

## Obama visits India

Written by Samuel Bastian • McFarlane Media, Mumbai, India  
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There were two elements to the first state visit of President Barack Obama to India, early November; the business and the personal.

As much as there was high expectation among all sections of Indians regarding the future course of the ever growing Indo-US collaborations, there was also high praise for the US First Couple's direct interaction with the Indian people.

The visit commenced from Mumbai, India's business capital, where on November 26, 2008 (26/11), terrorists attacked and killed 166 people.

At the time of the attacks—likened by some to the 9/11 attacks—the then president-elect Obama said they indicated "the grave and urgent threat of terrorism". Hence, significantly, his first India stay began at the Taj Hotel, symbolically the ground-zero of the 26/11 attack, where many Indians, Americans and people from other nations lost their lives in that 60-hour terror campaign.

Obama's first address was to a motley gathering of 26/11 survivors—including a five-star chef, a constable of the railway police, a taxi driver's wife, the General Manager of the Taj Hotel itself, who lost his entire family. All listened rapt, some not understanding the words, but sensing the importance of his message.

"Yes, we visit here to send a very clear message that in our determination to give our people a future of security and prosperity, the United States and India stand united," Obama said, with First Lady Michelle Obama by his side.

Quoting from the speech by Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister, on the day of Mahatma Gandhi's assassination—"We shall never allow that torch of freedom to be blown out, however high the wind or stormy the tempest"—the President said that the American people believe in this just as people in India do.

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Later, while the President was engaging with Indian business groups, Michelle Obama, with a remarkable ease, played hop-scotch, at the University of Mumbai library. And the next day, along with the President, she was a willing student of the Koli (western Indian fisher-folks) dance at the Holy Name School.

All this in the presence of an admiring nation glued to the TV.

On the business front, in Mumbai, the President sought to change some longstanding notions and equations with India. No longer, he said, it was possible for America to support world economies without countries like India reciprocating.

He said that while in the U.S. there was a caricature of India as a land of call centers and back offices that cost Americans their jobs; in India many see the arrival of American companies and products as a threat to the livelihood of small shop keepers.

“These old stereotypes and old concerns ignore today’s reality,” Obama said. “Trade between our countries is not just a one-way street of American jobs and companies moving to India. It is a dynamic two-way relationship that is creating jobs, growth and higher standards in both our countries.”

And by the time he said this, the U.S.-India Business Council in Mumbai had already announced a \$ 10m of sale of mainly infrastructure goods to India. This, the President estimated would create 50,000 jobs for folks back home; mindful of the recent “shellacking” that his party had received in the mid-terms on the issue of 9.6% unemployment.

On the second day, the First Couple had a town-hall type meeting with Mumbai students at the St. Xavier’s College quadrangle.

Michelle Obama introduced the President in a very inspiring speech, telling the students that nothing is impossible for them to achieve so long as they hold close to some values. She illustrated this by giving the example of her own upbringing.

She said, “But even though my parents couldn’t give us material things, they gave us something much more precious—they gave me and my brother strong values. They taught us to treat others with dignity and respect... They taught us that our circumstances didn’t define us and that if we believed in ourselves, if we made the most of every single opportunity, we could build our own destinies and accomplish anything we put our minds to.”

At the end of her speech she invited the students to pose tough questions at her husband, “... you got to keep him on his toes, all right?” She said he loves tough questions; they make his day for him.

President Obama’s speech was stirring as usual. He stressed on how important it was for young people to mold their minds to take up the challenges of the future.

He said, “So now the future of this country is in your hands. And before I take your questions, I

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want you to consider... questions about what the next 20 years will bring [for India]”. He then took some very pointed questions from the students ranging from his views on jihad to moral and spiritual issues.

From Mumbai the first couple went to Delhi, the capital of India.

His interaction with Indian leaders was largely on expected grounds, yet loaded with significance. The joint communiqué, addressed by the Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and President Obama made strident moves into a deeper US-India partnership in global economics and politics.

The magnum-opus of Obama’s visit was the address to the Indian Parliament. In his speech, the President attached great importance for India, as a rising economic power, to take its place on the high tables of global policy making. He even endorsed US support for a permanent seat in the UN Security Council. He laid great stress at the outcomes of the growing US-India relationship:

“Here in India, two successive governments led by different parties have recognized that deeper partnership with America is both natural and necessary. In the United States, both of my predecessors—one Democrat, one Republican—worked to bring us closer, leading to increased trade and a landmark civil nuclear agreement.

“Since then, people in both our countries have asked: what next? How can we build on this progress and realize the full potential of our partnership? That is what I want to address today—the future that the United States seeks in an interconnected world; why I believe that India is indispensable to this vision; and how we can forge a truly global partnership—not in just one or two areas, but across many; not just for our mutual benefit, but for the world’s”, the President said.

In Delhi, while the President was busy with the Indian Government and Parliament, Michelle Obama did some pre-Christmas shopping at the National Handicrafts and Handlooms Museum. She spent an hour longer at the venue than planned, filling her shopping cart some exquisite Indian rural craft.