

Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968): Profile of an Icon of Civil Rights Movement*

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Born in a priest family on 15th January 1929 at Atlanta in the pro-slave state of Georgia in the South¹, Martin Luther King, Jr. was an American Gandhian. He was best known for his contribution towards the advancement of civil rights of the disadvantaged minorities especially blacks ending racial discrimination through recourse to non-violence as a method of protest.

As an extraordinarily talented student MLK skipped two classes at school level entering the Morehouse College at age 15 without formally graduating from high school. In 1948 he obtained a Bachelor of Arts degree from the same College. He had his second graduation in divinity from Crozer Theological Seminary in Chester, Pennsylvania in 1951. He obtained his Ph.D. degree from Boston University in 1955 for his dissertation on Theology.

Engaged himself as a Minister in a Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama at age 25, King was greatly attracted to the teachings of Jesus Christ and the Bible leading him to dedicate his life to the service of humanity fighting against all injustices.

America has been an extremely heterogeneous society inhabited by peoples of divergent characters in terms of race, ethnicity, religious origin and geographical variations. Slavery was an integral part of American society and economy for matter of historical reason until it was abolished in 1865 in the aftermath of Civil War being fought between the pro-slaves and anti-slaves states of the North and South over the issue². It was paradoxical that slavery persisted in some form or other whether as a social taboo or under a different pretext, mostly in the Southern States, despite constitutional guarantee of equality and legal abolition of the system. As a result, African-Americans or black minorities were subjugated to continued maltreatment, indignity, deprivation and discrimination in all spheres of life. In denial of equal rights and opportunities, they were subjected to segregation be it in public transport, school, store, church, lunch counter, housing, neighbourhood and so on and so forth under, what was called, Jim Crow Law.³

Against this backdrop, King came to engage himself in Civil Rights Movement understanding that 'freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed.'⁴ However, the course of action that he followed was peaceful non-violence. In this respect, Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948) had a great influence on him.⁵ Before his visit to India in 1959, Martin Luther King, Jr. came to learn

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about Gandhi including his ways of carrying on struggle against apartheidism in South Africa and the British Colonial rule in India through his father's classmate at Morehouse college, who was also his early day educator, theologian Howard Thurnian, who had personally met with Gandhi during his missionary work. King's visit to Gandhi's birthplace in India left a profound impact on him deepening his understanding of Gandhi's philosophy including his non-violent non-cooperation mobilisational tactic of resistance. As King, in a radio address made before leaving India, maintained:⁶

Since being in India, I am more convinced than ever before that the method of nonviolent resistance is the most potent weapon available to oppressed people in their struggle for justice and human dignity. In a real sense, Mahatma Gandhi embodied in his life certain universal principles that are inherent in the moral structure of the universe, and these principles are inescapable as the law of gravitation.

In his 13 years of Civil Rights Movement, Montgomery Bus Boycott (1955), Albany Movement (Georgia, 1961) against segregation, Birmingham campaign (Alabama, 1963) against segregation and economic injustices, demonstrations in St. Augustine (Florida, 1964), defiance of Selma injunction (Alabama, 1965) barring campaign on voter registration, March on Washington (1963) for jobs and freedom, Civil Rights Marches from Selma to Montgomery (1965) resulting in Police brutality, commonly known as "Bloody Sunday" several marches on different parts of Chicago (1966) in demonstration of support for slums dwellers and protest against racially discriminatory processing of housing, one intended to spread the movement to the North, anti-Vietnam War rally (King's "Beyond Vietnam" speech, 1967) and poor people campaign on Washington D.C. (1968) on demand for 'economic bill of rights' in aid to the poorest communities were the major events⁷ that deserve special attention and scrutiny in understanding King's ideas, leadership and role in the Movement.

The Montgomery Bus Boycott, which lasted for 385 days in protest against Rosa Parks' arrest on charge of non-compliance with 'Jim Crow Sign' in favour of a white passenger, created a situation akin to a miniature version of Gandhi's Boycott Programme (1920) against the British or Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's non-cooperation movement during 2-25 March 1971 against the Pakistani ruling Junta in the struggle for Bangladesh's independence.⁸ Further King's several marches joined by a huge number of protesters resembled Gandhi's *Satyagraha* movement, say, salt Satyagraha (1930), from Gujrat to Dandi as a case in point.

Guided by the fundamental principle of non-violence, in his Civil Rights Movement, King adopted various tactics and strategies which included, inter alia, boycott, marches, confrontational course provoking mass arrests, decline of bail, temporary occupation of public spaces by marchers and sit-ins in open violation of law or injunction, stand-offs with authorities, recruiting children and youths on special circumstances to join demonstrations, drawing media attention to brutal police actions upon demonstrators coming to be shocking to many among white Americans, too, halt to a demonstration as

and when turning to be violent, and creating a compelling situation for the authorities to open the door to negotiation.

Unlike Gandhi or many other leaders, MLK maintained equidistance from party alignment which he thought was very necessary for some one to play the role of a kind of conscience keeper. However, in order to muster strong moral support behind the Movement and provide organizational leadership, in 1957 he along with a few other Civil rights activists founded the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) out of black churches with himself at the top.

In carrying out the movement, King incurred a lot of sufferings in the forms of hit by thrown bricks or bottles while on a march, arrests (as many as 29 times in a period of 13 years), jail, fine, prohibition of entry by authority, police violence, continued life threats before his final assassination on 4 April 1968 in the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee. In an era of cold war at a point of time he was held to be a “communist” suspect by the authority for his professed support to the poor, demand for redistribution of wealth and resources for social wellbeing and opposition to military spending and Vietnam War, coming to be closely followed by FBI agents to wiretap him. Despite all sufferings and adversities, on a number of occasions during his Civil Rights Movement, King succeeded in creating a situation forcing the local authorities to end segregation of public buses or in some other public places and punish repressive policemen or to take similar actions (Montgomery Bus Boycott, Birmingham Campaign referred).

The March on Washington on August 28, 1963 for Jobs and Freedom was a great event in King’s Civil Rights Movement as well as his own life on which occasion he made his most famous 17 minute “I have a Dream” speech at a crowd of more than a quarter of a million in front of the Lincoln Memorial onto the National Mall and around the pool. In his address, King at first made same specific demands, such as, (i) an end to racial segregation in public school; (ii) Civil rights legislation prohibiting racial discrimination in employment; (iii) Protection of Civil rights workers from police persecution; (iv) a minimum \$2 wage for all workers; and (v) self-government for Washington, D.C. Then he proceeded to tell the crowd extempore about his dream:⁹

I say to you today, my friends, so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal.’

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

I have a dream today.

I have a dream that one day, down in Alabama, with its vicious racists, with its governor having his lips dripping with the words of interposition and nullification; one day right there in Alabama, little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.

I have a dream today.

In a sense the occasion was comparable to that of March 7, 1971 when the Father of the Bangale Nation and the architect of Independent Bangladesh, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman made his historic 18-minute address in the course of his struggle for national emancipation from the Pakistani rule in front of a crowd over a million at the Race course Maidan (Current Suhrawardy Uddyana), Dhaka in which he said :¹⁰

I have come before you today with a heart laden with sadness ... Today the people of Bengal desire emancipation, the people of Bengal wish to live, the people of Bengal demand that their rights be acknowledged ... you can not keep seventy five million people in bondage. Now that we have learnt to die, no power on earth can keep us in subjugation ... God willing, we shall free the people of this land. The struggle this time is a struggle for our emancipation. The struggle this time is a struggle for independence.

Both addresses came to be regarded as one among the best speeches in history.

Martin Luther King, Jr. has become a national icon of civil rights and liberties in the US. The Federal Government declared a national holiday known as King Day being observed in the third Monday of January every year since 1986 in his honor. Hundreds of streets, institutions and other public places have been named/ renamed after him throughout the US. He received many honorary degrees from universities in home and abroad. He was posthumously awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1977 and Congressional Gold Medal in 2001. King became the youngest recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964 (age 35) awarded in recognition of his contributions toward establishing civil rights in the American society especially for Blacks through peaceful non-violent means. His Civil Rights Movements resulted in passing the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the 1965 Voting Rights Act by the US Congress with the same intent and purpose.¹¹

It was true that King fought for equal rights and opportunities for Blacks ending all kinds of racial discrimination. However, his engagement in Civil Rights Movement was not inspired by any sectarian consideration. He stood by all hapless and disadvantaged peoples regardless of caste, creed, color, race, sex, cherishing universal values inherent in humankind that 'all men are created equal'. He had profound belief in Freedom for one

and all, full not truncated to be meaningful, holding, “Freedom is one thing. You have it all or you are not free.” He was for genuine integration of society founded upon the principle of universal brotherhood through moral change without regard for anything cosmetic. He was a forerunner of the world peace movements. He was a visionary, too. The election of Barack Obama as the first black President of the United States of America has come in line with his vision.

Speaking once about how he wished to be remembered after his death, what King stated is most pertinent. After the request not to mention his ‘awards and honours’ at funeral, he continued:¹²

I’d like somebody to mention that day that Martin Luther King Jr. tried to give life serving others ... that I tried to be right on the [Vietnam] war question ... that I did try to feed the hungry ... that I did try in my life to clothe those who were naked ... that I tried to love and serve humanity.

Perhaps nobody else could have written his epitaph so accurate and eloquent. We pay our homage and deep tribute to this great son, true humanist, the Mahatma of the United States on this occasion, marking the 50th anniversary of his “I have a dream” speech. King’s life and philosophy would continue inspiring the multitudes throughout the world in their struggle for equality, justice and freedom.

Notes and References

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