

Living Up To The Mahatma's Image, The American Way

Chandigarh: (IANS) US President Barack Obama may be longing for a dinner date with Mahatma Gandhi, but two of his own countrymen are living shades of the Mahatma's life, not just in the US but also in India.

Bernie Meyer, 73, and Donald McAvinchey, 53, have not just adopted the look but also the lifestyle and views of India's Father of the Nation, whose 140th birth anniversary falls Friday.

Roaming bare-chested in a white dhoti, carrying a bamboo stick in hand and sporting the trademark round-rimmed spectacles, the two Americans, who are staunch followers of Mahatma Gandhi, are here to pay tribute to the apostle of peace.

Invited by the Chandigarh-based NGO Yuvsatta for a five-day international peace festival that ended Wednesday, the Gandhi lookalikes said: "We love it when someone calls us Gandhi instead of our real names."

"For the last eight years I have been portraying the character of Mahatma Gandhi. In 2001, I was asked by my fellowship council to dress like Gandhi for a function and it has since become a quintessential part of my routine and living," Meyer, who served as a priest in Ohio in the US, told IANS.

Both have been invited to several educational and social institutions across India and other parts of the world to help make people, including in his homeland, aware of the life and philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi.

At times, they are mobbed by enthusiastic youngsters wanting to get close to them and seeking their autographs.

Meyer added: "I have read a lot about this illustrious man and have adopted his principles of

Meyer holds degrees in various subjects — history, urban studies, philosophy and theology.



peace and non-violence in my real life; I have automatically become teetotaler after adopting this path.

"Now, wherever I go, I preach the same principles."

He is also associated with the Ground Zero Center for Non-violent Action.

"There is need to make this world nuclear-weapons free. Barack Obama had stated that he wants their abolition and has begun a process with

other countries. So we are quite hopeful," said Meyer, who is on his sixth visit to India and has been a Gandhi fan since 1967.

"If George Bush had been aware of Gandhian ideology, it may have prevented the US-Iraq war," he pointed out.

His colleague McAvinchey, who has followed Gandhi's lifestyle for the last three years, says it is not easy to live up to the image.

"Mahatma Gandhi was a legendary campaigner of non-violence, truth and peace. He had sacrificed everything for the sake of his principles, so it is not at all easy to play his role. It puts immense responsibility on my shoulders," McAvinchey told IANS.

Unlike the hit Bollywood film "Lage Raho Munnabhai" that gave out the Gandhian message with humour within a mainstream format, this duo takes its role very seriously.

"I have researched a lot about this man to play this character to perfection. It has brought countless positive changes in my personal life. I have become more calm. Now I know how to control my anger. I actually practice his teaching in my life," stated McAvinchey, who is working in the department of health at Mexico city in the US.

About his experience in India, he added: "This is my first visit to India. I was very nervous and quite worried about the reaction of local people when they see a foreigner dressed like their father of the nation. However, I have found that people here are very jovial and warm. Wherever I went, people greeted me with open arms."

Farmer's Widow Kicks Off Her Maharashtra Poll Campaign

Both-Bodan (Maharashtra): (IANS) It was poignant in its imagery and telling in its impact. A slow procession of widows of farmers who committed suicide in the Vidarbha region in the last couple of years wound its way through rutted village tracks as Bebitai Bais, the first farmer's widow in Maharashtra to contest the assembly elections, began her campaign Saturday.

She will contest for the Wani assembly seat.

The widows' procession to the hamlet of 90 huts — which got into media spotlight after it saw 18 farmers' suicides in the past few years — symbolically marked the launch of this brave woman's poll campaign as a candidate of the Vidarbha Jan Andolan Samiti (VJAS) and Shetkari Sanghatana, supported by the Republican Left Democratic Front (RLDF).

VJAS president Kishore Tiwari told IANS Both-Bodan village was chosen as it "represents the heart of the agrarian crisis in eastern Maharashtra".

In a prepared statement released here, Bebitai said getting elected in the present murky political scenario would be difficult for a poor woman like her with limited resources at her command.

"I was disturbed when Kalavati Bandurkar was forced to step out of the poll race. My aim would be to unite all the 7,000 farmland widows and over 35,000 orphans of Vidarbha whose concerns and problems are common. We must show the world the apathy of the bureaucracy and politicians to our issues and our demand to live a life of dignity," she said.

Bebitai appealed to the widows and people of Wani to support the cause of the farming community and help her to raise their voice in the assembly.

The Vidarbha farmland crisis was highlighted in 2005 when 118 suicides were officially registered from the region. This prompted Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to send agriculture expert M.S. Swaminathan there. He reported in September that

year that the crisis was severe.

Four months later, in December 2005, then Maharashtra chief minister Vilasrao Deshmukh visited the affected regions and announced that there were nearly 800 suicides. He also announced an aid package of Rs.1,075 crore, but the suicides continued.

In March 2006, the centre sent a team of

experts led by Adarsh Mishra which said the crisis was very serious and warranted central intervention.

In June 2006, Manmohan Singh himself visited the region and announced a package of Rs.3,750 crore, of which Rs.850 crore went toward waiver of interest on farm loans and the rest for augmenting irrigation facilities.

In February 2008, the centre announced the historic farm loans waiver package of over Rs.70,000 crore on an all-India basis.

However, Tiwari pointed out that 90 per cent of the farmers in Vidarbha did not get any benefit in view of the eligibility clause stipulating a minimum two-hectare land holding.

The suicides have continued unabated. Citing statistics, he said that the suicides were: 440 in 2004, 450 in 2005, 1,640 in 2006, 1,468 in 2007, 1,500 in 2008, and 780 so far in 2009.

"We have decided that this time, a Vidarbha

farmer's widow must be elected to the assembly. It will be our way of tribute to the memory of over 7,000 debt-ridden farmers who committed suicide in the region. In September alone, 10 farmers killed themselves in Yavatmal district where over 1,600 people have died so far," Tiwari said.

He reiterated that VJAS will make a serious attempt to "empower" the widows and orphans of Vidarbha and a widow elected from here shall be their face in the assembly. "Even if it means that I have to sell off all my property and belongings," Tiwari said.

On Friday night, over a hundred widows congregated at Bebitai's native village Hivra and took out a candle-light procession on the occasion of Gandhi Jayanti.

The Vidarbha region includes Yavatmal, Nagpur, Akola, Gondia, Gadchiroli, Wardha, Amravati, Buldana, Washim, Bhandara and Chandrapur districts.

The Wani seat shall also be contested by the Congress and Shiv Sena candidates.



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