

Circumstances played alchemist in bringing both Obama and Modi together, opines **Sidharth Mishra**

United States president Barack Obama flew back on Tuesday after transacting considerable business in the Indian capital. The United States president spent two nights in New Delhi, whose high offices are occupied by a certain gentleman called Narendra Modi. Till he was elected prime minister with a thumping majority, the same Mr Modi was a persona non-grata in the United States. In March 2013, the Wharton Business School had withdrawn an invitation to Modi to address The Wharton India Economic Forum, an annual event organised by students. In their note to the organisers, those opposing the invitation had said, "Our role as scholars and students -- and indeed as would-be entrepreneurs and business managers -- must be to develop conscientious and efficacious modes of economic organisation, not to piggy-back onto the inhuman policies of politicians, who not only lack a commitment to human rights and to ideals of social justice, but whose political success is based on the suppression of substantial sections of their own citizens."

Less than two years later, the United States president endorsed a well-choreographed answer to a pre-determined question that the two leaders displayed tremendous personal chemistry. "I am new to this field. But on the basis of my limited experience, I can say that the relationship between two countries depends less on commas and full-stops on paper. How much openness is there between leaders, how the chemistry matches. I and Barack share that friendship. This chemistry has brought Barack and me closer, Washington and Delhi closer, and the people of America and India closer. It grows on occasions like this," said Modi in reply to a question on their tete-e-tete over tea in the lawns of Hyderabad House.

Such words from Narendra Modi, the leader who remained a pariah in the international community for a considerable period, go beyond the realm of magnanimity. His words also reflect a broad mindedness to do business with the country which matters most globally. From Obama's point of view too, India continues to be an important destination for trade and it's statesmanlike of him to reciprocate to Modi's gestures of accommodation. Such an exchange has helped build the chemistry between the two leaders.

In the run-up to the Lok Sabha polls in 2014, as it increasingly became clear that Narendra Modi could be the next Prime Minister, no less than the Time magazine had predicted a further souring of relationship between the two nations, which had any way hit the rock-bottom following the arrest and strip-search of Indian diplomat Devyani Khobragade. The opposite has happened.

Modi is clear that to make his dream project 'Make in India' a reality he would need US investments and also technology transfer and towards that end he cannot carry the baggage of



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the bitter past. When he first met Obama in September last year, the summit between the two leaders met much higher levels of cordiality than expected. The much talked about chemistry between the two leaders was struck, when the two met for dinner at White House.

It was not that Obama did not enjoy a cordial relation with Modi's predecessor Manmohan Singh. In fact our economist-prime minister was held in high-esteem by the US president. It was, however, never clear to Obama whether Dr Singh had the mandate in his party or Parliament to fulfill the commitments that the United States required. With a majority in Parliament and as supreme leader of the ruling party, Modi has that clear advantage over Dr Singh.

No wonder within weeks of their first meeting, the two governments resolved the row over food subsidies that had earlier blocked a global trade agreement. This sent a clear message that both governments could do business together. When US Secretary of State John Kerry came over on an advanced visit, he called Modi "a visionary prime minister." When Modi announced that Obama would be the chief guest at the R-Day parade, he referred to Obama as his friend on the micro-blogging site Twitter.

It's natural to ask what is it that makes both leaders appreciate each other's position so well, though ideologically the two come from diverse strands. Some say it's probably their shared non-elite background and massive expectations that their respective electorate has from them.

In the run-up to the nomination as candidate of the Democrats, Obama in 2008 staved off Hillary Clinton's claims, wife of charismatic former US President Bill Clinton. Modi won his race for the prime ministerial candidate of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), despite reservations expressed by its Delhi-based elite, including his one-time mentor Lal Krishna Advani.

More than that, however, Obama also has the Indian-American electorate to take care. They have been his great supporter during the past decade. Through the Madison Square event in September, Modi effectively managed to convey to Obama that he too has no less a fan following among people that matter so much in the US. With polls due this year-end for the next occupant of the White House, Obama knows that his chemistry with Modi would make this powerful constituency happy.

Obama has a year left in his second term of presidency. Modi has just begun his journey as India's Prime Minister. Obama is desperate to leave behind a healthy legacy. Modi has methodically begun to build a political inheritance. The two leaders, despite diverse ideological moorings, have common goals to achieve. No wonder the chemistry between the two works well.

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