

James Otis apologises for auctioning Gandhi items

US collector James Otis, who sparked a row by putting up for auction Mahatma Gandhi's belongings earlier this month, Friday apologised here for unintentionally hurting Indian sentiments. He said the money generated from the auction would go to organisations promoting Gandhian values.

'He (Gandhi) is the world's great hero. I have been studying him for the last 20 years ... the money from the auction will go to non-violent organisations,' Otis told reporters as he flipped through black and white photographs of Gandhi.

'I am sorry if I angered anyone in India. It was never my intention to gain profit. The intention was to promote his principles,' Otis said with folded hands.

Gandhi's steel-rimmed spectacles, a pair of sandals, a Zenith pocket watch, an eating bowl and a plate were put under the hammer by Antiquorum Auctioneers in New York March 5 despite an outcry by Indians and pressure from the Indian government.

The row had led to a change of heart on the part of the US collector to auction the items, but it was too late and the auctioneer went ahead with the sale.

Days of high drama over the auction ended on a triumphant note for India as business tycoon Vijay Mallya put in a bid of \$1.8 million to buy the five pieces of memorabilia.

In the next few days Otis and Mallya are set to address a joint press conference to clear the air about the custody of the auctioned items and donating the money of the proceedings. Otis also confirmed that the Indian government had approached him offering to pay for the items and had asked him to stop the auction.

'The Indian embassy offered me an amount which was very low. The reason I went back to stop the negotiation was we were in negotiations and they (the government) had agreed to substantially increase the money going to the poor and take the items all over the world,' Otis explained.

'Gandhi did not believe in materialism. If he would have been here, he would have laughed at it and go and feed his goats,' he added.

Otis also expressed his disappointment at the Mahatma's great grandson Tushar Gandhi 'calling him names' in the media.

'I would like to take Tushar Gandhi to a dinner and it is an open invitation,' Otis said.

The practitioner of Gandhian principles, as Otis calls himself, will be taking part in Tibetan movements based on Satyagraha against the Chinese government.

'I will be engaged in a Satyagraha Thursday (next week) and will try to get into Tibet. I will be arrested with other monks. It is (a campaign) inspired by campaigns of Gandhi,' he said.

Clad in a green jacket, Otis was also dressed in a bullet proof.

When it was pointed out to him that Mahatma Gandhi had never done any cushy thing, Otis replied: 'I wear a bullet proof jacket as I am going to countries at war. The world is far more dangerous and violent now.... He (Gandhi) did not go to countries where poor are killed in greater numbers. It is very important to live and get listened to'.

Otis added that he would be undertaking a fast for 30 days for being guilty of angering the 'good people' of India.

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