

I Have A Dream

Martin Luther King Jr. (1928-1968) was a minister of the Baptist Church and the leader of the Civil Rights Movement in the US. His work was fundamental in achieving freedom for the Black people in the 1950s. He was well known for his non-violent protests such as the March on Washington (1963). He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1964. Though he had a secure life and education in the Northern districts, he was shocked to find segregation was legal in the South. With a solid foundation in law, medicine and theology, King was chosen as leader of the Montgomery Improvement Association to boycott racial segregation. King and his team boycotted the bus system after civil rights worker Rosa Parks was asked to give up her seat to a white passenger. He organized the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and gave many lectures.

In 1959, he was received passionately by Jawaharlal Nehru and learned Gandhian concepts of non-violence. He was imprisoned for his fight against racism. On 28 August 1963, he gathered an interracial assembly of more than 200,000 for the peaceful March on Washington before the Lincoln Memorial. This is where thousands were uplifted by his passionate but peaceful speech "I Have A Dream." Owing to the efforts of King, the US government passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 designating racial segregation as illegal. But King's plans for Poor Peoples' March and for equality in voting rights were severely opposed by officials with violence. King faced much opposition and was assassinated by James Earl Ray on 4 April 1968.

"I Have A Dream" is a speech delivered at the March on Washington in 1963. Martin Luther King Jr. had observed many incidents of violence, lynching and oppression in the Southern states. "Whites Only" placards placed at hotels and buses enraged him. But he demanded justice in a peaceful non-violent way. He begins his speech by reminding that the Emancipation Proclamation was signed by Abraham Lincoln on 1 January 1863. Lincoln had declared in his famous "Gettysburg Address" that "all men are created equal". King also borrows Lincoln's opening lines "Four score years ago" to emphasize that the war for racial freedom had already been fought. The speech delivered in the Lincoln Memorial is yet another example of King stressing the importance of Lincoln's promise to the African-Americans. Lincoln's promise brought great hope to many who were just slaves. But even after a hundred years, the Blacks were still not free.

King uses anaphora to emphasize the absence of freedom promised ages ago. He repeats "One hundred years later" to show the horrifying life of the Negro - manacled in chains, steeped in segregation and exiled in his own land. The Negro was not secure anywhere. King metaphorically compares racism to an invalid cheque that has bounced off

because of insufficient funds. Freedom and equality had been promised to them but the promise was broken. The Declaration of Independence stated that both Black and White men were heirs to “unalienable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” But King and his followers knew that justice was still available in the land of opportunities. He uses anaphora with “Now is the time” to ask for immediate freedom from injustice. King compares the Negro’s victimization to a sweltering summer. He hopes that his peaceful demonstrations will bring freedom and justice. But King assures the gathering that the riots will continue; that he will keep fighting for justice till the Negro is free.

One of the powerful markers of King is his affinity towards non-violence. His fight for freedom will be peaceful. He will not drink from “the cup of bitterness and hatred”. King alludes to biblical passages to make his speech a sermon for justice. Instead of violence, King has chosen a majestic path of meeting physical force with soul force. As a Civil Rights leader, King assured the gathering that he will not be satisfied until every Black man is free. He covertly claims rights of equality in motels, schools, buses and public places. Black people were confined to ghettos and slums. King wants to reverse this. He also wants equality in education - when Black and White children could study in the same classroom. The state of Mississippi prevented Black people from voting. King wants voting rights for all. He assures the gathering that justice would come and for now, they had to continue their work. So he asked them to go back peacefully to their states.

Halfway through the speech, King very quickly delivers his wishes with the anaphora “I have a dream”. These are his demands. All men must be treated as equals. Georgia was known for its brutal treatment of Black slaves. King hopes that one day both slave and master would sit at dinner together. The governors of Mississippi and Alabama made the violent treatment of slaves legal. King wanted this to be ‘nullified’. He promises the crowd that he would continue to fight for them, to go to jail and conduct peace rallies from the South. He concludes his speech demanding equality not only for Blacks but also for Jews, Gentiles, Protestants, Catholics. His fight would continue till everyone is “free at last.”