

COMMUNITY

Obama thrills Asian Indian supporters at fundraisers

'Not only do I think I'm a *desi*, but I'm a *desi*'

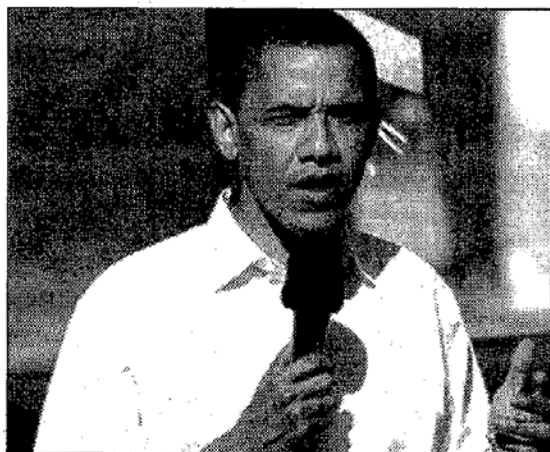
Washington, DC: *Desis*, say hello to Bharat Obama. Democratic Presidential candidate Barack Obama tickled his South Asian supporters at a fundraiser in San Francisco on August 17, using the colloquial Indian term to describe a native to claim that he too is a *desi*.

Obama told the group — many of them Indian and Pakistani immigrants, including San Francisco District Attorney Kamala Harris — that he is not only familiar with their cultures, but also proud of his lifelong associations with them.

"Not only do I think I'm a *desi*, but I'm a *desi*," the *San Francisco Chronicle* quoted Obama as telling a mirthful crowd. "I'm a homeboy." Obama then went on to recall how when he first went to Occidental College, his first roommate was Pakistani. And in his dorm, he said with a laugh, "Indians and Pakistanis came together under one roof ... to cause havoc in the university." To applause, he said he became an expert at cook-

ing *dal* and other ethnic dishes, though "somebody else made the *naan*."

"Those are friendships which have lasted me for years, and continue until this day. I have



an enormous personal affection for the people of South Asia," Obama said, adding, "I've also had an orientation toward Asia and a recognition ... that over time we are going to see ... more economic growth," and an economic partnership with the US that is strategic.

The mirthful aspect of Obama's *desi* claim aside, his plural, multi-ethnic identity has surfaced increasingly as

the Presidential campaign has progressed, with commentators noting that he is the most unusual candidate ever to run for the White House in terms of background. In particular, analysts are discov-

Obama roomed with Pakistan and Indian college mates, one of whom, Vinai Thummapally. Obama said he became an expert at cooking dal and other ethnic dishes, though "somebody else made the naan. Those are friendships which have lasted me for years, and continue until this day. I have an enormous personal affection for the people of South Asia," he said.

ering his strong African and Asian identity, rather than merely dubbing him an African-American or Black candidate.

"In fact, reading Obama's absorbing 1995 memoir *Dreams from My Father*, it strikes me that the tropes that surround and define Obama can just as easily be read as those of another community entirely. Which raises the question: Could it be that our true first black president

might also be our first Asian American president?" *Chronicle* columnist Jeff Yang asked recently.

Yang pointed out that Obama was born and raised in Hawaii, the only majority-Asian state

Rouse, whose mother is Japanese American, and his legislative director Chris Lu, whose parents hail from China.

Obama also roomed with Pakistan and Indian college mates, one of whom, Vinai Thummapally, now a Mid-west tech entrepreneur, is a major political contributor. His advisory team has several South Asians, including Preeta Bansal, a legal luminary, and Parag Khanna, who is part of his foreign policy coterie.

Obama has also spoken recently about the insights he gained into the region from a three-week visit to Pakistan in 1980s when Zia-ul Haq took the country down the path to radical Islamisation.

Elsewhere, Obama also talks about his liberal white mother's association with NGOs in India, including the time she spent in Delhi. One indication of his South Asian sensitivities his supporters point to: Obama was quick to send a message condoling the death of Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw.

in the union; he spent four years in Jakarta, the home of his Indonesian stepfather Lolo Soetoro, where he attended local schools and learned passable Bahasa Indonesia.

The family with whom he's closest - half-sister Maya Soetoro-Ng and her Chinese Canadian husband, Konrad Ng — are Asian American. So, too, are the most senior members of his Congressional team - his Senate chief of staff Pete