

PRESIDENT OBAMA

Sankaran Krishna

There comes a time in politics when one should be swept up by the passion and euphoria of the moment and still the voices of reason, moderation and doubt in one's mind. For many of my generation, the parliamentary elections of 1977 were unforgettable: the defeats of Indira and Sanjay Gandhi, the decisive rejection of the Emergency, and the heady hopes for the future, are still etched in my mind. That many of the hopes would be belied, and that so many of the stalwarts who won in 1977 would turn out to have feet of clay, is no doubt true. But so too was the thrill of that victory and the joy that ensued: politics matters to us because of such moments when we are more alive than ever.

It was just such a moment late in the evening of 4 November 2008, when major television networks declared Barack Hussein Obama had won the presidency of the United States (U.S.). A crowd of thousands at the Grant Park in Chicago erupted in celebration and joyous camaraderie. Similar captures were enacted all across the US, from Harlem to the Ebenezer Baptist Church in downtown Atlanta (where Martin Luther King Jr and his father had served as pastors) to the streets of Los

Angeles and halfway across the Pacific as students and volunteers revelled in neighbourhoods where a young Barack had grown up in the Honolulu of the 1970s.

As television cameras panned across the rainbow of beautiful faces celebrating in Chicago and elsewhere, they evoked William Wordsworth's lines on the French Revolution, Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, But to be young was very heaven!

Jesse Jackson

Almost hidden in the surging and ebullient crowd at Grant Park was Jesse Jackson, his granite face glistening with rivulets of tears. As I saw the greying temples and the weathered visage, I remembered the candidate. In 1984 Jackson won five primaries and garnered over three million votes (representing nearly 20% of the popular vote

in the Democratic primaries). He did even better in 1988 when he won in seven state primaries, four state caucuses, and more than doubled his support to over seven million voters. All this was accomplished with practically no money or donors, and a boot-strap organisation of volunteers. Despite running so strongly, Jesse Jackson found no place on the ticket in either contest and his policy platform was simply ignored by the Democratic Party. His stunning outcry at the Democratic national conventions, his energising slogans of 'Keep Hope Alive, It's Nation Time' (the latter borrowed from a famous poem of the same title by Amiri Baraka), and the call Run, Jesse, Run, still resound in my ears.



This issue of Polity is dedicated to the memory of

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Social Scientists' Association,
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Progressive Agenda

Jackson was one of very few American politicians who regularly used 'third world' not as a pejorative adjective but as an empirical descriptor of the poverty and colonised history of the non-western world. A look back at his election platforms is instructive. He called for, among

other things, the establishment of a Palestinian state; a nuclear freeze followed by disarmament (not merely arms control with the Soviet Union); slashing the budget of the Defence Department; a single-payer universal healthcare system; a foreign policy attentive to the interests and needs of developing societies and not solely focused on a narrow definition of US interests; equal punishment for the buyers of illegal drugs moment at the apex of the world of nations rather than the one-sided and punitive excess visited on dealers; increased taxes on the richest 10% of Americans and using that money to support public education and the needy; reparations for descendants of slaves; and declaring South Africa a rogue nation (at a time when the Reagan administration pursued 'constructive engagement' with the apartheid regime). Jesse Jackson saw the US as one of many equals in a world order rather than a preponderant power, and seemed to have a greater empathy and understanding of the non-western world than any other leading politician.

Distance to Cover

It is astonishing to read Jackson's platform over two decades later and realise not only how sensible it was but also the distance that remains to be traversed. For me, the high point of Jackson's candidacy was when he pronounced at one of the conventions that the problem of the US was not that it had a two-party dominant political system but that both parties were so similar and so far over at the conservative end of the political spectrum. In a society eternally besotted by the 'choice' offered at the end of a process that weeds out anyone with independent thought, Jackson epitomised wisdom. At Grant Park on 4 November, Jesse Jackson was crying, like thousands of others black and white, young and old, men and women at the enormous symbolism and incredible victory of a black man finally ascending to the presidency of a nation with a history of slavery. They were perhaps also the tears of a man who realised more acutely than many others in that crowd that in order to attain the White House, Obama had to leave Jackson and his brand of politics firmly behind. Pragmatism may produce political victories, but it does exact a severe price: sometimes it may even demand of you your soul.

Crossing the Barrier

Obama was able to transcend the prejudices of a deeply racialised society because of his obvious intelligence,

and the competence and moderation he radiates. He inspires safety and reassurance in a society deeply doubtful about the future and maybe even dimly aware that its financial crisis in a century, eight years of the most inept presidency in its history, two costly and ineffectual wars, and an opponent seemingly trapped in a time-warp, for the American public to finally accede to a black man in the White House. Obama deserves a huge amount of credit for sensing the political moment and running a perfect campaign. Yet, the conjuncture that has elevated him to the presidency also indicates the magnitude of the challenge he faces. It is both ironic and apt that a society in which the inferiority of racial minorities has long been accepted as fact has turned to one of them for deliverance in its moment of grave crisis.

Realising King's Dream

Over four decades ago in April 1968, less than a day before his assassination, with a prescience that has often characterised leaders about to meet their death, Martin Luther King Jr famously said, I've been to the mountaintop And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land. And I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.

Barack Hussein Obama's election as the 44th President of the United States is a substantial step towards the colour-blind and egalitarian society that King envisaged. His election should also serve to remind Americans and people everywhere (for we all live, often too comfortably, with our own myopias on race, caste, colour, religion, class, gender and other inequities) of the huge distance that remains to be traversed.

Yet, even as we are sobered by all that, now is the time to celebrate the extraordinary improbability and incredible beauty of what we saw on 4 November: a handsome young black man turning to hug his tall and lovely wife and their two daughters as they raced along a ramp, cheered by tens of thousands of Americans of every hue, and the echoes of his first speech as newly elected President of the United States of America slowly faded into the night sky over Chicago.

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