

“Civil Rights Movement: A Non-violent Revolution that Blurred the Color Line in the U.S.A.”

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Abstract

Civil Rights Movement was one of the epoch making non-violent protest movements in the human history. It was a national wide, mass campaign in the 1950s and 1960s to gain equal social, legal and economic rights for Africans-Americans in the United States of America. Right from the time black people were forcibly brought to America, as slaves, they were treated in the most inhuman way. The history of slavery in the U.S.A. was very horrible. Even after the “Emancipation Proclamation,” issued by Abraham Lincoln, the black people were not free because of the white prejudice. Racism and color line drove them to a marginalized position in the society. Everywhere they were segregated and humiliated. Life in America was becoming unendurable, and their agony was great. Their condition was such that they were rocking like a pendulum between anger and hope. At such a juncture, they could not go back to Africa because they were Americans now, what thought America denied them this right. The only option was assimilation, and that was not easy. The color line was so ossified that it was very difficult to erase. Black people wanted white Americans to accept them as their brothers and sisters. America was reluctant, but, for blacks, it was their mother country. They could not hurt and destroy it. That’s why black people waged a non-violent protest to claim their rights. My attempt in this paper is to explore the causes, forms, techniques, and relevance of this movement along with the major incidents and people associated with it.

Key-Words: Civil-Rights, Non-violence, Race, America, Color-line, Hope, Integration.

Introduction:

There are two ways to get justice: violent and non-violent. The former causes bloodshed, turbulence, anger and within a short span of time justice is snatched. But to get justice in such a way can not be justified since it is achieved at the cost of human lives, peace and order in the society. And the later one is much difficult way demanding patience, power, and forgiveness and above all hope even in adverse conditions. The second way is longer but safe, healthy for everyone and permanent. The history of our earth is replete with both violent and non-violent protests. The justice achieved through violence can not be praised because the victim begins to behave like his oppressor and forgets his humanity. Whereas in the non-violent way the victim feels that his oppressor has fallen down, and he should rise helping his oppressor to rise above the wrong things. It is not easy to have such feelings when being tortured. Obviously it causes anger and bitterness which can destroy the victim too as James Baldwin says in *Notes of a Native Son* (1955) that: “Hatred, which could destroy so much, never failed to destroy the man who hated and this was an immutable law” (84). Struggle means fighting for life not against it. This is the root of non-violence protest. It demands, as W.J. Weatherby writes in his book *James Baldwin: Artist on Fire* (1989), “. . . keeping your own heart free of hatred and despair and not succumbing to the fever, the rage in the blood . . . how well you achieve that discipline depended on the course of your life in the future” (42). Although much difficult it is to follow it, yet we have many examples where dauntless people demanded justice without yielding in face of immeasurable suffering.

Civil Rights Movement is the story of such people. It is not just one man and one spot centered movement. It was, indeed, an epitome of the power of people who showed remarkable patience and hope to resist injustice despite the continuous white hatred and oppression.

Causes:

The movement had its roots in the institution of slavery. Beginning with the ‘Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade’ the suffering of African people was beyond any measure. Records show that in the slave ships, “They were packed like books on the selves into the holds, which in some instances were no higher than eight inches” (49, Before the

Mayflower). But it was just the beginning of the larger drama of slavery in America which lasted for four hundred years and did cost millions of lives. Fugitive Slave Law (1850) and the Supreme Court Decision in the case of Dred Scott (1857), were two major blows to the African-Americans. While the former once again endangered the lives of the free blacks, the latter pronounced that no black could be a US citizen and that black people had no rights in America that white people are bound to respect. Slavery caused the Civil War (1860-65). The out break of Civil War proved that slavery was to end only in bloodshed. When the war ended in 1865, almost six-hundred twenty thousand Americans were dead – including nearly forty thousand black men. On January 1, 1863 President Abraham Lincoln issued Emancipation Proclamation freeing nearly four million people of African descent who had been enslaved for two hundred and fifty years in America.

At the dawn of twentieth century, the future of black people was still under the shadow of discrimination. The so-called freedom, given to them, has been snatched away under the name of Jim Crow Laws and Black Codes. As a consequence public parks, hospitals, movie theatres, drinking fountains, swimming pools, phone booths, restaurants, and waiting rooms were segregated on the basis of color and race. The more the discrimination rose, the more their struggle. They devised many strategies to protest segregation and the negative racial stereotypes.

In 1954, Thurgood Marshall won the historic ‘Brown V Board of Education’ case in the Supreme Court which unanimously declared the ‘separate but equal’ mandate in ‘Plessy Vs Ferguson’ unconstitutional. Meanwhile, the violent reaction of white Southerners to the growing assertiveness of black people found expression in summer of the 1955, in the lynching of the 14 year old Emmant Till of Chicago. Despite the proof and testimony an all-white jury acquitted the people who were responsible for it. Thousands of people paid their tribute, and many committed themselves to fight the system that made this crime possible. On December 1, 1955, Rosa Parks, an African-American woman, refused to surrender her seat to a white passenger on a city bus in Montgomery, Alabama. She was arrested and fined. Park’s resistance and her trial ignited the civil rights movement

Form and Technique of the Movement:

Led by both blacks and liberal whites it was a movement against racial segregation and white prejudice in the southern United States focusing chiefly on desegregating public facilities and schools; eliminating barriers to black voter registration; and abolishing racially discriminatory practices. The civil rights movement leaders advocated peaceful and non-violent ways for protest, such as – boycotts, sit-ins, mass street demonstrations, freedom rides and picketing. This movement greatly changed the race relations in America. Black intellectuals continued to press for full integration and assimilation and throughout the movement the dream of a society where race was not a barrier persisted.

Rosa Parks: December 5, 1955 can be taken as the official date for the beginning of this movement. It was the first Monday after Rosa Parks – the mother of civil rights movement – was arrested, and which was stated both as Park’s court date and the first day of a protest by Afro-Americans who refused to use city-buses which are segregated. Black cabs and individuals offered their services to public transportation for boycotters. The yearlong bus-boycott was met by harassment, attacks, arrests and intimidation by police force and white supremists, but Montgomery’s black population stayed off the buses. As a result, on December 21, 1956, Montgomery buses were desegregated by US Supreme Court. The bus-boycott represented the first large scale use of non-violent resistance against racial discrimination in the history of America. The victory at Montgomery set an example for future protests.

Little Rock, Arkansas: With ‘Brown V Board of Education’ decision, US Supreme Court officially ended public-school segregation. Following the decision nine African-American students tried to get enrolled at Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. At the beginning of the school session in 1957, Governor Orval Faubus deployed 270 soldiers of the Arkansas National Guard outside the school to prevent the nine black students from entering. The governor was determined to maintain school segregation despite the Supreme Court decision. When a Federal court ordered forced the governor to allow the children into the school, he simply removed the soldiers and left the black children alone to face an angry white mob. Here President Eisenhower sent 101st

Airborne Division paratroopers to Little Rock for a safe entry of the nine children into the Central High. White students abused them verbally and physically but they valiantly withstood the insult, harassment and the threats of segregationists both inside and outside. The Federal troops remained in Central High for the remaining session. For the first time, since Reconstruction, federal troops had been sent to the South to protect the rights of black people.

Greensboro Sit-In: the Greensboro Sit-ins of 1960s played a vital role in the civil rights history. Adapting the ideas of non-violence and peaceful protest of Martin Luther King, Jr. four black college students decided to desegregate local restaurants. They entered the all-white Woolworth store, where black people were not permitted to dine, and set down to be served. They received no service that day, but sat quietly doing their school work until the store was closed. Other students followed their example and within one week there were 54 sit-ins throughout the South. Their demand to be served was met with food poured on them at lunch counters, but they kept waiting peacefully. All this moved the people in America. The protesters succeeded in getting partial desegregation without any legal action. That was why, this was one of the simplest and most effective protests of the civil rights movement.

Freedom Rides: The sit-in movement paved a way for the 'Freedom Rides' of 1961. This new journey was taken up to protect the rights of black people for a free use of bus terminal facilities. On May 4, 1961, when John Lewis, one of the seven black riders, tried to enter the all white waiting room in South Carolina, he was mercilessly beaten by abusive white people in the full view of the police. Again on May 14, a white mob firebombed the freedom riders' bus and attacked the passengers as they escaped the flames in Alabama. This showed the world how far the white South would go to maintain segregation.

The March on Washington and the 'Dream' of Martin Luther King, Jr.: Between 1960 and 1963 the civil rights movement activists continued their struggle to be integrated completely. The above cited incidents were all part of a black strategy for a permanent solution to their situation. The growing number of demonstrations compelled President Kennedy to act. Anticipating a color blind society, nearly 2,50,000 marchers

gathered before the Lincoln Memorial in Washington DC, on August 28, 1963. Here Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his historic “I Have a Dream” speech, showing hope for the future America based on love and faith. He believed:

. . . that somehow this situation can and will be changed. Let us not wallow in the valley of despair . . . I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of the former slaves and the sons of the former slaveholders will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood . . . 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 . . . This is our hope. This is the faith. (Qtd. in Logue 316)

Relevance of this Movement:

Civil Rights Movement proved to be a great success in bringing various historic legislations and judgments. Freedom fighters, for more than a decade, stormed the legal barriers of segregation. Their constant struggle along with their white friends compelled the federal government to outlaw segregation in the South. But only law cannot be a guarantee to change. President Kennedy and Martin Luther king, Jr. were assassinated on this journey. They paid the price, raising questions to the conscience of America as to what it was doing in return to their love, faith and hope.

After the turbulent 60s and 70s, the decades of the 80s and 90s were marked by positive and healthy approach by black and white intellectuals. Beginning with the 1980s, a cultural renaissance touched the soul of America, where black and white artists, singers and others came together and initiated a culture which went beyond anything ‘narrow.’ Race and color no longer remained as ends to produce something provocative, rather they became means to proliferate the cultural heritage of the country. Non-violence and faith moved the hearts of America and the ‘Dream’ of Martin Luther King, Jr. was actualized.

It was an emotional, inspiring moment meant for an audience of millions. The opening ceremony of the 1996 Atlanta Olympic was designed as a pageant not about athletics but about the race. Carefully choreographed in ebony and ivory, blacks and whites performed together as brothers and sisters, climaxing when a

mixed group of four blacks and four whites carried the Olympic flag around the track. Moments later the music stilled and the powerful, stirring voice of Martin Luther King, Jr. echoed through the stadium, evoking once again his dream that the children of the former slaves and the former slaveholders could sit down at the table of brotherhood. The camera flashed on President Clinton as tears welled up his eyes. Through symbolism and words, the Atlanta Olympics had reaffirmed our nation's commitment to racial integration. (Steinhorn 3)

November 4, 2008, brought an end to the breathless expectations of millions of people in America. The next day, newspapers were filled with titles like -- “Yes We Can,” “Change Has Come to America,” and “We shall Overcome” etc. Barack Obama was elected the 44th President of the United States of America sweeping away the last racial barrier with an eloquent promise of change, and most important, of hope. Barack Obama assured the people in his “Chicago Victory Speech” that:

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 . . . The road ahead will be long; our climb will be steep. We may not get there in one year or even one term, but America, I have never been more hopeful than I am tonight that we will get there. I promise you, we as a people will get there. (*Time* 22)

Barack Obama was elected second time. This is the faith. Today black and white, the two different races have created this bond because of love and hope. Non-violence provided the basis for these two to take place in their hearts. Non-violence is successful everywhere, its approach is universal and the solution it provides is permanent. In the context of our post-modern world, we need these ideals if we have to save humanity.

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