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Gandhi's Legacy of Peace as perceived by Stanley Albert Wolpert

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Abstract: Mahatma Gandhi is considered an apostle of global peace and non-violence by people traversing continents, religions and communities. This great leader served as an inspiration towards ending injustice and colonialism through elements of suffering and self-sacrifice. He held a strong conviction in the inviolable connection between ends and means comparable with one between a seed and a tree. India's attainment of freedom symbolized victory of soul force over armed force under Gandhi's leadership. His influence on activists of peace and non-violence even in present times, makes him most modern and has had a considerable impact on the lives of Americans from all walks of life. Stanley Albert Wolpert (born 1927), an American historian, is one. He occupies a pre-eminent position among those contributing towards American historiography on Modern India. His notable works include studies of the subcontinent and those related to it as also, the landmarks of the Indian freedom struggle. His association with India dates back to February 1948 when he first touched the Indian soil as a marine engineer and saw Gandhi's ashes being immersed in the Arabian Sea off the coast of Bombay. Knowledge of Gandhi and his tremendous following aroused Wolpert's interest in this great personality and India. The magnitude of the impact was so much that thenceforth, he became a student of Indian history, setting aside his career of marine engineering. Over the years, he developed a strong bond with India and started teaching Indian history in the University of California, Los Angeles. Subsequently, he wrote on various personalities of the subcontinent such as B. G. Tilak, G.K. Gokhale, J.L. Nehru, M.A. Jinnah, Z.A. Bhutto besides others. However, it was

Mahatma Gandhi who impressed him the most. Consequently, he produced the biography of Gandhi entitled 'Gandhi's Passion- the Life and Legacy of Mahatma Gandhi' (OUP. 2001).

In this work, Wolpert speaks of the rich global legacy of Gandhi who showed to the world that civilizations can exist and prosper only when there is global peace. This is Gandhi's greatest contribution and legacy to mankind, held in high estimation by Wolpert. According to him, it inspired personalities worldwide. However, Wolpert is skeptical about Gandhi's Indian legacy. He feels that despite his worldwide appeal, it is ironical that Gandhi failed to convince his own countrymen even in his lifetime and after it. That he was 'walking alone' with his ideals even before Independence is illustrative of the fact that his principles did not find appreciation of many of the Indians. Barely a few months after India attained Independence, Gandhi had to sacrifice his life for those very ideals. Even later, India remained non-compliant with his ideals, resorting to armament and nuclear testing. Wolpert was shocked and anguished when India exploded three underground nuclear bombs in 1998. At that point of time, hardly any Indian protested: on the contrary, the popular response was euphoric. This compelled the historian to wonder whether Gandhi had really influenced his countrymen or not. Such a paradox between Gandhi's global and Indian legacy finds expression in Wolpert's biography on Gandhi. But then, it is also imperative to assess India's position in the world, to consider that India cannot survive as a political entity divorcing itself from such elements in present times. Moreover, to make Gandhi's dreams come true, a concerted effort is required, not only of Indians but of people all over the world. Truly, global peace can be a reality only amidst mutual respect and collaborative effort towards peaceful co-existence.

Keywords: global peace, American historiography, disarmament, nuclear testing, legacy.

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Introduction :

People across the world draw inspiration from the Indian freedom struggle and life and ideals of Mahatma Gandhi. They cherish the way India attained freedom from the clutches of the mighty British Empire through non-violent and peaceful methods. It was the most glaring example of colonialism and racial prejudice where soul-force was pitted against armed force. Finally, India threw off her shackles on 15th of August 1947, symbolizing the victory of Mahatma Gandhi and his ideals. This great leader held a strong conviction in the inviolable connection between ends and means as between a seed and a tree. Considering his impact on generations of mankind, he can be reckoned as most modern. His influences on activists of non-violence, civil rights and peace make him an apostle of peace. This is his greatest legacy to the world. Even though Gandhi had never visited the United States of America, he held great attraction for Americans. After all, both America and India hold many things in common: both these countries were victims of British imperialism and racial discrimination. Also, presently, both are among the world's largest democracies.

In the 20th century, the United States emerged as a strong democratic nation out of the first colonial revolution of modern times. It held sympathy for anti-colonial struggles being waged all over the world, particularly India. A good number of Americans from all walks of life were highly appreciative of the way Indians struggled to be free and came forward in its support. They identified themselves with the oppressed Indians and held in high esteem the efforts of Indian leaders towards establishment of nationalism, equality, democracy, and eradication of racial prejudice. Of all such leaders, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi attracted them the most. The Americans were mindful of his activities since his *Satyagraha* in South Africa and followed his struggle against the British interestedly after he returned to India in 1915. India waging a non-violent struggle against colonialism under Gandhi drew attention of intellectuals of America, including Dr. Stanley Albert Wolpert, an eminent historian. He occupies a significant position among those contributing towards American historiography on India. His association with India dates back to 1948. The historian, keeping his biography on Mahatma Gandhi at the center stage, has discussed Gandhi's global legacy and his legacy to India where the dichotomy anguishes him.

Objectives :

The study focuses upon the worldwide appreciation of Mahatma Gandhi wresting freedom from the British through non-violence and peaceful methods.

In this connection, the views of the distinguished American historian Stanley Albert Wolpert have been examined who discusses the legacy of Gandhi towards world and India in his work entitled 'Gandhi's Passion: The Life and Legacy of Mahatma Gandhi'. Gandhi received praise from leaders the world over, as also organizations committed to peace. This phenomenon forms an integral part of such discussion.

The relevance of the title of the biography is also discussed. Here, the views of Wolpert find agreement with those of many intellectuals, sizeable number of whom consider Gandhi the greatest personality after Jesus Christ.

Finally, the study attempts to evaluate Gandhi's legacy towards India which unfortunately, as the historian opines, is anomalous with his global legacy.

Methodology:

In this paper, historical and content analyses have been adopted. Both primary and secondary data have been put to use. Wolpert's work on Gandhi forms the primary data. Under secondary data, records, documents, diaries, newspapers and other biographies have been put to use.

Discussion and findings:

Born on 23rd of December 1927 at New York, USA, Stanley Wolpert is considered one of the top ranking Indologists of the world. His contribution towards modern Indian history and historiography is immense. After obtaining a Ph.D. degree in South Asian studies from the University of Pennsylvania, he was honoured with the Watumull Prize of American Historical Association for the best work on Indian history published in the United States in 1962. His studies include some important personalities of the subcontinent or those related to it as well as landmarks of the Indian Freedom Movement. His journey with India started with his work on important leaders like Tilak and Gokhale in the year 1962 which happened to be his doctoral dissertation. He went on to present biographies on Lord Morley (1967), Mohammad Ali Jinnah (1984), Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (1993), Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru (1996) and Mahatma Gandhi (2001) besides others.

Of all the personalities, the historian seems to be impressed by Mahatma Gandhi the most. Consequently, he produced a biography of Father of the Nation 'Gandhi's Passion: The Life and Legacy of Mahatma Gandhi' (OUP., 2001). The title itself is indicative of the discussion centering around Gandhi's life and his legacy – to the world and of course, to India. It was the result of three years of rigorous labour coupled with accumulated knowledge and experience. Incidentally, in 1962

itself, Wolpert had produced the work on Gandhi's assassination entitled 'Nine Hours to Rama' which presently, faces a ban in India. But 'Gandhi's Passion' falls in the category of a full – fledged biography, reflective of Wolpert's long association with Indian history and ideals of Gandhi. In fact, his ties with India dates back to 12th of February 1948 with an event associated with the Great Soul itself. On that day, Wolpert, then a marine engineer, touched upon the shores of Bombay and saw Gandhi's ashes being immersed in the Arabian Sea with thousands of mourning people. Since then, his interest in this great apostle of world peace was aroused and the fact that Gandhi was assassinated by a fellow Indian, made Wolpert compare him with the great American leader Martin Luther King Jr. who too met with the same fate at the hands of a fellow citizen. Deeply stirred, thenceforth Wolpert became a student of Indian history forgoing his career of marine engineering. Thus, in a way, such an association with Gandhi brought about a 'conversion' in him.

Understanding Mahatma was not easy: it took him almost four decades to decide what to write on Gandhi, for he never thought he knew enough to present his views on the great leader. Finally, it was in the year 2001 when his biography of Gandhi was published. Prominently, two reasons were responsible for this delay. First, there was no paucity of reference material on Gandhi for, he himself was a prolific writer penning down his views in numerous articles, editorials and letters. Second, like other historians, Wolpert found Gandhi a genius and a complex man. He hoped that with age, experience and knowledge, he would understand Gandhi better. However, the event that acted as a catalyst was India's response to her nuclear explosions which took place at Pokharan in 1998. At that moment, Wolpert was shocked and dismayed because hardly any Indian protested against this complete departure from Gandhi's faith in peace and 'ahimsa'. On the contrary, the national pride which filled Indian hearts, made Wolpert wonder as to whether it was the same India, the nation of Bapu, or the land where his teachings had become defunct, meaningless and invalid and a new, militant nation has emerged, glorifying nuclear bombs. That May itself, Wolpert decided to write on the life and the legacy of the Mahatma and produced the concerned work three years later.

In this work Wolpert speaks of a rich global legacy of Gandhi in matters of peace which inspired personalities worldwide. Yet, when it came to India, his own country, the historian feels that Gandhi failed to stir it in the same fashion: he had to sacrifice his own life for the ideals he cherished the most. The historian further

says that India under Pandit Nehru and thereafter did not give up nuclear testing and joined the deadly armament race. In fact, it considered the 1998 underground nuclear explosions a matter of pride. Under such circumstances, Wolpert holds doubts about Gandhi's legacy to India, his message having failed to reach even his own countrymen.

The discussion would be incomplete without emphasizing the significance of the title 'Gandhi's Passion' where the historian comes very close to Gandhi's association with ideals of Christianity. 'Passion' means 'suffering' and 'suffering of pain'. Wolpert draws the word from the Oxford English Dictionary where initially, it figured as synonym of 'the sufferings of Jesus Christ on the Cross'. True, Gandhi's life symbolized conscious suffering for noble causes as *satyagraha*, non-violence and peace, so much so, that his life of 'passion' ended in martyrdom but not before he had become immortal. The historian believes that like Jesus Christ, Gandhi suffered and sacrificed his life. In him, Gandhi combined Western passion with India's traditional *tapa*, demanding her freedom from imperialism, racial prejudice and exploitation. According to Wolpert then, this 'Passion' for life was the chief legacy which Gandhi left for his country and for the world. He considers Gandhi the greatest Indian since Gautam Buddha.

Many Individuals agree with Wolpert's views. They believe that other than Hinduism and Jainism, Christianity had a proud impact on Gandhi's life. One of the first Americans to take notice of Gandhi was Reverend John Haynes Holmes (1879-1964) who was a seminal figure in peace and 'civil liberties' movements in the early 20th century. For Holmes, Gandhi was the greatest personality since Christ. Gandhi believed in what Christ taught in the Sermon on the Mount, himself agreeing to such influence during his stay in South Africa. This shaped his life forever. He believed in the efficacy of soul force and faith in the conquering power of love and truth holding the view that it was the evil that ought to be resisted not the evil doer and that, enemies needed to be loved. But, what makes Gandhi unique is that he let the practice of non-violence transcend the masses, not restricting it merely to single individuals or small groups. The idea of Gandhi's life and ideals being close to those of Jesus Christ found agreement among Europeans too as Romain Rolland, Professor L.W. Grensted and Reverend Jack C. Winslow.

According to Romain Rolland (1866- 1944), the famous French dramatist, novelist, essayist and a Nobel Prize recipient, Gandhi renewed for all people of West the message of Christ, forgotten or betrayed. He considered Gandhi another Christ and is said to have

said "If Christ was the Prince of Peace, Gandhi is no less worthy of this noble title" (www.mkgandhi.org). According to Professor L.W. Grensted of the University of Oxford, both Gandhi and Christ were rebels and the element of self sacrifice was highly predominant in both of them. Correspondingly, Gandhi had asked Indians for self-sacrifice. Further, if freedom required shedding blood, Grensted agreed with Gandhi who stated "...remember it must be your own blood. Never a drop of anyone else's blood" (Radhakrishnan, 2005). Reverend Jack C. Winslow, the British evangelist held similar views.

Gandhi understood that self-sacrifice appealed to Indians and keeping himself at the centre of all his actions, he took upon himself the sins of others, fasting and suffering for them. Even the famous Spanish author Juan Guixé, in his work 'Mahatma Gandhi' (1930) compared Gandhi to Christ where the former's doctrine of *ahimsa* is examined with reference to primitive Christianity (Nanda, 1994). Teachings of Leo Tolstoy, John Ruskin, Henry Thoreau and Edward Carpenter also moulded him.

According to Wolpert, Gandhi's journey towards peace and non-violence began with his stay at South Africa between 1893 and 1915. It was the country where he first applied 'Satyagraha' evoking worldwide appreciation. The imperialists mainly the British, began to take notice of this man who regarded non-violence as a positive force. Through it, he was determined to liberate his country.

Wolpert then traces Gandhi's adoption of peaceful means, most sublime to attain a noble end, that is, independence. Back in India, when Gandhi set up the Satyagraha Ashram in May 1915, he himself drafted its constitution, incorporating non-violence as one of the vows which the Ashram's members needed to take. Yet again, at Champaran, Kheda and Ahmedabad he demonstrated the effectiveness of peaceful means against attrition. This attracted men and women, peasants and workers alike in the freedom struggle. Wolpert further adds that the Hindu-Muslim unity which the British dutifully tried to avert in the post-Revolt period, became a reality during the *Khilafat* Movement. In the summer of 1920, Gandhi exposed to the world how hollow was the assertion of the Allies when they insisted that they had restored peace after the defeat of the Ottoman Empire. He wrote in *Navajivan* in 1920 "To say that there is peace where one party forces the other to agree to something against its will, crushes it under its brute strength, is a grave offence against God in the form of Truth." Gandhi's strong abhorrence to violence led to his sudden suspension of the Non-Co-operation Movement in February 1922.

Like many Americans, Wolpert is impressed by Gandhi who substituted spinning wheel to gun power because Gandhi symbolized self-reliance and hope. The historian recalls an incident when an Indian correspondent living in London asked Gandhi as to how could his country contribute towards world peace. To this, Gandhi's reply was "If India succeeds in regaining her liberty through non-violent means, she would have made the larger contribution, yet known to world peace."

Gandhi's Civil Disobedience Movement is considered the most famous and difficult struggle against the world's leading imperialist nation in the most peaceful manner. This amazed people worldwide and their hatred towards British increased each day. The American interest manifested itself in the writings of their countrymen as of Louis Fischer, Webb Miller and William Shirer. *Dandi* March began to be likened to Boston Tea Party in assertion of rights. Gandhi considered salt to be the representative of India's honour. Many American United Press correspondents, who came to cover this movement, were deeply moved when amidst large scale violence of British, Indians did not even raise an arm to fend off the blows. The anguish of the helpless witnesses was immense. Wolpert has taken note of this event in the biography. Gandhi's non-violence illustrated unbounded courage when he, at a later point of time, fearlessly asserted that both Roosevelt and Churchill were no less war criminals than Hitler and Mussolini. This shocked the Allies. Again, during India's efforts towards attainment of Independence, Gandhi believed that Partition and bloodshed could never bring happiness as also, peace established through army and police would mean end of peace. But, with passage of time, it became evident that there were no takers of Gandhi's ideology. Sadly, the Mahatma too had realized the ineffectuality of his message and teachings in India, thereby preferring to keep away from the deliberations of Independence and Partition.

Wolpert illustrates how the whole world found Gandhi's ideals of peace and non-violence commendable and cherishable as the Afro-American leaders W.E.B. Du Bois, Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks, Tibet's Dalai Lama, Poland's Lech Walesa, Burma's Aung San Sui Kyi and South Africa's Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela among others. Many compared Gandhi's life to those of Jesus Christ and Gautam Buddha because of strong elements of suffering and self-sacrifice in him. Of particular reference are personalities like W.E.B. Du Bois and Martin Luther King Jr. Du Bois (1869-1963), the first African-American to earn a doctorate, was a professor of history, sociology and anthropology at the University of Atlanta. As one of the co-founders of the National

Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP) in 1909, he was deeply impressed by Gandhi and had invited the latter to visit America on behalf of this organization. The other Afro-American Martin Luther King Jr. (1929-1968) was the most important leader of the civil rights' movement from 1954 to 1968 whose interest in Gandhi was aroused in 1950. Hailing from a family of Baptist preachers, King viewed non-violence and the commandment to love as the core of Christ's teachings (Cortright, 2007). Regarding his feelings towards Bapu, he said "I went to Gandhi through Jesus." Since Bible concerns itself with deliverance for the poor and the oppressed, Gandhi came very close to Christianity. King, as Wolpert rightly points out, never got the opportunity to meet him but made it a point to interact with his disciples during his India visit of 1959. Viewing his dedication to Bapu, King is rightly heralded as the 'American Gandhi'. Wolpert adds that UNESCO's 'year of Tolerance' in 1995 and the first article of the International Declaration of Human Rights have bearings of Gandhi's ideals of peace (Wolpert: 2001, 266).

But, he questions the legacy of Gandhi towards India whose assassination speaks of his complete failure in convincing his own countrymen despite the fact that India had won freedom on Gandhian principles. Undeniably, in his own lifetime and after it Gandhi had a lean following. In addition, India's active participation in nuclear testing and armament both bear testimony to it. Wolpert ruefully says that India's 'victory' in the Kargil War energized Indians at home and those residing in the United States. In a country like India where millions live below the poverty line, lacking the basic amenities of life, such an expenditure is gratuitous. The historian feels that though India continues to celebrate Gandhi's birth as a national holiday and has his face and message on its currency, in its foreign policy, it has largely turned away from Bapu's ideals. In reality, India's poor peasants and landless *Harijans* seem to understand Gandhi better (Wolpert, 2001).

But then, one should remember that it was the same Gandhi who had clearly said: "I do believe that, where there is only a choice between cowardice and violence, I would advise violence...I would rather have India resort to arms in order to defend her honour than that she should, in a cowardly manner, become or remain a helpless witness to her own dishonour". He added, "The world is not entirely governed by logic. Life itself involves some kind of violence and we have to choose the path of least violence" (www.mkgandhi.org). But, otherwise, Gandhi considered non-violence and forgiveness infinitely far superior to punishment. It is well known that in 1942, it was Gandhi who gave the *mantra* of 'Do or Die'. He was conscious of the changed milieu in India since the days of the suspension of the Non-Co-operation Movement in 1922. Even later he had

agreed, as Rajmohan Gandhi, the eminent biographer and research professor says, to deployment of Indian army to defend Jammu and Kashmir after it had been attacked in October 1947. Gandhi very well knew that this was choosing between defending Kashmir or letting it be taken by force (Nanda, 1994).

Moreover, history is replete with examples when imposition of peace on one individual or party can never be successful. The Second World War took place largely because the Allies placed the onus of maintaining peace on the vanquished nations, mainly Germany. Had all been equally committed towards maintaining peace, in all likelihood, the War would not have occurred. Thus, India's adherence to peace and non-violence can be meaningful only when countries worldwide resort to disarmament and shun nuclear testing.

Conclusion:

Thus, we may conclude by saying that violence, non-violence and peace all nurture in the human heart universally. Correspondingly, it depends upon the individual more than the country in choosing between violence and non-violence, war and peace. Certainly, in this way, we would pay true homage to Mahatma Gandhi the great apostle of peace.

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