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"Barack Obama can bring about a sweeping change"

Madhur Tankha

NEW DELHI: Mary Elizabeth King, Professor of Peace and Conflict Studies at the University for Peace in Costa Rica, on Saturday said U.S. President Barack Obama's campaign and presidency were a continuation of Mahatma Gandhi's work with collective non-violent action in South Africa and India.

Delivering a lecture here on 'To continue the long march of those who came before us: The influence of Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King on Barack Obama's campaign and presidency,' Dr. King

said Mr. Obama's most striking attribute was his inclusiveness.

"His background was that of a community organiser. After university, he worked in the slums of Chicago in housing projects and schools. One of his early inspirations in those days was Gandhi, whom he saw as another community organiser like himself. Obama studied organisers who were agents of change such as Gandhi to develop a theory of mass participation."

Stating that Mr. Obama had said in an interview that he always looked to Mahatma Gandhi as an inspiration because he

embodied the kind of transformational change that can be made when ordinary people come together to do extraordinary things, Dr. King said when the former entered the U.S. Senate he hung a portrait of Gandhi in his office to remind himself that "real results will not just come from Washington, they will come from the people."

Dr. King said Mr. Obama's campaign and his choice of words invoked aspects of the Indian and U.S. civil rights struggles.

Gandhi's Views

"His view of himself as an imperfect vessel that needs to be subjugated to higher ideals, resonate with Gandhi's own views of himself....Obama vigorously guarded against retaliatory sentiments in the heat of the tempestuous campaign. He sidestepped triumphalism in his inauguration. Gandhi and King were both concerned, in their respective movements, that triumphalism should not develop."

Dr. King said Mr. Obama has taken "the first steps toward creating sweeping change — so far without bloodshed, guns and no new wars.

In his emphasis on collective action and the role of each individual in a movement, Mr. Obama has the potential for leading sweeping change, as did Gandhi and King."

Describing herself as a white woman with family roots in the American South, Dr. King said she worked with civil rights leaders such as Julian Bond and John Lewis for four years in the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee. "My job was working with the news media, trying to get out the news of atrocities committed against African Americans."