

BRIDGING THE GULF BETWEEN DREAM AND REALITY

Relevant for: Ethics | Topic: Contributions of Moral thinkers and Philosophers from World

Celebrating the lives of visionary leaders who left an indelible imprint on thought and action not only refreshes our memories of their transformative impact but also rekindles hope. Among those who influenced American society and inspired many across the world in the 20th century, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. stands out. Reflecting on the legacy that Dr. King left in setting the U.S. on the path to a more inclusive society and polity assumes significance in the context of [persisting racism leading to the death of innocent African-Americans](#) coupled with the rise of the [Black Lives Matter movement](#).

As Americans celebrate his life in the U.S., it is befitting to reflect on his lasting legacy in India too, focusing particularly on the ideas he articulated and the movement he led, which have enduring and universal appeal, particularly at a time when some of those ideas are under threat.

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If there is one idea that captures the essence of Dr. King's contribution, it is his dream of an inclusive America. Though the election of Barack Obama as the first African-American President in 2008 was a major stride towards the fulfilment of this dream, Dr. King's dream was much more grandiose in its breadth and scope. He expanded the horizons of the dream both in its conceptualisation and actualisation in the 1950s and 1960s.

In his 1963 oration at the Lincoln Memorial, Dr. King eloquently unpacked his vision for an inclusive and equitable America, which is famously remembered as the ["I have a dream" speech](#). Acknowledging the contribution of President Abraham Lincoln who signed the Emancipation Proclamation that set the African-Americans free from slavery, he underscored that "the life of the coloured American is still sadly crippled by the manacle of segregation and the chains of discrimination." Given persisting racial injustice even after a hundred years since 1863, he gave a clarion call saying: "Now is the time to lift our nation from the quicksands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood." The spirit of Jesus Christ's Sermon on the Mount and the Gandhian method of nonviolence burst forth beautifully when he cautioned his community not to "satisfy the thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred."

He raised a perceptive question: "When will you be satisfied?" And he answered it saying, "We can never be satisfied as long as our children are stripped of their selfhood and robbed of their dignity." From thereon he made the world spellbound with his inimitable oratory by expounding the dream that he had for America. "It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed... that all men are created equal." He unfolded the dream further by saying, "I have a dream my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character." He ended the speech with the old Black spiritual that gave them hope against all hopes, "Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!"

Comment | [The dream he had](#)

Dr. King's contribution to the Civil Rights Movement was remarkable. There have been many African-American leaders who have propagated the message of freedom and dignity since the mid-19th century. Among them, Dr. King was unique; he changed the very architecture of the movement. He added flesh to these insightful ideas by leading a relentless and nonviolent

movement. He was fully aware that his majestic dream could never be realised without galvanising all those who have the same vision. The movement adapted ideas from India's forays into civil disobedience. The 381-day Montgomery bus boycott demonstrated the potential for nonviolent mass protest and galvanised the Civil Rights Movement. He tirelessly worked with Rosa Parks, E. D. Nixon, Jo Ann Robinson, Ralph Abernathy, Ella Baker, John Lewis, Andrew Young, Jesse Jackson and C.T. Vivian and many others.

Right through the movement, Dr. King strived to be the conscience and unifier of a nation that was deeply divided on racial lines. He bridged the gulf between the dream and reality. Dr. King's major contribution to the U.S. in general and African-Americans in particular is in invigorating the benchmarks of equality, justice and dignity.

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The power of these illuminating ideas and the tenacious movement eventually resulted in a number of path-breaking laws such as Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965, which ended several vestiges of racial discrimination and led to the empowerment of African-Americans like never before.

In the process of realising this glorious dream he was jailed almost 30 times, his house was bombed, he was stabbed once, and finally assassinated. He sacrificed his life for the dream of a better and inclusive America. Both in life and death, he was a beacon of hope for America.

May India, where there are continuing atrocities on the Dalit, tribal and minority communities due to a hierarchical social structure, as well as the marginalised communities across the world, draw inspiration from Dr. King and strive for a more inclusive, just and equal society.

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