Martin Luther King Jr.: Changing Perspectives

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Martin Luther King Jr., in his 1967 book *where do we go from here: Chaos or Community?* has perceptibly observed, "With Selma and the Voting Rights Act one phase of development in the civil rights revolution came to an end" (King 557). Dr. King believed that the next phase in the Civil Rights movement will bring its own challenges, as African-Americans continued to make demands for better jobs, higher wages, decent housing, an education system equal to that of whites, and a guarantee that ensured that the legal rights won in the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965 would be enforced. He warned that ''The persistence of racism in depth and the dawning awareness that Negro demands will necessitate structural changes in society have generated a new phase of white resistance in North and South'' (King 562). King's incisive observations in this book are significant to the understanding of the changing dynamics of race relations in the post-civil rights movement era. King's self-conscious attempt to demarcate the Selma movement and the Voting Rights Act as the points of departure not only serves his purpose to differentiate between the equality achieved through legislation and the equality to be realised in real terms but also becomes a vantage point from where the changing perspectives of King's ever-evolving politics and vision can be studied. His dilemmas concerning the *de facto* challenges that awaited the African-American population both in North and South after the *de jure* recognition of civil rights, often question the viability of his own integrationist, non-violent, and religious approach in the changing social, political, and economic scenarios of African-American existence. In my paper here, I would also treat the Selma movement and the Voting Rights Act as the points of departure in order to highlight the changing dynamics of Martin Luther King Jr.'s politics in terms of very apparent conflicts that emerged with respect to two notions of race and class in the post-civil rights movement period.

In the autobiography of Martin Luther King Jr., Editor Clayborne Carson has brought together several pieces of writing and speeches by King Jr., in order to arrive at a point of textual coherence from where King's evolution from an inconvenient hero to an international voice can be traced. A very harmonious image of his childhood and family emphasises King's privileged middle-class background which not only distances him from the racist practices of Southern society but also ensures a congenial environment for school education and university training. King writes, "My home situation was very congenial. I have a marvellous mother and father. I can hardly remember a time that they ever argued" (King 2). This protective and secure family environment immediately foregrounds his middle-class belonging. He recalls that his early racial and segregationist experiences were acquired through his mother's instructions rather than self-experience. His early days at Morehouse College, Crozer Seminary, and Boston University seem to be recounted in hindsight keeping King's philosophical and ideological orientation in mind. He seems uniquely positioned to have gone through a maze of writings by Henry David Thoreau, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Karl Marx, Lenin etc. (King 19-20). At a very young age, King developed a kind of abnegation towards communism which was antithetical to King's religious belief and training. His rejection of communism remains a constant ideological orientation (King 20). At the same point in time, he seems to have charted out the pitfalls of American capitalism which propagates ever-increasing chasm between different classes. However, King's engagement with the economic aspect of African-American lives takes a concrete shape much later.

King's integrationist stance while dealing with race issues is exemplified in the early part of his career. In Montgomery, after taking over his pastorate duties, he joined NAACP which sought legislation and political rights as the possible ways of attaining equality for the black population, as well as the Alabama Council on Human Relations, an interracial group, which

aimed to achieve integration through the means of education and internal purification (King 48-49). For him, both were mutually inclusive and their simultaneous membership reflects King Jr.'s own ideological orientation where political protest co-inhabited with the Christian principles of love, justice, and truth. He writes, "Through education, we seek to change attitudes and internal feelings (prejudice, hate, etc.); through legislation and court orders we seek to regulate behaviour" (King 49). Martin Luther King Jr. further qualified his integrationist stand with the Gandhian method of nonviolent resistance. He saw non-violence as a way of life with an appropriate amalgamation of the Christian concepts of love, truth and justice. James H. Cone in his comparative study of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. explicates about the integrationist stand, "optimism about blacks achieving full citizenship rights in America has always been the hallmark of integrationism. This optimism has been based not only on the political ideals of America but also upon its claim to be founded on Christian principles" (Cone 9). King's religious orientation didn't dehumanise the oppressor but the oppression, not the sinner but the sin. Martin Luther King was apprehensive about every little detail which might have brought them into the same line of action as his oppressors were. He wanted to assert the "ethical course of action". His own dilemma is highlighted when he discusses the idea of the means and the ends. In his book *Stride Toward Freedom*, King argues, "Even if lasting practical results came from such a boycott, would immoral means justify moral ends?" (King 428).

As James H. Cone argues, freedom to King becomes a Christian concept with greater adherence to the concept of Truth (43). This spiritual concept was not to be seen as a consequence of human actions but something that was already determined by the higher authority of God and the principles of Truth. He advocated unity of the community which will determine the idea of freedom. The separation itself is to be seen as a sin. He wanted the African American population to endorse the idea of boycott not only to protest against the

external elements i.e. the white society but also to address the internal demons by using the means of introspection (King 428-29). Such an approach was largely reformist rather than revolutionary where the means as well as the end were to abide by the laws of truth and justice. At the same time, Martin also realised that an integrationist and non-violent approach was not only a viable means but also a pragmatic solution to achieve freedom. In his apparent ideological confrontations with Malcolm X's assertion of violent means as the possible solution for achieving equality, King strikes a similar pragmatic viewpoint when he remarked:

> Fiery, demagogic oratory in the black ghettos, urging Negroes to arm themselves and prepare to engage in violence, as he (Malcolm X) has done, can reap nothing but grief. In the event of a violent revolution, we would be sorely outnumbered. And when it was all over, the Negro would face the same unchanged conditions, the same squalor and deprivation-the only difference being that his bitterness would be even more intense, his disenchantment even more abject. Thus, in purely practical as well as moral terms, the American Negro has no alternative to nonviolence (King 266).

However, as Herb Boyd quotes James Baldwin from his essay "To be Baptized", Malcolm, representing the violent and nationalist tradition of resistance, was "unfamiliar and dangerous (not because of)…his hatred for the white people but his love for blacks, his apprehension of the horror of the black condition, and the reasons for it" (Boyd 79). Malcolm, being familiar with the ghetto existence of the urban North and the limitations that it posed to the everyday existence of the African American masses in the Northern cities, was able to provoke and channel the embedded anger of the northern protest movements. Thus what emerged in terms of the politics that Martin and Malcolm were offering was a questioning of each other's methodology, and pointing out the limitations which in turn were recognised by both of them.

Martin and Malcolm could be seen in the light of a dialogic harmony where their points of differences became enriching rather than limiting.

As David Garrow has argued in his seminal essay *Where was Martin Luther King Jr.going?,* the year 1966 when King Jr. returned from his European fund-raising tour turned out to be a discouraging and politically challenging year in terms of his understanding and negotiations with the two pressing issues of race and class (Garrow 720). In the previous decade, he had accomplished several milestones after he was elected by his colleagues to preside over the Montgomery Improvement Association in 1955. After achieving the successful desegregation of public buses in Montgomery, the Sit-In Movement against the segregated lunch counters, and the Freedom Rides of 1961, King and his colleagues were able to mobilise the masses across the nation and even attract the attention of President John F. Kennedy by the non-violent questioning of the segregationist practices of Birmingham city officials. The 1963 campaign in Birmingham and the subsequent March on Washington later that year also attracted the attention of international media, and in the wake of these events, President Kennedy announced the new civil rights proposal which would later be passed into law as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (King 221). The Voting Rights Act of 1965 was passed by Congress after the voting rights march in Selma. However, as Garrow quotes King in 1966, the movement's real obstacles "were economic rather than legal, and tied much more closely to the question of class than to issues of race" (Garrow 729). King, in the wake of the Nobel Peace Prize of 1964, attempted to question both issues of poverty and peace by severely criticising the Vietnam War which, to him, was draining the national resources which could have been utilized in the social programmes.

In the post-Selma political struggles, he had become increasingly aware that economic inequality and injustice would prove far harder to combat than formal segregation and discrimination and, by 1964, when black rioting struck both Harlem and Rochester, New

York, he saw that meaningful change for northern ghetto residents would be much more difficult to attain than the legal demise of southern segregation. King was deeply shaken by the violent 1965 mid-August eruption of Watts, Los Angeles' black ghetto. In the urban ghetto existence where the question of survival was itself an arduous task and violence was an everyday phenomenon, King was forced to think of non-violence as the meaningful option. He spoke out even more forcefully about the underlying conditions that had produced the rebellion in such ghettos than against the apparent violence itself. In his autobiography, King writes, “What we witnessed in the Watts area was the beginning of a stirring of a deprived people in a society who had been bypassed by the progress of the previous decade. I would minimize the racial significance and point to the fact that these were rumblings of discontent from the “have-nots” within the midst of an affluent society” (King 291-292). Gradually, he was moving toward an explicit decision that issues of economic justice would be the main focal point of his future work. Economic inequality had long troubled King. In graduate school, he had manifested explicit discomfort with the maldistribution of wealth generated by American capitalism (King 21). Several scholars, therefore, have argued that the struggle against economic injustice was not defined by “a radical departure at a specific juncture” but it is revealed as “a continuous evolution in his thinking through changing contexts” (Jackson 5). He had touched on the theme in his first book, Stride Toward Freedom (1958), but his exposure to the economic realities of black Chicago during 1966 had significantly intensified King's concern that meaningful economic opportunity simply did not exist for tens of thousands of Americans, particularly African-Americans. In a testimony given to the Senate Committee on Government Operations, he said, "the civil rights movement has too often been middle-class oriented," and had done far too little that spoke to "the deep despair and the deep frustration and the deep sense of alienation" that devastated the lives of tens of thousands of black Americans trapped in urban ghettos (Garrow 727). He

began to realize that the Civil Rights Act (1964) and the Voting Rights Act (1965) did not significantly affect the problems of racism and poverty, especially among northern blacks.

As David J. Garrow highlights, as the 1964 Nobel Peace Prize recipient, King was very aware of choosing his means in his struggle to deal with both international as well as domestic issues (734). With the advent of television and a vibrant national media, King mobilised his rhetorical and leadership skills to confront the issues on both these fronts. While championing the spirit of the multiracial democratic spirit of the USA, King also brought along an anti-imperialist agenda in his speeches. In the post-Selma period, King, if not in terms of the means but in terms of the objectives that he sets out to achieve, goes through a revision. He realises that the two political constituencies of the North and the South had their own distinctiveness. The demands of the southern middle-class constituency could not be imposed on the realities of the northern ghetto lives. His social location determined the overall resources that he mobilised in the fight against racism. King too, like Malcolm X, was a mind in flux and he appropriately responded to the zeitgeist that he is so fond of recalling in his writings. King's increasingly harsh post-1965 views of America's economic ills and governmental policy shortcomings have become the most important elements of his legacy.

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