful events, he pronounced a devastating indictment of his co-religionists many of whom sided with the British against India's righteous struggle. However while he was angry and upset, Kumarappa also warned his correspondents that without their signature on letters he could not publish their news "for lack of proper authentication." The Gandhian restraint was very much evident. Nevertheless some, like a letter-writer published in the June 26 issue, were still not "convinced that there is the true spirit of love amongst Gandhiji's followers" and while professing belief "in the practicability of Christ's teaching of non-resistance of evil" questioned if there wasn't "the ulterior motive of gaining power over one's enemy". Such doubters were however presumably very sanguine of the purity of the British motive in India.

By July the press of *Young India* was seized by the Government and from 10th July 1930 to 5th March 1931, *Young India* appeared in cyclo-style on every Thursday. Despite the martial law and chaotic situation, not a single issue was missed and on his release from prison Gandhi himself confessed that he did "not yet know how over seven thousand copies are being issued with such regularity."

Like many of Gandhi's campaigns, the Salt March failed in its immediate objective. The salt tax was not to be repealed until Gandhi reminded his colleagues of it in 1947. But it drew thousands of ordinary people, including many women for the first time, into the national struggle. And by adhering to a creed of *ahimsa*, Indians had exposed the immorality and brutality of British rule in India. The demise of the Empire was still distant but was now inevitable. Based on a bedrock of *satya* and immense sacrifice by ordinary people, a new form of political mobilisation was invented and bequeathed to the world. By urging Indians to manufacture what they needed locally, Gandhi was also pointing to the inalienable fact that political freedom was meaningless without economic independence and self-sufficiency.

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Freedom was won in 1947 but millions are still struggling for survival. Of late one hears a lot about the *aam admi* in declarations and statements from the Government. However as Gandhi had recognised all those decades ago, beyond mere intentions, the *aam admi* needs fruitful employment. The evicted slum-dweller of Mumbai, fisherfolk battered by the tsunami in Nagapattinam or the thousands who will soon leave their villages in an annual search for sustenance during the summer months, all need the opportunity to earn a decent wage for their hard work and have access to the minimal decencies of life. And on the seventy-fifth anniversary of the momentous Salt March what we need from the Congress Party is an honest attempt to provide minimal employment guarantees to all, not yet another ceremony to appropriate a legacy that belongs to all Indians.