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Gnani Sankaran: Will Anna's Lokpal get people the freedom to protest?

WRITTEN BY

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A small news item it was. Not to be found in any of the English dailies down south. Only the Tamil dailies carried it, most of them in their district editions.

The news would be sending shockwaves had it happened anywhere in the western hemisphere. But since it happened in a nondescript village 25 kilometres from Kanyakumari, the southernmost tip of India, it remains unnoticed and neglected.

The name of the village is Koodankulam, which will ring a bell to regular readers anywhere in India. This is where the country's largest nuclear power plant with Russian collaboration is coming up. The first plant is expected to go critical this year.

The 'explosive' news I am referring to is about Koodankulam's gram sabha meeting held on August 15. For latecomers, under the Panchayati Raj act, the gram sabha is the most basic unit of our parliamentary democracy. It consists of adult villagers and the act mandates that the gram sabha meets on Independence Day, Republic Day and Gandhi Jayanti to transact business without fail.

The Koodankulam village gram sabha met this August 15 to unanimously resolve that they do NOT want a nuclear plant in their village. They also resolved that NONE of them

and those in surrounding villages will take up even causal jobs at the site. The gram sabha meeting was actually part of a protest going on for more than a fortnight against the nuclear plant. Fishermen struck work; their children boycotted school. Nearly 3,000 villagers of this coastal area marched to the government revenue divisional office to surrender their ration cards. It is a popular myth that surrendering ration cards would mean abdication of citizenship and an embarrassed government will act to stop citizens from quitting the nation at any cost.

In Europe and the western world, a village council opposing an industrial plant, leave alone a nuclear plant, would warrant a debate at the national legislature. Not so here. Though the Panchayati Raj act empowers the village council to take all decisions regarding the village, other laws centralising the power with the state and Union governments deprive the village of the right to decide for itself.

The law requires prior consultation with all stakeholders before a project is launched. The district collector holds mandatory meetings, most of which are nothing but a farce. The real issues are not even spelt out at the meetings. Most of the meetings are conducted literally at gunpoint with the intimidating presence of a heavy police force. Party politicians are cleverly employed by bureaucrats to pacify protesting public. Koodankulam too had its share of consultation meetings when anti-nuclear protest movements were cleverly kept out.

The gram sabha's resolution made me wonder about what Team Anna is trying to achieve – a Lokpal for the entire country with teeth, as they claim. How would a Lokpal solve the issue of Koodankulam's fisherfolk? There is no corruption involved. The only issue is the right to livelihood and the right to decide for themselves about what kind of development should happen. The gram sabha has the right to resolve but no teeth to bite. It can only bark.

But then, barking is what democracy is all about. Anna Hazare and his team have made a big issue of the right to protest thanks to the media glare. But what the nation does not know is democratic protest is not so easy to achieve without the aid of 24x7 channels.

In Chennai, as elsewhere, no demonstration is allowed in any part of the city except two

places earmarked by the police. Street theatre is simply impossible even in parks or the beach. Stage plays are subject to censorship with scripts whetted by the police, thanks to a British act. The play Vagina Monologues was prevented twice in the last four years from being staged under the censorship rules in Chennai.

Would Anna Hazare's Lokpal bring in the freedom to protest? I wonder. Certain privileges are available only to certain sections in our country. Even the right to protest. Can a Maoist prisoner send out a video message to the world? Anna Hazare can. The Koodankulam gram sabha can bark with a resolution. But it won't be disseminated and will end up as a whimper.

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