The Significance of Civil rights movement in America
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The story of the struggles of African-Americans to organize into communities and demand for equality before law and equality of opportunity has been a long drawn struggle, fraught with vehement resistance based on deep rooted prejudices and hatred. The discriminatory Jim Crow laws curtailed growth of the community and the repeal of these laws came only after a long political and social struggle. Condemned as ‘communists,’ politicians sought to portray blacks as evil that was required to be subdued, forcing the black communities to resort to religious rhetoric and avoiding ‘economic’ terms for the fear of being labeled as communists. The lack of political will and failure of Reconstruction to assimilate the blacks despite the 1857 Civil rights Act and the Supreme Court's approach of toeing the line of popular practice only added to widening the chasm and hardening of “the color line” at that time.

Despite several justifications in various academic disciplines put forth by nineteenth century intellectuals to establish that the negro was in fact, endowed with lower mental capacities and hence incapable of contributing in any significant way, the struggles of the African American communities and their achievements are a source of inspiration and symbols of communal strength that have influenced every social and political institutions of modern America.

Civil rights, a “moral issue” as declared by John F Kennedy on June 11, 1963, was an issue that was evaded by the civil society for a long time on one pretext or the other. It was finally the clarion call of the Civil rights leaders and the mobilization of thousands of affected blacks that brought the issues of racial discrimination into mainstream debate in America. The success of the Civil rights movement to garner support for the upliftment of a vast population by drawing attention to the peculiar disabilities faced by the blacks and stressing the need for special measures for their empowerment was done through the channels of court cases, appeals and media exposure. This process eventually changed the map of the American work force hitherto unwelcoming to the blacks. Economic freedom thus becomes a precursor to the betterment of the African American communities. The southern diaspora, a “Great Migration” to the North provided the necessary social and political impetus to the civil rights movement in the South, at a crucial juncture.

Black music, northern Diaspora and Black Metropolis
Acceptance of black music in mainstream social circles has had a tremendous impact on the black community it its fight for basic respect and dignity.

African Americans had to leave the south in order to gain the leverage needed to lift them and the rest of the nation out of Jim Crow segregation. Newer avenues became available to the blacks as a result of their migration in to some of the “great” cities such as Newark in New York, Camden in Philadelphia, Gary, Detroit, Cleveland and St Louis in Chicago, Long Beach in Los Angeles, and Oakland in San Francisco. The migrants' music was southern in spirit and their commercial success could be achieved only in northern metropolitan cities. For the black community, music became “the great twentieth-century channel to fame, fortune and cultural influence, the first substantial venue where whites were willing to acknowledge a pattern of black creativity and authority.” Music, broke down barriers in some ways and created a cultural confluence. Black

5. Ibid., 237.
6. Ibid., 117.
7. Ibid., 135.
performers influenced the “fashion, values, language and social styles” of white patrons. Louis Armstrong played the “ditties with a Texas-Oklahoma to please the dancing Okies, hillbilly western music also took the forms of “Jazz hillbilly” and “western swing” to keep up with the popular musical trends and demands. Talent search in southern cities resulted in opportunities in New York, Los Angeles and Chicago that became important centers for career minded artists. The formation of white Jazz bands was an important development that carried black music to the white audiences. The inclusion of females in the music industry was a shift in the social structure of the black community. The music industry turned Bessie Smith into an “Empress of Blues.” The images of “female power and raw sexuality” attributed to African-American female musicians is prevalent to this day.

The uniting force of the Black Metropolis and the connections it produced in business, politics and culture proved crucial for the African American community. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the National Urban League were important alliances created in the northern cities. NAACP, a result of the Black Metropolis was a vast organization, an alliance of half a million members by 1945. The Urban League provided welfare services, helped negotiate terms with organized labor and created a platform for black issues in the Roosevelt administration in the 1930s. In 1936 it organized black campaign committees to harness black votes and kept the Republican party alive to competition for black votes. Thus forging future political alliances based on promise of racial equality. The NAACP drew the black middle class in to civil rights activities. Creating publicity by linking churches and media through lobbying efforts and law suits, it questioned racial discrimination and kept civil rights activism alive. NAACP’s activities were a reflection of the spirit and message of the Black Metropolis, that laid down a fertile ground for the growth of civil rights movement in the northern cities of America. The Black Metropolis became a symbol of community building and forming of political ‘alliances’. Organizational effectiveness was evident for example, when the black campaign committees organized for the congressional race in 1936. It was for the first time, an acknowledgement of the political importance of African Americans, inviting criticism from white segregationist senator Ed Smith, who considered it as a “humiliation” of the white south. This incident brought media focus on a “new spectacle of national campaigners vying for Negro votes.”

The impact of Executive Order 8802
Opening up of the defense sector for the African Americans was an important stepping stone in the struggle for civil rights. Demanding a right to work in the defense sector in 1940 with a slogan “We Loyal Colored American Citizens Demand the Right to Work and Fight for Our Country” resulted in Executive Order 8802, for the first time since the Reconstruction, seeking to do away with discrimination based on race and the creation of a Federal Fair Employment Practice Committee (FEPC) to oversee government contracts of companies and unions. By passing the Executive Order 8802, President Roosevelt established for the first time a mechanism to include the blacks in the defense related industry. Thus the African American rhetoric, with an “unusually radical and universalistic vision of justice” that was founded on “mainstream American values” proved fruitful. Finding it propitious, the community took advantage of the overall political climate against fascism in Europe to awaken the American conscience against the racial discrimination at home and pushed for a “Double V” campaign, reiterating victory abroad and victory at home. Roosevelt’s New Deal reform legislations also provided ample opportunity for the blacks to unite and organize. These developments were however, not without significant compromises on the part of the blacks. In order to please the Conservatives,
reform legislations’ excluded blacks in farm and domestic sectors.26 Additionally, the disenfranchisement policy was continued.27

Brown vs Board of Education - a landmark decision

Resourceful activism on the part of African American leaders, progressive legislations and pro-civil rights activist judges were responsible for promoting the thought that “the destinies of the two races are indissolubly linked” giving a strong push to the cause of African Americans civil liberties. Supreme Court decisions that were pro-civil rights, made a lasting impact on the psyche of the African American communities and helped foster inclusion. In a break through decision, in Brown v Board of Education28 (1954) the Supreme Court ruled that psychological “damage” caused due to discrimination through segregation, was also a contributory factor in lower levels of performance of blacks in the field of education.29 This decision gave impetus to the hard work of NAACP and the social scientists who were keen on establishing that blacks were ‘victims’ of discriminatory social practices.30

Attitudes of indifference and apathy towards Affirmative Action:

Affirmative action for the blacks proved to be an important instrument that could help the communities shed their years of poverty and social backwardness. President Lyndon Johnson declared that “freedom is not enough” and that “not just equality as a right and a theory, equality as a fact and a result” ought to be the goal in bringing justice to the African American community.31 Martin Luther King Jr was of the strong belief that special efforts through affirmative action was an imperative to bring the black communities into American social mainstream. According to him, there was a need for a “massive program by the government of special compensatory measures” to undo the humiliation of poverty.32 King was acknowledging a need for ‘pluralism’ to become an active agent through affirmative action rather than remaining merely in a philosophical plane.33 Despite negative portrayals as “discrimination in favor of blacks” “racial spoils system” and “free handouts”,34 one of the reasons for the effectiveness of affirmative action can be attributed to the progressive approach adopted by the Supreme Court in the early years of its introduction. For example, In Griggs v Duke Power Company35, the appellants were black janitors who sought to apply for better positions at the Dan River, North Carolina power plant and were turned down by the company.36 The Supreme Court in a unanimous decision declared illegal, the “barriers” such as tests that were unrelated to the job and “favored an identifiable group of white employees.”37 The interpretation taken by the Court brought out potentially harmful nature of “ostensibly neutral industrial-relations systems” that could damage “historically excluded groups.”38 The Court pointed out that Title VII of the Civil Rights Act was concerned with the “consequences of employment practices, not simply the motive.”39 Black inclusion in the American work force has proved to be a gateway towards their progress. Studies by economists have clearly demonstrated that numbers based affirmative action programs have been beneficial to the black working class.40

Critics and anti-civil rights activists have persisted in their crusade, and their attitudes are often reflected in the judicial decisions and approaches taken by policy makers. As Oliver Zunz points out, for example, when the Civil rights Act(1964) was in its nascent stage as a bill, Virginia congressman Howard Smith, adopting delaying tactics, sought to garner the support of southerners against the bill to have the bill killed.41 In a classic case of reversal of stand, the Supreme Court in 1978, in Regents of the University of California v Bakke42 upheld a white student’s claim that the reservation of a certain number of seats for minority students amounted to discrimination.43 The decision overturned the affirmative action policy and the objective it sought to achieve, denying justice to the historically disadvantaged groups.

26 Ibid.
27 Ibid.
28 347 U.S. 483
29 Zunz. Oliver, 151.
30 Ibid.
31 Mclean, 5.
32 Mclean, 105.
33 Zunz. Oliver, 154.
34 Mclean Nancy 304.
35 401 US 424
36 Ibid., 109.
37 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid.
40 Maclean Nanacy 110.
41 zunz Oliver, 142.
42 438 US 265
43 . Ibid., 153.
Efforts at diluting the effectiveness of affirmative action policies and to psychologically damage the blacks, abound and are a reflection of obstruction of the democratic process. Conservative propaganda that blacks were seeking “handouts” without any reciprocal contribution and their portrayals of civil rights leaders as selfish liberals interested only in formal equality, have had a damaging effect on the community. Depicting affirmative action in poor light and as detrimental to the beneficiaries who are “unqualified” “lazy” and illegitimate recipients of benefits, the Neoconservatives have attempted to play into the very stereotypes that have been prevalent since the 19th century.

Ronald Reagan, an unpopular President with the African American community, having received the least number of African American votes as a Presidential candidate compared to any other Republican presidential candidate since the inception of the Republican party, sought to curtail the established affirmative action policies. The Reagan government sought to undo the progressive reforms that the affirmative action policy had undertaken in the twenty years before its assuming office. By seeking to rescind Executive Order 11246 that had opened up federal contract programs to include blacks, Mexican Americans, Puerto Rican men and women, the Reagan government, attempted to overhaul the hard earned rights and opportunities that had changed the lives of a huge minority population. The position of 15,000 businesses, employing twenty three million workers at 73,000 work sites were sought to be affected. With popular support against the overhaul of Executive Order 11246 from within the Congress, businesses and corporations, the Reagan administration resorted to other disruptive mechanisms to dilute its effectiveness. Depriving enforcement mechanisms of funds and appointing persons like William Bradford Reynolds as the head of the Civil Rights Division of the Justice Department, the administration tried to weaken the enforcement. Reynolds held views that were adverse towards the office he held resulting in gross disrespect towards law.

Lack of enforcement
Enforcement of civil rights law has been fraught with loopholes; a New York Times Magazine investigation done in 1972 revealed that despite federal legal provisions in place, civil rights violations were common in public construction projects. Inspite of courts recording such violations, there were no instances of cancellation of such projects. The regional office of the Office of Federal Contract Compliance(OFCC) at New York responsible for ensuring compliance from thousands of government contracts in New York state, New Jersey, Puerto Rico and Virgin Islands was understaffed, consisting only of a director, assistant and a secretary to handle all the bulky work. The following instances are examples of how The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOP) lacked teeth. It was unable to implement the conciliation settlements that it secured, leaving the companies with ample opportunity to violate the terms of their agreements. President Lyndon Johnson’s proposed EEOP budget was cut into half because of the canvassing of some congressmen, evidently an example of obstruction of justice. Despite the legal speculation of no more than two months between the time a complaint is filed and the conduct of investigation, by the end of 1968, the EEOP was taking 18 months to open the cases, “causing irreparable damage to the individuals concerned.” Overburdened and lacking sufficient funds and authority, in 1972 the EEOP had a backlog of over 53,000 cases. The failure of the “first Reconstruction” to improve the lot of the African American community, and the slow but definite place of civil rights in the “second Reconstruction”- the fight has been about various aspects of citizenship- from enfranchisement to equal opportunities in the job market. The struggle against racial discrimination has been at various levels and in all walks of life. The perception of “rightness of whiteness” has haunted them since the inception of slave trade and continues to haunt them in the present. Although the civil rights movement and its consequences have not been completely appreciated, often times by the African American communities themselves, the impact on their social, economic and legal status

44 Ibid., 339.
45 Ibid., 301.
46 Ibid.
47 Ibid.
48 Ibid.
49 Ibid., 301-302.
50 Ibid.,
51 Maclean Nancy 102.
52 Ibid.
53 Ibid.
54 Ibid., 111.
55 Ibid.
56 Ibid.
57 Ibid.
have been phenomenal in America. Recognition of legal rights of the blacks, although at times through piece meal legislations, has proved to be very effective in countering the imbalance created by racial discrimination. George Wallace's call for “Segregation now, segregation tomorrow and segregation forever”\textsuperscript{58} has died down even in the Conservative camps. Despite the clear hatred and white supremacy of organizations such as the Klu Klax Klan that acted on assumptions of intellectual inferiority and incapacity of the blacks, the black community’s resilience and achievements have sought to demolish the stereotypes and prejudices.

The attitudes of the opponents of civil rights have ranged from active resistance to indifference. It is reflected in such moves as canvassing for “color-blind” laws and the deliberate dilution of affirmative action policies through cutting funding of enforcement agencies. Yet, due to consorted efforts on the part of resilient community leaders, inclusive measures and dignity of labor have become a reality that have changed the dynamics of American society and unsettled long held prejudices. The recognition of civil rights and provisions for affirmative action to compensate for society's historic injustice stands as a covenant of civil society's abstinence from reverting to perversion.

The path traversed by the civil rights activists, was one fraught with insurmountable obstacles which could only have been overcome with the spirit of community and a hope for a just future for their children. The organizing power of the African- American communities came together under a single umbrella of eradicating racial discrimination and demanding the right to live as respectable citizens. The impact of the civil rights movement on race relations in modern America has influenced every modern institution. The role of African- American struggles and the ensuing civil rights movement in “enlarging the polity” is a significant national contribution, in that, it brought to the fore issues of segregation, inequality(both legal and actual) and unjust practices that were otherwise considered normal in a society that was experiencing “fascism abroad and fascism at home.” The civil rights movement, having gained momentum in the urban centers of the North, had its humble beginnings in the South with one lady's refusal to give up her seat in a public bus. As the movement progressed, it has built lasting alliances, giving it additional support and political leverage. A fight for basic dignity and human rights, the civil rights movement has become a symbol of struggle, sacrifice and achievement, and is a beacon of freedom for blacks, women and other minorities in America and the world over. In a modern multi cultural American society, racial equality is a necessary prerequisite for protection of its diverse ethnicity within the country and as a symbol of equality and human rights in the global arena.

References


\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 51.