
UNIT 13 CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENTS IN THE UNITED STATES

Structure

- 13.1 Introduction
 - Aims and Objectives
- 13.2 Discrimination of the Disadvantaged Groups
 - 13.2.1 African Americans
- 13.3 Black Civil Rights Movements
- 13.4 Consequences of Civil Rights Movements
 - 13.4.1 Native Americans
 - 13.4.2 Hispanic and Asian Americans
 - 13.4.3 Women and Civil Rights Movements
 - 13.4.4 Rights of Homosexuals
- 13.5 Democrats and Civil Rights
- 13.6 Republicans and Civil Rights
- 13.7 Summary
- 13.8 Terminal Questions

Suggested Readings

13.1 INTRODUCTION

Mahatma Gandhi's influence on civil rights movements around the world is beyond anyone's doubt. Non-violent resistance through non-cooperation and civil disobedience are powerful tools of the deprived over the privileged sections of the society. Gandhi's influence is nowhere more discernible in the developed West than in the United States itself. Martin Luther King, Jr., the leader who led the non-violent civil rights movement, in the United States to empower the African Americans, was highly inspired by Mahatma Gandhi.

Civil rights denote the rights of individuals to equal protection under the laws of the land and equal access to public amenities and services in society. Civil rights differ from civil liberties. Significantly, civil liberties involve freedom of speech and expression and other freedoms of the citizens that are protected from the possible violation by the government. Civil rights, on the other hand, refer to individual members or groups—whether racial, religious and others—who need to be treated equally by the government and even by the private parties to a certain extent. To express in more simple terms, civil liberties deal with personal freedoms and civil rights are related to issues of equality.

Aims and Objectives

After reading this Unit, you would be able to understand:

- The meaning and significance of the concept of civil rights.

- Civil Rights Movement in the United States of America.
- The role of different communities involved in ensuring rights

13.2 DISCRIMINATION OF THE DISADVANTAGED GROUPS

The history of civil rights movements in the United States is by and large group's claims to equality. The US Constitution recognises various rights of the individuals. The American Bill of Rights guarantees individual freedoms of expression, speech, assembly, practice of religion etc., but all American citizens have not been able to exercise this freedom. Since the birth of the republic, various disadvantaged groups in the US had to struggle for decades to acquire equal rights with other fellow citizens. More specifically, Native Americans, women, African Americans, Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans and many others in the US had to launch and sustain long struggles to achieve political and social equality.

These groups, after prolonged discrimination, have been able to achieve in legal terms the equal protection of law, equal access to public amenities and equal rights to vote, even as the US laws do not discriminate against individuals on the grounds of race, gender, ethnicity or religion any more. But the civil rights movements in the US, particularly during the 1950s and 1960s, primarily sought to uplift the African Americans and allocate civil rights to them. Legal equality did not translate into *de facto* equality until the civil rights movements succeeded in their goals. The history of America is witness to the fact that disadvantaged groups rarely achieved legal equality without a struggle. Powerful groups always resist granting disadvantaged groups a greater degree of equality.

13.2.1 African Americans

There were hundreds and thousands of African slaves in the US at the time of the framing of the Constitution. The first written constitution of the world did not recognise slaves as human beings deserving equality with the white population and were not given full citizenship. Slave trade was allowed until 1808. Slavery, as a social institution, was dismantled only after a ferocious civil war in the US that threatened the unity and territorial integrity of the nation. The civil war was followed by a period of Reconstruction. When Reconstruction ended in 1877 and the federal troops were withdrawn from the slave-states, the white supremacy in socio-political life returned. The Southern white population adopted a host of new rules and regulations, commonly known as the Jim Crow Laws, to resume the practice of racial segregation. The black people were debarred from sharing the same public facilities and educational institutions with the white population. Black children were compelled to study in separate schools that lacked adequate infrastructure and facilities. Blacks could not enter hotels and restaurants meant for Whites. Racial segregation was also practised in public transportation facilities.

Significantly, the Supreme Court of the United States sided with the dominant white population by upholding the Jim Crow laws. In *Plessy vs. Ferguson* case in 1896, the US Supreme court ruled that "separate" facilities for the two races did not violate the Constitution so long as the facilities were "equal". The Court also pointed out that the Constitution could do little to bring about racial equality, if one race happened to be inferior to the other.

The leaders of the Black community resisted such practices and relentlessly fought against racial discrimination and bigotry by resorting to legal means. But the legal method brought little relief until the 1930s when the US Supreme Court began to alter its opinion rather in a modest way. The Court ruled that if no facilities existed for the African Americans, they must be permitted to use the facilities reserved for the white population. About two decades later, in another landmark decision, the Supreme Court reversed its *Plessy* doctrine and ruled in *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka* that racial segregation of public schools “generate [among black children] a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone.... Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal.” This case was initiated by the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP) for Linda Carol Brown, a Black child in Topeka, Kansas, who was denied admission into an all-white elementary school. The case was argued by Thurgood Marshall who subsequently became the first Black justice of the US Supreme Court.

The *Brown* decision was not welcomed by the Southern White population. Even in the North it was hailed only by a slender section of the White community. Three years after this decision, in the city of Little Rock, Black children were not allowed to enter the white public school and the problem was resolved only after President Dwight D Eisenhower placed the ANG (Arkansas National Guards) under federal control to implement the *Brown* decision on desegregation.

Though public schools were technically desegregated in 1954 by the U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Brown vs Board of Education*, many were still de facto segregated due to inequality in housing and racial segregation in neighbourhoods. The Supreme Court held that not only were separate but also equal schools “inherently unequal”, the public schools in many parts of the country continued to be segregated by race. In *Swann vs. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education* (1971), the Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality ‘of busing’ to end school segregation, an attempt to further integrate schools.

A federal court in 1974 found that in Boston, schools were constructed and school district lines intentionally drawn to segregate the schools on the basis of race. In the early 1970s, a series of court decisions found that the racially imbalanced schools trampled the rights of minority students. As a remedy, courts ordered the racial integration of school districts within individual cities, sometimes requiring the racial composition of each individual school in the district to reflect the composition of the district as a whole. This was generally achieved by transporting children by school bus to a school in a different area of the district. This practice widely came to be referred to as “busing” or “desegregation busing” in the United States.

However, many White families moved to the suburbs to avoid sending their children to far off schools in unfamiliar (and violently Black) neighbourhoods, and those who stayed back moved their children into parochial or private schools. As a consequence, urban school districts came to be overwhelmingly Black, reducing any effectiveness compulsory busing may have had. Though the U.S. Supreme Court verdict in *Milliken vs. Bradley* (1974) that busing children across districts was unconstitutional, limited the extent of busing to metropolitan areas, there is no doubt that busing integrated ethnic minority school children with the larger community. Since the 1980s desegregation busing has been on the decline.

13.3 BLACK CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENTS

Soon after the *Brown* decision of the Supreme Court, the African American leaders started a political movement for civil rights of the community. The most well known leader was Martin Luther King, Jr. who persistently organised peaceful marches and demonstrations in Alabama to press for the improvement of socio-economic conditions and civil rights of the African Americans. Such movements faced enormous impediments and antagonism and were often suppressed with heavy handed tactics.

One of the most well known incidents in the movement was a march organised by King in the city of Birmingham in Alabama in 1963. As King and his supporters began their peaceful marches and demonstrations, the Birmingham police led by Sheriff Eugene “Bull” Connor attacked the demonstrators, including King with “dogs, cattle prods and fire hoses.” The entire country watched this ghastly and brutal scene on television. This incident bolstered further the courage and valour of the African- American community to continue the fight and also made a large number of white Americans sympathetic to the cause of the African Americans. In the same year, as a result, on 2nd of August, King and other leaders organised a massive “March on Washington” for jobs and freedom and rights of the African Americans that attracted about quarter of a million marchers. Reverend King made his famous speech where he said: “I have a dream that 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.”

This march brought moral triumph and political victory. In 1964, despite the hurdles and barriers erected by the conservatives and racists, the US Congress enacted the Civil Rights Act providing African Americans and other minority communities’ equal access to public facilities and prohibited discrimination in jobs on racial grounds. However, enactment of legislations did not automatically bring to an end discrimination against the minorities nor put an end to the feelings of racial superiority among the people. The southern states began to devise new means to put a damper on the federal Civil Rights Acts. Virginia, for instance, set up a commission to pay the legal expenses of White citizens who were brought to the courts for infringement of civil rights measures. Such tactics and manoeuvrings by former slave-owning states only strengthened the spirit of the federal government to do more with regard to civil rights of the African Americans and minorities. Under the active leadership and efforts of President Lyndon B Johnson, the US Congress passed the Voting Rights Act in 1965 ending racial barriers in elections.

13.4 CONSEQUENCES OF CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENTS

As has been mentioned earlier, there are several minority communities in the U.S apart from African Americans, who had to face problems of social, economic and political discrimination. No other group, however, has been active in launching political movements comparable to the ones embarked on and sustained by the African American communities, who became the pivot of the civil rights movements in the United States.

However, when the civil rights movements triumphed and the U.S. Congress finally enacted the legislations related to civil rights and voting rights in 1964 and 1965 respectively, other minority communities also derived benefits resulting from civil rights movements and legislative measures either directly or indirectly. It is important to give a few instances of benefits or encouragement received by other minority communities.

13.4.1 Native Americans

Native Americans numbered about ten million when the first White settlers from Europe set foot in the United States. The European settlers conquered the territories of the Native American tribes through war, deception, diplomacy and ethnic cleansing. By 1900, as a result, there were fewer than a million Native Americans in the U.S. Like other minority groups this community too enjoyed no civil rights.

In the 1950s, the Native Americans opposed a federal government policy to move them to the cities with an aim to help them assimilate with mainstream American life. There resistance emanated from the fear of losing their ancestral land, and difficulties of adjusting in the cities. Though the policy was scrapped in 1961, the United States Commission on Civil Rights reported that poverty and deprivation was common among Native Americans. Importantly, the civil rights movements of the 1960s had left out Native Americans. But they certainly inspired them to raise their demands and concerns. The civil rights legislations of the 1960s provided an opportunity to other minority groups to enjoy rights at least on law that were not there earlier.

Influenced by the Third World nationalism and the progress of America's home-grown civil rights movement, Native American activism turned aggressive in the 1960s and 70s. A series of movements for the restoration of land and water rights were launched in these two decades. The American Indian Movement (AIM), the organisation of the Native American civil rights movement, was founded in 1968 ostensibly to encourage self-determination among Native Americans and to establish international recognition of their treaty rights. Over the years, it helped channel government funds to Native American organisations and assisted the marginalised, neglected and poverty-stricken urban Native Americans. In the same year, the U.S. Congress enacted the Indian Bill of Rights that provided constitutional guarantees similar to other U.S. citizens. But it hardly alleviated the genuine grievances of the Native Americans.

Drawing a lesson from African Americans, Native Americans occupied the Bureau of Indian Affairs in the US capital and subsequently seized control of a village in South Dakota. The incident was not absolutely peaceful, as the natives exchanged gunfire when the marshals opened fire. But the incident soon brought to the attention of the people and the governing elite the plight of this minority group and the result was the enactment of another piece of legislation in 1974 granting greater control to these people over federal programmes affecting them.

Though confrontations between Native American groups and government authorities became routine during this time, the mainstream Americans were certainly sensitised toward the requirements and rightful demands of Native Americans. All branches of government were forced to respond to the demand of equal treatment of Native Americans that were long overdue.

13.4.2 Hispanic and Asian Americans

The civil right movements of the 1960s primarily also helped in asserting the rights of the Hispanic Americans and Asian Americans. A large number of Hispanic people who migrated to the United States in search of jobs did not go back to their respective countries in Latin America nor were they able to acquire US citizenship. These illegal aliens suffered much discrimination in the hands of their employers as well as the society at large. It was in the spirit of the civil rights movements and legislative measures of the

1960s that the U.S. Congress passed the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act that offered citizenship to illegal immigrants who could provide residential proof for last five years.

But Hispanics themselves had to share the blame for the discrimination they faced in the U.S. Not only did they continue to live in the U.S. illegally, but also many of them refused to learn English and assimilate into the mainstream American society. Their recalcitrance gave rise to a nativist movement—the Official English Movement, aiming to make English the official language of the United States—and, as a consequence, more than half of the states declared English their official language within a span of three decades. Till date, efforts are on to make the use of English compulsory at the workplace. Bills are pending in the U.S. Congress that gives employers the right to demand that English be used by employees regardless of their language background.

Asian Americans, particularly the Chinese and the Japanese, who were brought to the US to work in coal mines and railroad constructions, faced severe racial discrimination expressed openly by the people as well as the ruling elite. Some of the U.S. legislations too discriminated against them. For instance, in 1921 when the U.S. first enacted a law to restrict immigration and introduced a quota system, Asians got a tiny quota compared to Europeans. Once again in the domestic climate of civil rights movements in the 1960s, Asian Americans were benefited by the 1965 Immigration Act, that sought to balance the quota in favour of those who were discriminated earlier. Unprecedented numbers of Asians and Latin Americans entered the United States as a result of that Act. The rights of Asian Americans were also slowly expanded through court rulings and legislations following the 1964 civil rights acts.

13.4.3 Women and Civil Rights Movements

Women in America were debarred from exercising their right to vote, holding public office or serving as juries both during the colonial times as well as after independence. The U.S. Constitution discriminated against American women. Significantly, the influence of British Common Law was so much on the United States that women in that country usually lost their identity after marriage and were considered the property of the husbands. They were not permitted to purchase, hold or dispose off property without the consent of their respective husbands. The discrimination was also reflected in a Supreme Court judgement that held that adultery was a violation of the property right of the husband.

The changing status of women's rights has come a long way through movements and struggles spanning decades and in the year 1848, the first ever women convention to press for their rights was held in New York, in response to the prevention of two women leaders from attending an anti-slavery convention. Since then women movements have been quite vigorous, although the success has often come late. Initially, the women rights movements were closely aligned with the anti-slavery struggles, such as the abolitionist movements. When the Civil War was over, the slaves were emancipated and a series of constitutional amendments were enacted to give rights to the liberated African Americans. Women hardly gained anything from it. For example, the Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution nobly announced that voting rights of individuals could not be abridged on the basis of race or colour, but the amendment was conspicuously silent on gender.

The struggle to empower women in the functioning of the American democracy continued and finally in 1920 the Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was enacted that forbade the U.S. or state governments from denying the right to vote “on account of sex.”

Ratification of this amendment inspired the women's rights movements to plead for the fulfilment of other demands, such as "equal rights" with men; equal pay for equal work; removal of discrimination in granting financial credit; and ending sexual harassment at work places. After decades of efforts by women movements, some of these demands have been met. While in 1923, the first proposal was made to bring about another amendment to the Constitution to ensure equal rights for women, it was only in 1973—half a century later that the U.S. Congress approved the Equal Rights Amendment only to be rejected during its ratification by requisite three-fourths of the states.

But the movement continued and society was slowly sensitised about the importunate discrimination against women. Sustained political struggles subsequently paid and the U.S. Congress passed the Equal Pay Act in 1963 in the midst of the civil rights movements in various parts of the country. This Act prohibited discrimination on the basis of gender in salary and wages of certain types of employment. The 1964 Civil Rights Act prohibited gender discrimination in the administration of grants for programmes of the Federal Government. The Education Amendment Act of 1972 prohibited gender discrimination in education and the Equal Credit Act of 1974 ended similar discrimination in granting of financial credit. Although women have gained considerably, gender inequality still remains in the US. Gender representation in public office, managerial posts and promotion to high offices is still negligible.

Women's rights acquired a new dimension with the debate on abortion that started in the United States in the 1970s, a new movement—supported by the Democratic Party—emerged that sought to give women complete control over her sexuality and the choice to continue or terminate a pregnancy. Highlighting the right of women—especially unmarried women—to safe and legal abortion, this movement came to be known as the "Pro-choice" movement. In *Roe v Wade* (1973), the U.S. Supreme Court upheld a woman's constitutional right to abortion and reaffirmed it in *Planned Parenthood v Casey* (1992). The latter case was decided by plurality opinion, and there is no doubt that even today, abortion rights have succeeded in keeping the judiciary divided.

The pro-choice movement drew strong reaction from The Roman Catholic Church—supported by conservative Protestant groups—against the pro-choice activists and the judiciary's decision in their favour. A movement, commonly referred to as the pro-life movement and sponsored unequivocally by the Roman Catholic Church, arose in opposition to abortion. Some within the Democratic Party, which has a large number of Catholics as members, have even sponsored legislation in the U.S. Congress to reduce the abortion rate without seeking to make the procedure illegal and without overturning *Roe v Wade*. However, conservatives still oppose abortion—on the ground that a developed foetus was an individual and had the right to live—and accept only early abortion (during the first two trimesters after conception) and even late abortion when the pregnancy was caused due to incest or rape. What conservatives want to put an end to is abortion-on-demand.

13.4.4 Rights of Homosexuals

Even though Illinois became the first U.S. state in 1962 to decriminalise private homosexual acts between consenting adults, the gay rights movement acquired momentum in June 1969, when the patrons of Stonewall Inn, a gay bar in New York's Greenwich Village, rioted for three days with the police when the latter conducted a raid on its premises. The Stonewall Riots transformed the gay rights movement into a widespread protest for equal rights and social acceptance.

In 1973, the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its official list of mental disorders. By that time the homosexual activity had become quite widespread in the U.S. In 1982, Wisconsin created history when it became the first state to ban discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.

Its victorious moment came when the U.S. Army allowed gays to serve in the military in 1993 but banned homosexual activity while serving. Though it was not an unalloyed victory as it still outlawed homosexual activity between serving gay and lesbian couples, it opened the door of the military to the gay community. Under this policy—enacted during the presidency of Bill Clinton and known as “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell”—gays and lesbians could be discharged from service in the Army if they either conceded to being gay or indulged in homosexual acts during service, but the Army was forbidden to ask its inmates about their sexual orientation.

In 2000, Vermont became the first state to recognize the same-sex marriages—or civil unions—between gay and lesbian couples and bestowed such civil unions with “the same benefits, privileges, and responsibilities as spouses”. However, it refrained from referring to such unions as “marriage”, reserving the term for heterosexual unions. Same-sex marriages were legalised—over conservative opposition—in Massachusetts in 2004, in Connecticut in 2005, and in New Jersey in 2006.

During the presidential campaign of 2004, and then again in 2006, President George W. Bush came out strongly against “civil unions”, reiterating that marriage was a faith-sanctioned and time-tested institution that solemnised the union between man and woman. He supported the move of the Christian Coalition, a Republican grassroots organisation to amend the Federal Constitution in order to define marriage as exclusively between man and woman and seek a ban on gay marriages. The President even declared that the United States government would “recognize and protect” marriage as it promoted the welfare of children and stability of society.

Interestingly, though in May 2008, the California Supreme Court ruled that same-sex couples had a constitutional right to marry; during the November election, voters in the state ratified an initiative—called Proposition 8—that banned same-sex marriages. Similar initiatives banning same-sex marriages were passed by voters in Arizona and Florida as well. Voters in Arkansas approved a measure that barred gays and lesbians from adopting children.

There is no doubt that like other civil right issues, gay rights have left American society deeply divided. As with abortion, the issue of gay rights has created an uncompromising political polarisation. Even after the backlash of the November 2008 election, the Iowa Supreme Court threw out a state law banning same-sex marriages on April 3, 2009. In less than a week later, the Vermont Legislature legalised same-sex marriage by overriding the Governor’s veto of a bill that allowed same-sex couples to marry.

13.5 DEMOCRATS AND CIVIL RIGHTS

The Democratic Party has always seen itself in the forefront of the civil rights movement. Both the Civil Rights Act (1964) and the Voting Rights Act (1965) were passed on the initiative of Lyndon B. Johnson, one of the most influential Democratic presidents ever. With these two measures, the political participation by Blacks became meaningful, and constitutes a solid and unwavering voting bloc for the Democratic Party across the United

States. They now hold elected political office in large numbers, and an outstanding example is reflected in Barack Hussain Obama's assuming office as the President of the U.S. Needless to say, the overwhelming majority of these Black leaders were Democrats.

The 2004 Democratic Platform opposed any move to ban gay marriages by amending the Federal Constitution and wanted that marriage be defined at the state level. For Democrats, the full inclusion of gay and lesbian "families" in national life with equal responsibilities, benefits, and protections as conventional families remains top priority.

Democrats have acquired a sizeable measure of the Hispanic loyalty and an equally sizeable chunk of their vote by opposing Official English in state after state by branding it as nativist and trying to convince language minorities that Official English was nothing but English Only, and that the proponents of the movement wanted to ban the use of non-English languages in the U.S. In place of English *Only*, Democrats have championed the cause of English *Plus*, proficiency in English and a second language or multiple languages. They hold that public facilities, programmes, and assistance be made available to citizens in languages other than English, keeping in mind those who were not proficient in English. But Democrats have been relatively unsuccessful on this count, as many Democratic governors (including Bill Clinton of Arkansas) signed measures declaring English as the official language of their respective states. However, Democrats have been steadfast in their support to bilingual education (introduced first in 1968 and subsequently amended)—which today is nothing but "maintenance" bilingual education and not "transitional" bilingual education—and multilingual ballots (introduced by the Voting Rights Act of 1965) that have not only pushed Hispanics to take up low-paid jobs but have kept them and other language minorities from any meaningful participation in the political process.

Democrats have consistently been pro-choice in matters of abortion: both the 2000 and 2004 Platforms sought to recognise and respect "every woman's right to choose" in line with *Roe v Wade* (1973) and make abortion "safe, legal, and rare". In fact, the party believes that the woman's "right to choose" was a constitutional liberty and needed to be upheld and protected by the courts.

13.6 REPUBLICANS AND CIVIL RIGHTS

It is a matter of supreme irony that despite the abolition of slavery in the hands of a Republican President, Abraham Lincoln of Illinois, the Republican Party cannot look toward African Americans today for widespread electoral support. The Black support to the Democratic Party is proof of the fact that they have given more importance to political empowerment than social emancipation. What is more disconcerting is the fact that Black community leaders have often portrayed Republicans as racist and liberal opinion has attempted to somehow link individual Republicans to the White supremacist Ku Klux Klan. It is true that neither Republican leaders nor the party as a whole has found itself in the forefront of the Black civil rights movement. Equally true is the fact that Republicans have been traditionally targeted by the Klan for its steadfast anti-slavery stance.

Republicans have made the retention of family values the core of the domestic issues they champion in election after election. Small-town America is also deeply religious, and Republicans have often supported and articulated the church's opposition to homosexuality and same-sex marriages as an assault on the traditional family. In so doing, it has earned the reputation of being a socially conservative and reactionary political force.

The Republican Party's support to and identification with age-old family values has also made it stand in opposition to abortion and pro-choice activism. In both its 2000 and 2004 Platforms, the party voiced its stringent opposition to abortion, held that the unborn child had a "fundamental individual right to life that cannot be infringed", and called for a ban on using public revenues for carrying out abortion and a stop on funding organisations which advocated it. In November 2003, President George W. Bush signed the Partial Birth Abortion Ban Act—a measure to prohibit late-term abortions—and the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of the Act in its verdict in *Gonzales v Carhart* (2007). No doubt, the Republicans' stand on abortion did not make their party any popular among pro-choice activists and liberal-minded women.

The Republican Party has also traditionally opposed "maintenance" bilingual education—the use of public funds for bilingual education through native language instruction that ultimately ended up in maintaining the language of linguistic minority students instead of teaching them English—and have supported the use of "transitional" bilingual education that aimed at imparting the teaching of subject-matter courses to language minority students in all-English classes as early as possible. Individual Republicans have been in the forefront of the Official English movement and it was in the Republican 104th Congress that the first-ever English Language Amendment (ELA), H.R. 123—the Bill Emerson English Language Empowerment Act (1996), seeking to amend the Federal Constitution to declare English the official language of the United States—was passed by the U.S. House of Representatives. Till date, those who have moved ELAs in the U.S. Congress with varying degrees of success have all been Republicans. Republicans have also repeatedly called for the abolition of multilingual ballots and voter assistance, thus earning the charge of being nativist, anti-immigrant, and anti-Hispanic.

13.7 SUMMARY

Civil rights movements emerged in the United States, as elsewhere, in order to uphold group rights. Though America is not constitutionally multicultural, the success of civil rights movements—whether of Blacks, women, gays, or immigrants—have ensured the preservation and protection of the constitutional rights of various marginalised groups in American society. An era of political correctness was inaugurated, in which Blacks became African Americans, housewives became homemakers, homosexuality came to be referred to as alternative sexuality, and immigrants became hyphenated Americans.

The preservation of civil rights have resulted in the successful exercise of civil liberties by abolishing private and public acts of racial, gender, and ethnic discrimination. It goes to the credit of the civil rights movement that any group that perceives discrimination on the part of the state or other groups can expect remedial action from the judiciary, if not always from the executive or the legislature.

But as the movement expands, new groups come into existence and new rights are manufactured to acknowledge the group and decide on the constitutionality of the rights that it seeks to protect and uphold.

The history of the U.S. civil rights movement is an interesting, though not always an acrimonious one. The American political system provided enough space to civil rights activists and even incorporated their agenda as planks in the platforms of the major parties. Referendums, initiatives, legislations, and court verdicts have all been used either to support or oppose the issues raised by the civil rights activists.

But there is no doubt that the civil rights movements have left American politics and society deeply divided. The domestic policy planks of the two major parties are determined to a large extent by their respective stands on civil rights issues. The churches, the centrepiece of American middle-class life, stand torn by issues of race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation (especially of the clergy), and abortion. Though race riots are not common any longer, racially-inspired hate crimes have shown a sharp increase.

Nowhere have the civil rights movements succeeded as in the US. If similar movements have appeared elsewhere, it can serve as a measure of the degree of urbanisation, industrialisation, or modernisation that has taken place in that society (for example, the gay rights movement in India emerged in the cities and not in the rural hinterlands). That remains a positive contribution of the American civil rights movement in understanding the degree of development in non-American societies.

13.8 TERMINAL QUESTIONS

1. What do you understand by “civil rights”? Which are the disadvantaged groups in the US that have struggled for “civil rights” in that country?
2. Write briefly about the Black civil rights movements in the US in the 1960s.
3. Native Americans, Asian Americans and Women to some extent benefited from Black civil rights movements in the US. Explain with examples.
4. What are the positions of American political parties today on the issues of civil rights?

SUGGESTED READINGS

1. C.A. Barnes., *Journey from Jim Crow: The Desegregation of Southern Transit*, Columbia University Press, 1983.
2. Thomas Gentile., *March On Washington: August 28, 1963*, New Day Publications, 1963.
3. Peter Levy., *Documentary History of the Modern Civil Rights Movement*, Greenwood Press, 1992.
4. August Meier, and Elliot Rudwick., *CORE: A Study in the Civil Rights Movement 1942- 1968*, Oxford University Press, 1973.
5. Michal R. Belknap., (Ed), *Civil Rights, the White House, and the Justice Department: Securing the Enactment of Civil Rights Legislation*, Garland Publishing, 1991.
6. Paul Murray., *Civil Rights Movement: References & Resources*, Macmillan Reference, 1993.
7. Rhoda Blumberg., *Civil Rights: The 1960s Freedom Struggle*, Macmillan, 1991.
8. August Meier, John Bracey Jr, Elliott Rudwick., (eds), *Black Protest in the Sixties*, Markus Wiener Publishing, 1991.
9. Vicki Crawford., *Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers and Torchbearers*, Indiana University Press, 1994.
10. Davis W. Houck, and David E., *Women and the Civil Rights Movement, 1954-1965*, Dixon University Press of Mississippi, 2009.
11. Adam Fairclough., *Martin Luther King*, University of Georgia Press, 1995.