



The audacity of hope

DOES THE ARRIVAL OF BARACK OBAMA ON THE WORLD
POLITICAL SCENE PORTEND A NEW ERA OF
ENLIGHTENED POLITICS? **by Dipankar Das**

More than two million people waited patiently in the sub-zero temperatures of Washington DC to witness history, to witness the swearing-in ceremony of President Barack Obama. It was to be the grandest home-run for a man who had begun this improbable journey two years ago as a little known Senator with a foreign-sounding

name. Obama moved into the Oval Office as the nation's fourth youngest president at 47, and the first African-American, a barrier-breaking feat believed impossible by generations of blacks in America.

As Barack Obama stepped up to the inaugural platform to take the oath, the crowd basking in the warmth of a bright midday sun

and rubbing shoulders with history, broke into a mighty chorus of cheers. It was not just the spontaneous endorsement of an excited people, but the ring of hope over despair, of expectation over dejection of the millions gathered in Washington, the multitudes glued to their TV across the great nation of America, and the billions across the globe, eagerly awaiting, what Abraham Lincoln had elegantly described as a ‘new birth of freedom’.

From a log cabin

One may then ask what is it about Barack Obama that excites so much hope, so much expectation of change? For one, Barack Hussain Obama is truly an exception in the width and depth of his personal experiences. Unlike most previous US presidents, he does not see the world through the gilded prism of privilege and patronage. He contains so much of the world within him; having grown up in the distant outpost of the US – Hawaii, then in Indonesia, and with roots in one of the major tribes of Kenya. Obama was just six when he arrived in Jakarta, along with his mother and Indonesian stepfather. “I went to local Indonesian schools and ran on the streets with the children of farmers, servants, tailors and clerks,” he would recollect later.

He never had the opportunity to frequent the corridors of elite educational institutes until he truly deserved to walk across them. When he arrived in New York for the first time, not finding his host, he spent his first night in New York, on a pavement, propped against his luggage and next morning bathed using water from a hydrant in the august company of other homeless people.

Change we can believe in

The telling punch line of Obama’s long drawn, 24-month campaign before his election win on November 4, 2008, was ‘Change we can believe in’. His composure against odds, his refusal to sink to base politicking during the campaign trail reflecting a subliminal maturity gave the punchline a ring of truth and swelled the ranks of his supporters. However, it was not just these personal traits that contributed

to his popularity.

Obama’s win is deeply telling on the history and self-perception of America. America has been a Janus-faced nation, like many western nations. It has sworn by democracy and individual rights, while resting on the plinth of Black slavery and denial, a modern-day Athens, deeply democratic, yet propped up by slavery. America’s founding fathers, including George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, proclaimed individual rights to the world while African slaves laboured in their backyards. This original ambiguity has haunted the US for over two centuries.

The election of Barack Obama, an African American, as president substantially liberates America from its basic contradiction. What impact it will have on the fortunes of African Americans in general is still to be seen, but it is undoubtedly a shining moment in the historical journey of American nationhood and a landmark for world history. Few societies have elected someone from their deeper subaltern trenches to the highest office of the nation.

A beacon of hope

Obama’s appeal is global and extends well beyond the borders of the western world, and his promise extends beyond the confines of racial redemption. The reason behind his global appeal is perhaps that so much of the world is entwined in him and his promise of universal values of inclusion, fraternity, and compassion for all.

Never have those values been more valued than today. Barack Obama has been elected to the most powerful office in the world at a time when the world is deeply bruised by the powers of politicians. His predecessor George Bush, often described as the worst President in the history of the United States, exited with the lowest ratings of any President in recent times. His most conspicuous legacy has been thousands of deaths in Iraq and a raging war in Afghanistan. Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay, along with Hurricane Katrina’s ravages under the nose of a comatose administration, remain the abiding images of the moral forfeit of the Bush years.

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Light in the darkness

The most powerful decision makers in the world, the politicians seem to have abdicated their responsibilities in favour of tunnel visions of exclusion and personal gain. Nowhere was its exhibition starker than in the aftermath of the Mumbai killings in November. Overprotected politicians descended in their assorted BMWs, Audis, and Mercedes, vulture-like to see the damage done by a handful of terrorists – tourists absorbing the novelty of a sight.

Such are the depths that the Indian political world can plumb, that it has already internalised Obama and caricatured him into irrelevance. Obama has also spawned an army of Obama wannabes. The BJP is said to have frozen a Rs 250-crore kitty to present LK Advani in an Obama mould. Mayavati has claimed her lowly birth to be credentials for Obama’s platform in India, her retributive politics and zooming bank balance notwithstanding. Rahul baba is yet another contender. Nevertheless, in the worn tradition of Indian politics it will be yet another triumph of symbol over substance, of grand visions backed only by rhetoric, of editorials and speeches, signifying nothing.

It is from this whirligig of such remorseless amorality and despair that engulfs not just India, but the world that Obama emerges as an exception, bearing expectation and hope to redeem the core and not just tinker with the periphery. At the heart of the stratospheric expectations that Obama prompts, lies the anticipation that politics will regain its lost ethical soul.

The implications of Obama

During his presidential campaign, Obama had assailed Washington’s “entire culture” in which “our leaders have thrown open the doors of Congress and the White House to an army of Washington lobbyists who have turned our government into a game only they

can afford to play.” He vowed to “close the revolving door” and “clean up both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue” with “the most sweeping ethics reform in history.”

Obama on his first day in office imposed perhaps the toughest ethics rules of any president in modern times. Sceptics have mocked that he will join the legions of politicians over-promising and under-delivering. They have sniggered, he will not change the way Washington works, but change the way political parties work it. Will Obama be able to reconcile change we can believe in with business as usual?

If the first few days of his office are anything to go by, then the world’s hopes are not misplaced. Day one, he ordered the closure of the infamous Guantanamo Bay prison. Within a few days, he capped the salaries of the top executives of conglomerates who now rely on the US government’s bailout and their top executives feed on fat paycheques doled out from the taxpayer’s money. In sharp contrast to most politicians, Obama has a time-bound and action-oriented approach to issues. While approving the \$ 850 billion bailout package for the US economy, he wanted the papers to come to his desk for closure by February 16.

The expectation that Obama has raised is a tall order. It is not just to raise living standards, or improve the economy but an even more difficult task of shifting the moral paradigm of public life.

There is no gainsaying that Obama has been a monumental hit. The power of Obama lies in his simple genuineness. His appeal is not vacuously charismatic as it is with most popular political leaders, but held up by an ethos, which is at variance with what politics has come to mean today. His well articulated multi-cultural universal values promise to leave no one on the sidelines, and be the foil on whose barometer all politics will be measured in future.

Dipankar Das started his career at *Life Positive*. He now works as a Training and Development specialist and in his spare time lives on the margins of other worlds.

We welcome your comments and suggestions on this article. Mail us at editor@lifepositive.net

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Can
Obama enable politics
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Photo: Mary;
Model: Dhanraj Janardan Patil