

Now, walk the talk

Barak Obama has proven his broad vision, brilliant oratory skills. Now he must prove his execution skills

BY HIREN SHAH

"If there is anyone out there who still doubts that America is a place where all things are possible; who still wonders if the dream of our founders is alive in our time; who still questions the power of our democracy, tonight is your answer. It's the answer spoken by young and old, rich and poor, Democrat and Republican, black, white, Hispanic, Asian, Native American, gay, straight, disabled and not disabled - Americans who sent a message to the world that we have never been just a collection of individuals or a collection of Red States and Blue States: we are, and always will be, the United States of America."

IN one sweeping statement, Barack Obama seems to have emphasised the one issue that should matter most in politics: Despite all the diversity a nation may have, when it comes to electing a leader, they should forget all the parochial biases and elect the most meritorious. Since the US and India are the world's oldest and largest democracies respectively, one could not help but wonder about the possibility of an Indian Obama and by that I mean not necessarily someone from an underprivileged segment of society but a person who is the most deserving should be able to rise to the highest office in the land.

One comes across articles stating Mayawati to be a potential Indian Obama as she is a Dalit. But that, to my mind, is fundamentally incorrect as she has used caste as her calling card extensively. Obama, on the other hand, never used race/colour or the victim mentality as part of his

campaign. He was chosen by 45 per cent white America, majority of every ethnic group and even Jews in a country where 11 per cent of the public is black. In contrast, Mayawati has been known for naked aggression in the past compared to the calm and unflappable Obama who is so popular internationally for his conduct that a German daily, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, called him the new Dalai Lama. Oratory apart, Obama, known for swaying audiences with novel ideas, having risen from obscurity, also reminds one of the Mahatma.

STYLE WITH SPEED

Since brilliant oratory is what Obama, a Harvard-educated lawyer, is most known for, can that alone make a good politician or statesman? Rajdeep Sardesai mentioned on one of his blogs on Television politicians how he had to make do with Arun Jaitley and Kapil Sibal when the top leaders of their respective parties were not inclined to debate on television. The recent American debate clearly revealed McCain's ignorance and discomfiture on matters related to the economy and Sarah Palin's gaffes on international affairs. Would Indian politicians subject themselves to such rigorous scrutiny before the elections and if some of them prove more knowledgeable than their senior counterparts, will it take them anywhere? There maybe other *chuppa rustams* within political parties who may have the potential but even if that comes out, what after that? The Lead India campaign threw up an ideal candidate in RK Mishra, who though not a brilliant orator won on the basis of his execution skills. Where is he now? What

happened to him after that? Can such people be allowed to be out of sight, out of mind?

Even if people are in favour of a particular person, since political parties are faction-driven and have their own internal politics, will that young person ever have a genuine chance of surging forward or will he have to wait in the wings for his turn even if he is more capable. Obama at 47 had only five years' experience in national politics but he was still nominated by his party and made it to the top. Recently, Mahendra Singh Dhoni got selected as the captain of the Indian cricket team on merit, bypassing seniors like Virendra Virendra Sehwag and Yuvraj among others. Can that ever happen in politics? In India, when it comes to the Lok Sabha elections, only the most senior leaders are projected as prime ministerial candidates. The young brigade in the Congress already speaks of Rahul Gandhi as its leader, which is completely at variance with what Obama stands for. A party with a hundred year history is bereft of talent to rally the masses to a particular cause and therefore has to depend on a single family. In Obama's case, there has been an element of luck as well, as the recent financial crisis and mismanagement of the past few years probably influenced voting on merit than any other consideration.

SUBSTANCE

Oratory may not reflect the real picture or be an asset in all situations. *Newsweek* reported that McCain's speechwriter had tried to convey sentiments that he symbolised but they sounded stilted coming from his mouth. Talking the walk, therefore, can be as important as walking

the talk. That apart, I am reminded of a statement made by former British prime minister Clement Atlee, who said that while eloquence maybe an asset in election speeches and Parliament, it could be a liability in cabinet meetings where brevity is the norm. This brings us to the critical question of execution. Whenever the word execution comes to mind, one is reminded of Rajiv Gandhi's famous statement in which he stated that 85 per cent of the funds for the poor never reached them and he was a powerful PM with 400 plus MPs in the Lok Sabha. Rajiv Gandhi also showed a lot of fresh promise in the beginning with his speeches at the UN in 1985 and his tirade against the power brokers in the Congress but towards the end of his term, he seemed to have lost his way and began to sound more like a typical politician. In a recent column in *Hindustan Times*, historian Ramachandra Guha, while praising Gandhi for his encouragement of technological innovation and Panchayati Raj also conveys how his record in office was sullied on issues like Shah bano, Ayodhya and Kashmir. Promise in oration need not imply exemplary implementation.

Since Obama stands for change, it would obviously include implementation in its range.

If an aspiring politician is a brilliant orator, can his execution skills be taken for granted? Some very good insights are available in the book *Execution* by Ram Charan and Larry Bossidy. The book says, "Intelligent, articulate conceptualizers don't necessarily like to execute. Many don't realize what needs to be done to convert a vision into specific tasks because their high-level thinking is too broad. Boards of directors, CEOs are too often seduced by the educational and intellectual qualities of the candidates they interview. Instead of checking how good the person is at getting things done, they check

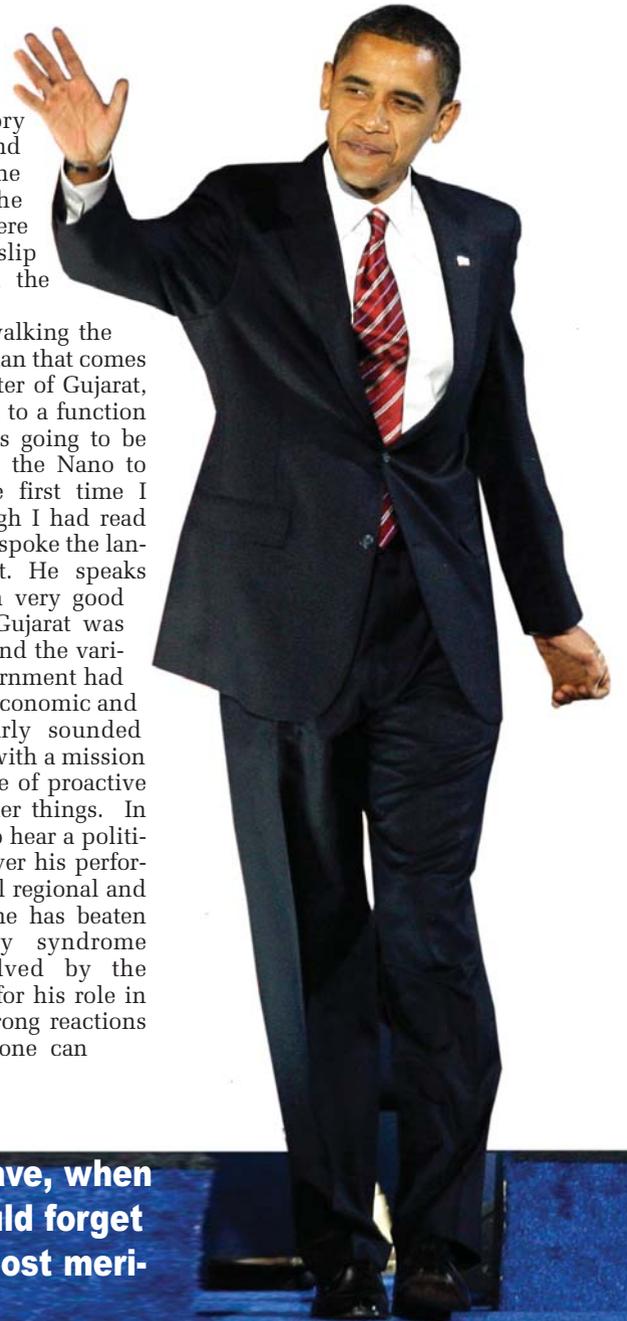
whether the person is articulate, a good change agent and a good communicator. In our experience there is very little correlation between those who talk a good game and those who get things done come hell or high water." In many cases, the people concerned falter when they are promoted to a higher or different level. Edward de Bono said once that the person with the bright ideas is not always the best person to execute those ideas. Venture capitalists also say that they fund teams and execution, not ideas. Brilliant oratory can prove deceptive and to judge by that alone would be missing the wood for the trees. There maybe the proverbial slip between the cup and the lip.

In that context of walking the talk, one Indian politician that comes to mind is chief minister of Gujarat, Narendra Modi. I went to a function in Delhi where he was going to be felicitated for bringing the Nano to Gujarat. This was the first time I heard him speak though I had read elsewhere that he only spoke the language of development. He speaks very well and made a very good presentation on how Gujarat was progressing as a state and the various initiatives his government had been taking on social, economic and other fronts. He clearly sounded very much like a man with a mission on the move and spoke of proactive governance among other things. In India, it is a pleasure to hear a politician who is gloating over his performance instead of trivial regional and parochial issues and he has beaten the anti incumbency syndrome twice. Though absolved by the Nanavati commission for his role in Godhra, he invokes strong reactions in many people. All one can say is that at least from the develop-

ment and economic progress perspective, he has given a Ram Rajya of sorts which the BJP used to talk about earlier.

EXECUTION TALENT

Normally a good chief minister is perceived as a potential prime ministerial candidate, the issue is how does one decide who is likely to be good at execution at the national



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level. Since ability is backed up by visibility, how does one make execution talent palpable to the general public as oratory talent. People who show good organisation and administration skills at the party level or within a company are prime candidates for providing good governance in politics. I worked under a boss once who was so good in conception and execution that he got elevated from assistant manager to chief executive in just one year. That apart, he had Lord Krishna-like smartness to get around office politics. Such people are Obamas in letter and spirit. To borrow a quote from Bill Clinton, I would say, "It is the execution, stupid". A less charming but better executing politician is preferable to vice versa.

The book mentioned above has an entire chapter devoted to 'Right man, right job' and concludes: 'Even the best process always does not get the right people in the right jobs, and it can't make everybody into a good performer.' In another book on competency mapping, it was mentioned how the right person in a particular role can be 20 times better than the wrong one. In politics however, talent seems to be taken for granted. Since Obama did not have any exalted political lineage, this is a fact worth mentioning. In India, one reads about sibling rivalry in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, the scions of state politicians either being "groomed" or having taken over the reins in Punjab, Orissa, Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra and Kashmir and of course the national scene where one can see smart and educated descendants of politicians in the Lok Sabha. Prominent journalists write on the "heir apparent" time and again with an article pitched in once in a while against dynastic rule. Benazir's niece Fatima Bhutto has expressed strong views against dynastic politics and speaks in favour of platforms, not personalities. This is very true as Obama talks of including republicans in his new team because of their capabilities, which is a great boon in the Presidential system. According to some reports, India's prime ministers have to do all sorts of balancing acts — region, religion, caste etc. The Indian Obama may not be able to walk the talk in a situation like this,

no matter how brilliant an orator he.

Talking of personalities, what happens if Jyotiraditya Scindia or somebody else in the young brigade turns out to be more talented than Rahul Gandhi as people's talents can be as different as their appearances? In corporate management, such a person would stand a far better chance. Since everybody is unique and talented to different degrees in different competencies of a role, individuals have to be distinguished separately in talent management as the penetrative power of different radiations - Alpha, beta and Gamma if we have to get a genuine Obama. What we have currently is political legacy passed on by Papa and Mama. In corporate management, hiring, training, performance appraisal, compensation, career and succession planning is done on the basis of extensive competency models. Compared to the suited booted world of professional corporate implementation, execution in politics seems more like a man out on a stroll in a kurta pajama. Then how can one hope for an Obama? This is also due to the fact that in the management world, results are monitored on a quarterly basis.

One thing that deserves to be mentioned in the context of execution is whether a politician should be allowed to do any and everything once he is elected. Before the Iraq war began in 2003, all kinds of people in the US, including Obama expressed their opinion against it but Bush chose to ignore not only that but bypassed the UN and made what turned out to be the biggest mistake of his Presidency. He is expected to bow out with extremely low ratings. This is even more relevant to India as the credibility of politicians is extremely low. New information technologies should be invented to ensure that elected politician honour public opinion.

Since the general public cannot be expected to read fancy talent management books, how does one educate them on spotting and voting for political merit? Since Bollywood and cricket drive India, we could perhaps take their examples. Being born in 1965, I grew up on Sunil Gavaskar and Amitabh Bachchan. While the sons of both the superstars followed them in their respective professions,

neither is a chip off the old block where sheer talent is concerned. Rohan Gavaskar could not even play in tests and though Abhishek Bachchan seems to have done better, he has a long way to go before he can be anywhere near his father. If one looks at a majority of father-son cases in cricket and Bollywood, the descendants have rarely surpassed their fathers with the possible exception of Hrithik Roshan and the Kapoor sisters whose fathers were not successful actors anyway. There may be other exceptions or examples. Even in politics, Indira and Rajiv Gandhi simply do not command the kind of respect Jawaharlal Nehru enjoyed as a national leader. How can talent ever be hereditary? One has to get the point across somehow. However if somebody is genuinely talented, he deserves to go further irrespective of the fact whether he belongs to a political family or not. The issue is how does one determine that — by oratory alone?

For the time being, one has to be wary of the wrong kind of political speech making. Considering that much of India's population is illiterate, it is not very difficult for a good communicator to be a good rabble rouser in the wrong manner towards the wrong or right ends. The recent example is of Raj Thackeray. Considering that the Jet Airways employees sought his help when they were removed from the company, it would be even more easy for relatively uneducated people to play into his hands and such people abound in India. *Time magazine* reported that after winning, when Obama asked Mc Cain for help on being called by him to be congratulated, Mc Cain replied "Whatever our differences, we are fellow Americans." In India, however, there are all kinds of politicians following divisive politics and trying to invoke false pride in the name region, religion, caste etc instead of performance. Even if we cannot achieve the rule of Rama or get a Mahatma, a Dalai Lama or an Obama, we have to stop this drama. I wish like Obama, one could say with confidence "Yes, we can".

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