

Obama, Indian Americans and a Conversation about Race

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It is heartening to find younger Indian Americans acting like other younger Americans and supporting Barack Obama. His autobiography, *Dreams from My Father: A Study of Race and Inheritance* provides a clue as to why he has become such a beacon to people deeply conflicted about identities.

I am sorry Aunty, I can't talk right now. I am making phone calls for the Obama campaign", Maya Uppaluru said. I have never been so happy to have someone hang up the phone. It was heart-warming to talk to a young Indian American so deeply involved in the Obama campaign. I have been feeling somewhat isolated with most of my older Indian American friends being soundly in the Hillary Clinton camp. As issues of race bubble to the surface in the US presidential nomination process, I am left to puzzle what the Obama candidacy means for whites, blacks, Latinos and yes, Indian Americans.

Colour Matters

For Indian Americans the term "race" has always been confusing. In India we grew up around cleavages created by caste, religion and region. Colour only mattered when it came to defining beauty and value in the marriage market. It came as a rude

shock to be in a society where brown skin is associated with a hitherto unknown entity, race. This innocence should have been shattered by the 1923 ruling by the US Supreme Court which ruled that Bhagat Singh Thind, a high caste Punjabi, could not be US citizen in spite of his claims to an Aryan origin because in those days Asians were not eligible for citizenship and Indians were clubbed with Orientals rather than Caucasians. However, most Indian Americans arrived in America after 1965 when these rules were long abandoned and immigration rules ensured that the new entrants were highly educated. So for these new entrants, there was an opportunity to define a new identity and frequently their choice seems to be to retain a cultural and religious identity but to ignore any racial connotations associated with brown skin. However, this implicit decision made by first generation immigrants often collides with the lived experiences of the second generation whose cultural identity and ties to India are far weaker than the naked reality of their skin colour.

I first heard the term "person of colour" when Jesse Jackson – a prominent African-American civil rights activist – sought Democratic Party nomination for president

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in 1984. He used it instead of the bland term “non-white” in the context of trying to build his rainbow coalition of people of various colours, ethnicities and national origins. For a recent immigrant to the us, it was a really seductive term. It brought to mind images of Indians in South Africa working hand in hand with the black South Africans to fight apartheid and echoes of the American civil rights movement looking to Gandhian non-violence for inspiration. It represented a hope that somehow I could wash myself clean of the sins of privilege by virtue of my skin colour and join the just fight.

The past two decades have done much to cure that naiveté. Jesse Jackson’s rainbow coalition has lost its brilliant colours and now I wonder if they existed only in my imagination. Indian Americans have come to represent doctors and engineers in America and have emerged as the wealthiest ethnic group with a household income of about \$ 63,500 in 2000 Census compared to \$ 44,500 for white and

\$ 29,000 for black households. In the year 2000, 65 per cent of Indian origin residents of the United States above age 25 had a college degree compared to 26 per cent whites and 14 per cent blacks [Desai and Kanakia 2004]. We as a group have certainly revelled in this power and tried to claw our way up the social ladder, taking pride in the prominent positions Indian Americans hold in business, academe and increasingly politics.

Colour and culture still matter, both in self perception and the way they are used by the society to pigeonhole Indian Americans. Unfortunately Indian Americans remain poised on a deep divide where they often feel forced to choose between white and black. One side offers power and prestige and a perception of success, the other a dark unknown and an unacknowledged fear that if oppression is the coin in which one must pay to belong, we have not and do not really want to pay the price.

In this context it is not surprising that William Jefferson Clinton and Hillary Rodham Clinton have managed to appeal

to the upwardly mobile side of Indian Americans. They have a genuine love and admiration for India and Indian Americans have sought to bask in this sunshine and flocked to support the Clinton campaign with time and money.

What Being Black Means

So it is hardly news that Indian Americans support Hillary Clinton in overwhelming numbers, with a minority supporting the republican candidate John McCain. It is more surprising to see younger Indian Americans like Maya acting like other younger Americans and supporting Barack Obama. It was not until I read his book *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*, an autobiography written long before he became a politician, that I realised why Obama has become such a beacon to people deeply conflicted about identities.

Barack Obama was born to a black Kenyan father and a white mother. His parents separated when he was very young and his mother remarried a man from

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Indonesia. Obama received his early schooling in a Muslim school in Indonesia and has a half-Indonesian sister. Later on, he was raised in Hawaii where whites are in minority as are African-Americans and did not move to the mainland US until he entered college. *Dreams from My Father* chronicles Obama's journey from Barry to Barack as he tried to figure out what being a black male in modern America means.

Over the three decades I have lived in the United States, I have tried to understand what being black meant but without much success. I have read statistics and studies; I have talked to friends, colleagues, students and mentors; I have watched television and read newspapers. Each insight is a fragment, a hope that someday I will manage to figure out the shape of this beast and a fear that I might not. Having children has elevated my anxiety because I have always worried that I won't be able to help them figure out what being brown means if I can't understand what being black means.

Dreams from My Father is like a key to decoding this mystery. Obama is a foreigner in many ways, raised in Indonesia and Hawaii with a white mother and golden brown skin; he had little contact with black America. One of his earliest encounters with race occurred at Punahou, a school enshrined in Hawaiian history as the bastion of white privilege. Obama notes, "There was one other child in my class, though, who reminded me of a different sort of pain. Her name was Coretta, and before my arrival she had been the only black person in our grade. She was plump and dark and did not seem to have many friends. From the first day, we avoided each other but watched from a distance, as if direct contact would only remind us more keenly of our isolation (p 61)". I read that and wondered if that is how my son felt being one of the two brown skinned boys in a sea of whiteness.

Strangeness, unfamiliarity, and discomfort marked Obama's early encounters with race. These I could understand. I suspect this is how my son feels when he accompanies his sari-clad grandmother into a store. However, being black in America goes beyond this uneasiness. I had never grasped the tightly coiled rage that permeates all interactions with well meaning

friends from the other side of the racial divide until I read Obama's claims:

We were always playing on the white man's court ... If the principal, or the coach or a teacher, or Kurt, wanted to spit in your face, he could, because he had power and you didn't. If he decided not to, if he treated you like a man or came to your defence, it was because he knew that the words you spoke, the clothes you wore, the books you read, your ambitions and desires, were already his. Whatever he decided to do, it was his decision to make, not yours, and because of that fundamental power he held over you, because it preceded and would outlast his individual motives and inclinations, any distinction between good and bad whites held negligible meaning. In fact, you couldn't even be sure that everything you had assumed to be an expression of your black, unfettered self – the humour, the song, the behind-the-back pass – had been freely chosen by you. At best, these things were a refuge; at worst, a trap. Following this maddening logic, the only thing you could choose as your own was withdrawal into a smaller and smaller coil of rage, until being black meant only the knowledge of your own powerlessness, of your own defeat (*Dreams from My Father*, p 85).

The Fact of Race

I am not unfamiliar with racially based rage, anger, distrust and hopelessness. It would be hard to live in America and not see it in numerous day-to-day encounters with black America. However, I find it difficult to distinguish between the hopelessness generated by race and that by class. Having been trained in the doctrine of the declining significance of race in modern America, propounded by one of the most celebrated black intellectuals of our time, William Julius Wilson, I was unprepared to see this expression of powerlessness by someone like Obama who was raised in a white middle class milieu.

If the sense of powerlessness was unexpected in someone with Obama's background, its consequences remain much too familiar. As a teenager Obama lived a life of drugs and dissipation that began with racial undertones but soon transcended race in sheer recklessness and escapism. Once Obama enrolled in the Occidental College in Los Angeles, he lost the distinction of being in Hawaii and his experience seems to reflect occasional flashes of insight lost in an ocean of apathetic anger he probably shared with many other black college students.

Interestingly after a couple of years in college, he was jolted into awareness. Obama quotes Regina, a young black woman as chiding him, "You wanna know what your real problem is? You always think everything's about you. ... Well, let me tell you something Mr Obama. It's not just about you. It's never just about you. It's about people who need your help. Children who are depending on you" (p 109).

In subsequent pages Obama documents a journey of self reflection in which he began to reflect on the folly of letting white America define his identity and fill him with constant, crippling fear that he did not belong somehow, that unless he dodged and hid and pretended to be something he wasn't he would forever remain an outsider, with the rest of the world, black and white, always standing in judgment. He ends this reflection with a profound statement that sums up his presidential aspirations, "My identity might begin with the fact of my race, but it didn't, couldn't, end there. At least that is what I would choose to believe (p 111)."

For a while it looked like this is what black and white America would choose to believe too. As of this writing, Obama has won 28 primaries and caucuses to Hillary Clinton's 14; he has won more votes and is ahead in delegate count. He has won in states like South Carolina and Mississippi with a large number of African Americans; he has also won in states like Iowa and Connecticut with tiny black populations. He could not have achieved this success without the support of white voters.

Conversation on Race

While most observers expected Obama's race to become an issue at some point during the campaign, the ferocity with which the latest storm has erupted could not have been anticipated by anyone. It centres on Obama's ties to controversial pastor, Reverend Jeremiah Wright. Obama, grandson of a Kenyan Muslim (from whom his middle name Hussein is derived) and son of an agnostic mother who married two men from very different cultural and religious backgrounds, grew up without much interest in religion. It was not until he began to work as an organiser in poor Chicago neighbourhoods that he realised that he could never connect with the

population he was trying to serve if he could not understand their spiritual needs and commitments. This realisation came as he was introduced to Reverend Wright and Obama became a member of his church. Many fiery sermons are attributed to Reverend Wright but several passages have brought serious condemnation. *Associated Press* reports that in a 2003 sermon, Reverend Wright said that blacks should condemn the United States because:

The government gives them the drugs, builds bigger prisons, passes a three-strike law and then wants us to sing 'God Bless America.' No, no, no, God damn America, that's in the Bible for killing innocent people. God damn America for treating our citizens as less than human. God damn America for as long as she acts like she is God and she is supreme.

Obama has been under severe pressure to dissociate from his pastor. On March 18, in a stirring speech he tackled the issue heads on. Even as he condemned Reverend Wright's statements as being profoundly wrong, Obama also acknowledged centuries of injustice to black Americans and refused to distance himself from Reverend Wright, claiming:

I can no more disown him than I can disown the black community. I can no more disown him than I can my white grandmother – a woman who helped raise me, a woman who sacrificed again and again for me, a woman who loves me as much as she loves anything in this world, but a woman who once confessed her fear of black men who passed by her on the street, and who on more than one occasion has uttered racial or ethnic stereotypes that made me cringe. These people are a part of me. And they are a part of America, this country that I love.

With these words Barack Obama has started a conversation on race that will continue on televisions and newspapers, classrooms and living rooms and might well be one of the greatest legacies of this remarkable election. It is hard to know how this conversation will end, will America have its first black president or will this conversation end up further polarising an already divided society?

Regardless of the outcome I am glad to finally have an open conversation about race which trusts in the intelligence of Americans to see nuances instead of searching for absolutes. Until now discussions of race have been subsumed under multiculturalism, a celebration of diversity.

Unfortunately multiculturalism is a bland term which masks underlying conflict between the black and the white. Obama has rightly identified that both blacks and whites in America have a host of resentments. Blacks still suffer the humiliation and doubt and fear of living in a segregated society. Black teenagers cannot figure out why their average scores on Scholastic Achievement Test (used for college admissions) are 857 out of 1,600 instead of 1,059 for whites [*Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* 2004] and why 41 per cent of the jail population consists of black males but only 4 per cent of those in higher education. By some estimates, one in three black males is expected to spend at least one year in jail [*Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* 2003]. Working class white families too suffer from doubts and uncertainties. Most working class whites do not feel particularly privileged and worry about losing their jobs and about less qualified blacks stealing their jobs or college admissions simply because of long past injustices, injustices that present generation whites do not feel they have a role in.

Long Overdue

I hope that if this conversation begins, it will expand to include immigrants, particularly immigrants of different colour and religion. Perhaps there will be space to talk about the fact that where I see Intel building an R&D lab in India as due homage to Indian talent, working class Americans see outsourcing of good jobs; where Indian American shopkeepers and restaurant owners see it normal

to employ family and friends, the native born Americans see unfair labour practices; where immigrant elderly see their use of welfare as their right based on the taxes paid by their children, native born taxpayers see this as illegitimate use of services by people who did not contribute to the system; where most Indian Americans see India's stubborn insistence on retaining nuclear weapon capability as an inherent right of a sovereign nation, their friends and neighbours see a danger to mankind. Perhaps there will be space in this conversation to acknowledge that different pieces of our heart belong to different continents and cultures and we need to find a way of reconciling them through honesty, reason and civic discourse – and yes, ultimately compromise. Perhaps in Barack Hussein Obama, a man with family on three continents who writes about his encounters with Hindu gods of Bali, religious education in a Muslim school and finding spirituality in a Christian church within a single narrative with soul searing honesty, we have found a catalyst for this long overdue conversation.

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