

Mutts R Us!



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BY SHEKHAR DESHPANDE

In his first post-election press conference, President-Elect Barack Obama mused that his family is looking for the puppy he famously promised his daughters in his victory speech in Chicago on Nov. 4, 2008. The problem, he noted, is that his younger daughter is allergic to dogs so they have to find one that is hypoallergenic. Their own preference is to pick a dog from a shelter (the good Democrat that he is!), but unfortunately, “obviously, a lot of shelter dogs are ‘mutts’ like me.” That is, they are not purebred. Apparently, purebreds are less hypoallergenic.

So begins the search for the First Dog of the new First Family in the United States.

Needless to say, that important dilemma has pre-occupied the country. Web sites have sprung up advising the



family on the right choice of dog. Radio programs are abuzz with experts and tales about dogs and allergies. Everyone is chiming in. The energy generated here could well fuel the sputtering economy.

But this is all at the literal level. Given the country's mindset, a literal discussion of anything, from the film you watched to the most significant political and cultural events, dominates. In their search for dogs, and the need to avoid mutts like the President-Elect, everyone seems to have lost sight of his eloquence. He offered a gold mine of insight into how he sees the world and we should too.

The columnist Patricia Williams noted that the remark has sparked a conversation about our own "muddled notions of race." We are all mutts: "As humans, we descended from a common African ancestor and have been mix-

ing up ever since," she says. Williams offers a sharp classification of how we name mutts. The hypodescendents are assigned the race of the parent with a lower social standing. Thus, the saying in the South: "One drop and you are Black." The hyperdescendents, on the other hand, claim identity from the parent of the dominant social group. Thus, Williams says, Jennifer Lopez is identified as White or Latina, but never Black or biracial.

All of this is intriguing and requires us to think about where our labels come from. If we have been mutts all along, then what is the impulse to embrace claims of purity? Somehow, the purists want to return to the original scene of the crime and claim a purity that is only in the eye of the beholder. To be a purist is to cling to a mythical reality that does not exist. Now that we have the most famous and significant mutt on the world

stage in the President-Elect, perhaps a real conversation about race and identity can begin.

In an increasingly multicultural and multiracial world, it is impossible to retain claims of purity and perhaps we can wake up to a new reality, not just in theory, but also in practice, one that is so close to our skin. If you remember Warren Beatty's brilliant film, *Bulworth* (very prescient about the current political scene and election), you may recall the exasperation of the senator as he struggles over the issue of race in this country. Translating into the mutt language of today, he says, the only way we can solve the race problem is by mutting ourselves constantly, all over the place, until "everyone looks like everyone else." We ought to become mutts.

Who knows this better than us, immigrants. Like the President-Elect's father, we are also of another nation and

another race. We arrived here, in part to become bigger, deeper mutts. India offers diverse opportunities to produce mutts. Some of us crossed the caste lines, some jumped over the fence of race, even as the British arrived. We have a whole generation of mutts in Anglo Indians, who themselves faced issues about their identity and assimilation, because we did not know what to do with such obvious mutts. Although this notion of mutting across caste-lines has been difficult, it is one of the distinct marks of our social advancement, that we are overcoming older boundaries and mutting into a mixed caste people. Some arrived in this country to produce more mutts. Face it!

Some of us became proud parents of lovely mutts and we can see before our own eyes that their future is different. They will continue to mutt as they grow older and have their own lineages. Languages will struggle to give them names, but we will have followed the senator in Bulworth to a better and different future.

Reading the blogs on this issue is instructive. Mutt is a derogatory term, even though the Mutt-in-Chief pronounced it on national stage. Many mothers say they do not like the term and would “choke” someone if their kids were ever called mutts. We hardly hear of the term as a compliment, so Obama’s remark shows we have come a long way, indeed.

We can imagine how dogs must feel. Does their loyalty come from being mutts? We know now that all domestic dogs are intentional mutts, descending from the wolf and his various mates. Yet, there are still newer breeds of dogs. Just take a walk on any street in this country. The fancy of owners knows no bounds as they amuse themselves creating new mutts. And, let us not even talk about national resources and money expended (\$40 billion a year) on these pets. The day the grocery aisles for dog food shrink, you can be sure the depression has really arrived. Domestic dogs are here to stay and reward us for their abuse and pampering by the mess they leave on our sidewalks.

But let us return to the wonderful ironies in the President-Elect’s remarks. The mutt honcho of the land does not want mutts in the White

House. And that too, for his daughters who are even more mutty than he is. What kind of example does he set for others? Did we not elect him as a mutt? Did we not just cross a major historical threshold by not electing purebreds by voting for a mutt? This is surely inconsistent policy.

This was his first presidential decision, even before he rolled out his cabinet. It simply did not say much about his acumen other than affirm his identity as a Democrat and a liberal by choosing heart over hard policy by refusing to say no to domestic lobbyists.

We need to wonder also about his facile comment about mutts in animal shelters. Are most dogs in shelters mutts? Is that some kind of metaphor, a systemic failure of our attempts to socialize and naturalize mutts? Do we really know if purebreds do not end up in shelters?

Are Republicans right after all? There is something wrong about our social structures if only mutts are inclined to take handouts in shelters. No purebred would ever be seen there!

As president he also needs look into the pervasive allergies in this country. Every kid seems to have allergies of some kind. Is it because of pollution or is nuclear waste the culprit? Have we killed the major defenses of our immune system?

Wouldn’t you think that these pressing issues are a serious component of the Health-Care debate in this country? Instead, Obama caves in to kids who whine about this or that allergy.

Should we stop designing mutts because the First Family has allergies? In one fell swoop, his pronouncement at the press conference has roused a national conversation on different dog breeds and allergies. It is time we stop designing drugs for every allergy and take a good look at the environment to understand why these allergies are so prevalent.

And please, stop disparaging mutts. Every presidential pronouncement is important, they say. Who knew this is the way we find out? ♪

