

President Obama's Trip to India: Was He Singing, 'I Wanna Get Away?'

by Ramtanu Maitra

Nov. 12—If you go beyond the pomp that ensued, and the size of the contingent that tagged along with America's First Couple, President Barack Obama's trip to India will go down as yet another high-level trip that produced little. The two obvious reasons were: that President Obama was badly mauled in the midterm elections that preceded his visit, and left him as weakened President; and, that the White House is continuing its efforts to continue the Wall Street-dictated economic policies, while keeping up a phony front to convey to New Delhi that, "We're okay."

What, however, became evident to the Indians during President Obama's four-day (Nov. 6-9) visit, was that nothing was really okay, and one of the reasons why Obama came to "please" New Delhi, was to secure some business deals, which he could then put up as a success story that he had created jobs for the increasingly jobless American people.

One Indian commentator pointed out that the trip, given the electoral shellacking that Obama and his party just suffered, was designed to be a respite from the Oval Office. He said, "Obama's need for a vacation was never more evident than at the painful post-mortem press conference he gave after the Tuesday electoral debacle in which he struggled to explain the complete destruction of both his party and legislative agenda. He looked like a man filming a Southwest Airlines commercial. As he looked out at the assembled White House press corps, one could almost hear the voiceover somberly intone: 'Wanna Get Away?'"

Creating Jobs for America?

In India, however, Obama did not make clear to the Indians, in the same way he has continued to keep the Americans uninformed, that the American economy has collapsed. Except for occasional remarks about the



White House/Samantha Appleton

President Obama's trip to India, designed to get him out of town following the drubbing he took in the midterm elections, accomplished little or nothing. But the Narcissist-in-Chief was typically oblivious.

necessity of partnership et al., his posture during the visit was that the U.S.A. was a sole superpower acknowledging the presence of emerging markets. His crowning achievement was to bring home 50,000 jobs from the \$7 billion-plus military hardware sales to India.

According to Vir Sanghvi of the Indian news daily, *The Hindustan Times*, by the end of Obama's first day in India, much of the Indian media had become increasingly belligerent. There were complaints that, the President was behaving like a travelling salesman, and that his real interest was in pleasing the folks back home by promising them more jobs and economic benefits. Obama was not doing enough for India, many people said. Unlike Bush, he had nothing concrete to offer. He was too frightened of antagonizing Pakistan to even name the country.

In a reply to India's NDTV's question as to whether his visit was more about creating jobs in the U.S.A.,

than relations with India, Obama said that the two countries match up for a win-win potential. "Some deals will create jobs in the U.S.," Obama admitted, adding, "Some of our hi-tech industries make the best products, and we want them to sell to India. The same technology will help Indian entrepreneurs to create jobs in India."

Obama continued, "When American people ask me why are you visiting India, I want to say that 'Look, India just created 50,000 jobs, and so we should not be talking about protectionism.'"

During his nearly two years in the White House, America's "official" unemployment rate has risen from 4.5% to 9.6%. The last figure seems to be etched in stone, neither going up nor going down. All that means, when translated into real life, is that at least 6 million breadwinners in the United States are now without jobs, since Barack Obama moved into the White House, promising the Americans a "change." Many of these millions, unemployed for months, even years, and indebted up to their eyebrows, have become homeless. With that on-the-ground reality, and a policy, adopted by this President, that has pushed the nation's economy into a deeper hole, it is unlikely that these 50,000 jobs, most of which would be of a temporary nature anyway, would even begin to make a dent to what the country needs.

At the same time, from what President Obama told NDTV, it may seem that the military hardware deals were his own doing. Far from that being the case, the defense purchases announced during Obama's visit had actually been announced much earlier. An Indian news daily pointed out that a deal for India to acquire ten C-17 Globemaster III heavy-lift transporters at a cost of \$4 billion, with the possibility of acquiring a few more later, was announced during Obama's trip, even though the U.S. Congress had already been notified about it a few months ago.

Similarly, the sale of over 100 General Electric GE-414 engines for India's light combat aircraft (LCA) for around \$800 million, had been agreed to in September.



IAEA/Kirstie Hansen

As Obama's U.S.A. flounders, sinking beneath the weight of the trillions of dollars in speculative debt, India, along with China and Russia, is moving forward with big infrastructure, including nuclear power. Shown, India's fast breeder test reactor at the Kalpakkam Nuclear Complex.

It is evident that it was important for President Obama to announce these deals in Mumbai. It boosted the purpose of what the visit had achieved.

While President Obama patted himself on the back for "creating" the 50,000 jobs in America that would result from his visit to India, such numbers are a pittance compared to the jobs that either China or India is producing nowadays. For instance, China is likely to produce 8 million new jobs in 2010, and India's job creation will be between 3-4 million this year.

And, in contrast to the 50,000 jobs in the United States that Obama crowed about, Chinese, Russian, and Japanese investments are creating millions of jobs in India. For instance, the building of 16 Russian nuclear power plants in India will create a few hundred thousand jobs in India and Russia. China has begun to invest in India's infrastructure, and large roadway projects will be coming China's way. Similarly, Japan has already begun the 1,000-mile-long and 20-mile-wide industrial corridor running from Delhi to Mumbai. Japan will also build a high-speed rail corridor in southern India and a dedicated high-speed freight rail corridor through the 1,000-mile-long industrial corridor. All these projects over the years will add millions of jobs

not only in India, but a significantly large number of jobs in China and Japan as well.

Tough Questions

To begin with, Obama's India trip started on the wrong foot. The President made clear prior to his departure for India, that he would not be visiting the Golden Temple in Amritsar, the holiest shrine of the Sikhs, despite earlier preparations to do so. The White House tried to downplay that, but did not deny reports that they wanted to avoid having the President photographed in the obligatory head covering, because it would easily be misconstrued to suggest that he is a Muslim, a charge that has been levelled against him in the U.S. However, Sikhs are not Muslims and neither is Obama, but the White House's paranoia irked the Sikhs in India.

It became evident to the Indians that, Obama had nothing concrete to offer. The media pointed out that he was too frightened of antagonizing Pakistan, whose help the Obama Administration is seeking desperately, to assist in the war in Afghanistan.

On the second day, Obama encountered a sharp question at Bombay's St. Xavier's College, where a management student, Afsheen Irani, asked him, "Why is Pakistan such an important ally of the United States? Why hasn't America called it a terrorist state?" There was no doubt that Obama was expecting such a question, and he also remembered how to obfuscate it. He said, "Pakistan is an enormous country with an enormous potential, but it also has extremist elements within it just like any other country." It was rather a clumsy way to obscure the facts, and it was also evident that it did not satisfy the student. She said so when she made clear to the news media that she never got the reply she was waiting for. "I was looking for an answer and I did not get it. I was not satisfied with what he said. He was very diplomatic."

By the time President Obama and his entourage flew into New Delhi, India's capital, for crucial meetings, it was evident that the trip was not going well. According to Sanghvi, it seems possible that the U.S. President and his party, recognizing that the trip was not going well, took steps to avoid having it seem to end in failure. Hence, a last-minute attempt was made to please India, and to say the things that Indians were hoping to hear.

Addressing the joint session of the Indian Parliament on Nov. 8, Obama went all out to please India. His speech, which one parliamentarian described as a

speech of "a salesman for India," included such crowd-pleasers as the proposal to include India as a permanent member of the UN Security Council. "And as two global leaders, the United States and India can partner for global security especially as India serves on the Security Council over the next two years. Indeed, the just and sustainable international order that America seeks includes a United Nations that is efficient, effective, credible, and legitimate. That is why I can say today in the years ahead, I look forward to a reformed UN Security Council that includes India as a permanent member..."

The suggestion drew cheers from the attending parliamentarians and other political leaders present inside the hall. However, Indians soon realized the incompleteness of the formulation that Obama used in making the suggestion. His utterance of a "reformed UN Security Council" which would include India, makes it evident that the permanent membership in the UN Security Council will not be a done-deal in the near future, and it would need a lot more to make it a reality rather than a mere statement.

'No Big Outcomes'

Prior to Obama's trip, India's Foreign Secretary Nirupama Rao told the media that the Indian government expects "no big outcomes" from the President's visit. Rao turned out to be right, indeed. There was no big outcome. Among the smaller outcomes, perhaps the most useful ones were the U.S. decision to lift the sanctions on high-tech trade to India, and its support to India in the Nuclear Suppliers Group to boost civil nuclear cooperation. Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh said the two sides have agreed to deepen cooperation in defense and other technologies in the high-end spectrum. Increased U.S. investment in high-technology flow, including nuclear energy, was also welcomed by New Delhi. All these, however, have to be worked out to satisfaction in the future.

Finally, it must be noted that the White House did not bill the trip as one that would lead to a breakthrough. In fact, it acknowledged that the trip was a way for the President and his family to view the sights and celebrate the Indian holiday of Diwali. According to Jeff Bader, senior director for Asia affairs at the National Security Council, "He [Obama] specifically wanted to have an opportunity to celebrate Diwali, and to do so with the Indian people, getting beyond simply his official business."