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Authors	Ali Engineer, Asghar
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MAHATMA, OBAMA AND INDIA

Asghar Ali Engineer

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Obama on his recent trip to India paid glowing tribute to Mahatma Gandhi and even said he belongs not only to India but to whole world. Needless to say it is easier to pay tribute but very difficult indeed to act in conformity with his philosophy. Anyone who becomes Mahatma meets with the same fate. We pay rich tributes to him and ignore his teachings in practice. In fact more we ignore his teachings richer tends to be our tribute.

There is very few exceptions to this rule. We Indians are guiltier of ignoring Mahatma's teachings than others. All our politicians ritually pay tribute to Mahatma, we name roads after him, install his statues and what is ironical print his photograph on currency notes of all denominations. Similarly all heads of states who visit India are ritualistically taken to Gandhiji's Samadhi to lay wreath of flowers.

Obama's tributes to Gandhiji, I must say, was not merely ritualistic, it was more than that. It seems it came from his heart. Obama after all is follower of Martin King Jr. who was greatly influenced by Gandhiji's philosophy of non-violence and what is distinguishing feature of King Martin is that he practiced non-violence and won rights for African-Americans through non-violent means.

King Martin had to sacrifice his life for his ideals but he liberated African Americans in sixties of last century and Obama is also King Martin's follower so what he said in India was more than mere formality and had ring of truth. But having said this some questions would be in place. King Martin practiced what he believed and empowered the African-Americans. Obama, though he too believes in Gandhiji's philosophy of non-violence but since he contested election and won presidency of America he is far from practicing his philosophy.

It is very important to note in case of Gandhi is that he never involved himself in any kind of power struggle. He never entertained ambition to become President or prime minister of India. The day India became independent and government formation was taking place in Delhi Gandhiji was far away in Navakhali putting out fire of communal violence. He did not even celebrated Indian independence which came at a heavy cost of partition, on one hand, and, mass killings, on the other. And his priority was establishing communal harmony. So he chose to be in Navakhali which was burning in communal fire.

Secondly, anyone who takes Gandhi seriously and claims to be his follower must practice non-violence which is not possible without practicing truth – *ahimsa* and *satyagraha* (non-violence and truth) go together. Any country which is armed to teeth and to the extent that it can destroy with those arms this earth 10 times over cannot practice non-violence. America wages wars in so many countries of Asia and Africa in the name of security. In fact more arms it possesses, more it feels insecure.

It possesses several hundred most disastrous nuclear arms and Gandhiji was totally against nuclear arms. Thus first thing Obama can do is to prepare an authentic programme to eliminate nuclear arms and then acquire moral right to ask other nuclear powers to destroy all nuclear arms. Today even under Obama USA is following double standards. While it pressurizes Iran not to manufacture nuclear weapons, it directly or indirectly justifies Israel possessing more than 100 nuclear heads. How can it exercise any moral authority to ask Iran not to go for nuclear arms. Such double standards are totally against Gandhiji's philosophy of truth and non-violence.

Thirdly, under Obama as a true follower of Gandhiji America must bring about genuine peace in Palestine and get Palestinians their rights. Gandhiji had said that Palestine belongs to Palestinians as much as India belongs to Indians or England belongs to Englishmen. I hope Obama has read these words of Gandhiji and as his follower should do everything possible, resisting all pressures, to restore Palestine to Palestinians as per UN resolution of 1948 and 1967.

Yet another question is of liberalization and globalization. Gandhiji had said that real progress and development is one which benefits the last person in the society or the poorest of the poor. What we see in the world in general and in India in particular, is just opposite of that. The poor are getting horribly poor and rich are getting vulgarly rich. It is well known fact that more than 75 per cent people in India are living on Rs. 25 a day which cannot buy even one single meal.

It is obvious that Obama too is promoting this kind of skewed development which results in extreme polarization between rich and poor and grinds down the poor. Gandhiji would never approve of such 'development'. It is this kind of unjust development which results in more and more violence. America also invades other countries not only for its security but for its economic 'prosperity'. Only a just society can be a truly non-violent society.

Today India is also witnessing so much violence – be it Naxal violence or communal violence or ethnic violence or caste violence only because there is no justice. Tribal areas are being plundered by multinationals for minerals for so called development earning billions of rupees whereas tribals go hungry. Can Mahatma Gandhi approve of such loot resulting in gross injustice?

Gandhiji laid down his life for protection and justice for minorities. A Hindu fanatic shot him dead accusing him of favouring Muslims. Today political parties directly or indirectly organize communal riots to win elections. Can this be a just democracy? Agreed no blame can go to Obama for this state of affairs but often communal violence also takes place to hide the ugly reality from gross injustices. Communal solidarity is promoted to break class solidarity. Poor of one community are made to kill poor of another community.

Poverty and development favouring rich becomes cause of violence which then takes different forms including communal violence. Even in western societies racial feelings go up during economic downturn. Just imagine the extent of violence in India where almost 75 per cent people live either on poverty line or below poverty line. Such developmental model simply cannot be acceptable by any admirer of Gandhi.

Gandhi stressed simple living with stress on spirituality and truth. A non-violent society is not possible without simplicity, truth and spirituality. Any high standard of living as Americans and Indian elite have will inevitably lead to violence as such high standards are based on exploitation and injustice which inevitably result in genesis of violence. Modern economies are based on generating artificial needs and high levels of consumerism.

President Obama was, on one hand, admiring Gandhi and, on the other, was all praise for high rate of growth of India which is, as pointed out above, beneficial only for the upper class elite. Both, i.e. admiration for Gandhi and his philosophy of truth and non-violence cannot simply go together. President Obama had come to India mainly for creating jobs for Americans through collaboration with economic growth of India, not so much to express his admiration for Gandhian philosophy.

We are aware that it is not easy for Obama, or for any American President, to bring about change in economic model and bring down level of consumerism. It is easier said than done. No American President can survive such change. American president cannot even reduce conventional armament, let alone nuclear armament as there are strong linkages between military and industry.

But it is also true that as long as America follows such pattern of economic growth and high standards of living at the cost of poorer countries, there will be no peace in the world. Also, it is compulsion of American military-industrial complex to sell armaments and provoke violence in some or the other part of Afro-Asian countries. Bush had said with all conviction that there are weapons of mass destruction in Iraq and destroyed Iraq with weapons of their own mass destruction and now he admits in his own book *Decision Points* that there were no weapons of mass destruction.

This lie was spoken deliberately and entire media controlled by the elite who benefit from such lies readily obliged and propagated theory of weapons of mass destruction. All this is necessary for sustaining unjust patterns of economic growth. A Gandhian with any measure of sincerity cannot be part of such unjust economic growth. A true Gandhian has to be spiritually-oriented and has to equally concentrate on one's spiritual richness as much as material one.

The modern economy is such that more one consumes, more one needs and more one becomes hollow spiritually. No growth deprived of morality and spirituality can bring any joy to the people. It can bring only stress and tension. Many of Gandhiji's economic theories also need to be critiqued as he was writing and theorizing during colonial times. Charkha (spinning wheel) economy also cannot work today but some of Gandhiji's insights are valid even today as much as they were during those days. There are eternal truths and contextual ones. We need not stick to contextual ones.