

MARTIN LUTHER KING

A ROLE MODEL FOR PEACE



THE BACKGROUND

Slavery

The United States of America is known to be the land of freedom. For many, however, this has not been the reality. It is the greatest economy in the world and it has the strongest army in the world. It certainly offers endless opportunities. But it is also a country of great poverty and injustice. One of the greatest comes from the tradition of slavery.

Slavery was common all over the world in ancient times. Christianity slowly eradicated slavery in the West. It returned, however, after the Renaissance, particularly in the newly discovered continents of North and South America. In Africa, Arab and European slave traders made it a big business. Millions of black Africans were caught like animals and shipped to North America under horrible circumstances. Many died during the journey. In the South of the United States, however, an economy based on slavery flourished.

At the first census in the United States (in 1790), 757,000 people of African descent lived in the United States. 700,000 were slaves. Over 22 percent of American families owned at least one slave. Despite a ban on the importation of new African slaves, the African population in the United States grew to approximately 4.5 million by 1860. Some 90 percent of African Americans were slaves.

Black slaves were at the bottom of a caste system. At the top were rich plantation owners. In the middle were merchants, small farmers, and laborers. Slaves lived in housing provided by their owners. The owners also provided food and clothing. The quality of these basic necessities varied widely depending on the owner. The field laborer worked normally from sunrise to sunset. Ten or more slaves lived in a single room shack. African American families tried to maintain connections with one another, but that often became impossible as the slaves were sold like property on a regular basis. Slaves had no right to marry, vote, own firearms, own property, learn to read or write, possess books, testify in court against whites, or speak abusively toward whites.

After abolition

Slavery ended in 1865 with the South's defeat in the Civil War. Slavery was outlawed but was replaced with racial discrimination. Southern states passed new laws enforcing racial segregation known as *Jim Crow laws*. African Americans could not eat in the same restaurants, drink out of the same water fountains, watch movies in the same theaters, play in the same parks, or go to the same schools as whites. They had to sit in the back of buses and streetcars and give up their seats to whites when told to do so. African Americans could not nurse whites in hospitals.

In addition to legal and social restrictions, terrorism was also used. If African Americans violated Jim Crow rules, they could expect swift and perhaps brutal punishment, such as whippings or even death.

According to a report in 1919, 2,522 African Americans were *lynched*—hanged, burned alive, or hacked to death—between 1889 and 1918. Lynching was the most violent form of discrimination. Offenses the victims were accused of were usually minor, such as stealing a cow, attempting to register to vote, or speaking out for equality. Often there were allegations of sexually assaulting a white woman or talking back to a white person. Of course, many victims were innocent.

As prejudice, discrimination, and violence against African Americans increased, a call to action by their leaders spread. Their focus was broad including voting rights for African Americans, right to good education, better job opportunities, equal treatment as whites before the law in courts, and an end to Jim Crow laws. This was the situation into which Martin Luther King stepped in 1955.

THE STORY

The beginning of a movement

In December 1955, an African American woman, Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat in a bus to a white person. She was arrested for this. In protest, the black population started boycotting the transport system. This was the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement in the USA, which eventually led to the emancipation of African Americans, in spite of great resistance and violence from the white population. This movement was led by Martin Luther King.

The beginning of a leader

Martin Luther King, Jr. was born on January 15, 1929 in Atlanta, Georgia. Both his father and his grandfather had been ministers in the Baptist Church.

Martin did well in his studies. In 1955, he received a Ph.D. from Boston University, where he also met his future wife, Coretta Scott, with whom he had four children. King was ordained a minister in 1947 at his father's Church in Atlanta. Traditionally, the Black Churches were a space of freedom and consolation for the descendants of African slaves. They were important centres for their self-esteem and spirituality. King was also an active member of the executive committee of the *National Association for the Advancement of Colored People* (NAACP). He was a well-respected minister at the time of the Rosa Parks incident. His great gift in oratory, his intelligence and his courage made him the natural leader for the movement.

King led the boycott for over a year. Resistance was great in the white population. The situation became so tense that King was arrested, he and his family were threatened, and his home was bombed. But eventually the Supreme Court outlawed discrimination in public transportation. King emerged a prominent leader of the civil rights movement.

The inspiration

King's approach was based on the ideas of *Henry David Thoreau* and *Mohandas Gandhi* as well on Christian teachings. A trip to India in 1959 to meet the Gandhi family cemented his belief in nonviolent resistance and his commitment to civil rights in the United States.

Between 1957 and 1968, King travelled all over the country and appeared more than 2500 times to speak in protest against injustices toward his people. He wrote five books and numerous articles. During these years, King was arrested and jailed by Southern officials on several occasions, was stoned and physically attacked. He was also placed under secret surveillance by the FBI (the Secret Branch Police of the USA). This was partly because he advocated equal rights for Black Americans and partly because he wanted a socio-economic transformation that many suspected was socialist. In fact, he drew his inspiration mainly from the teachings of Jesus and the Bible.

Actions and reactions

On August 28, 1963 King led a great march in Washington, DC. This march culminated with his famous "*I Have a Dream*" speech at the Lincoln Memorial. More than a quarter million people of all ethnicities attended the event, making it the largest gathering of protesters in Washington's history. It was increasingly difficult for the authorities to ignore his message.

On March 7, 1965, a group of protestors attempted a march from Selma, Alabama to Montgomery. King was not part of this march because he had wanted to delay its start date until the 8th. The march became extremely important. It was met by terrible police brutality that was captured on film. The peaceful demonstrators were attacked by dogs, whipped with barbed wire and blasted with water cannons. These images made a huge impact on those not directly involved in the fight. The result was a public outcry for changes to be made.

King eventually had some political success. African Americans were given equal civil rights in 1964 and equal right to vote in 1965. At the height of his influence, King was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964. He turned over the prize money to the movement.

The movement moves North

King then used his newfound powers and prestige to attack discrimination in the North. For economic reasons, many African Americans had migrated from the South to the North. There was no official discrimination against them there, but they lived in separate areas (ghettos) and were treated as second class citizens. To educate themselves about the plight of African Americans in the North, King and Ralph Abernathy moved to Chicago's slums. Both reflected that the public reception in Chicago was much worse than in the South, the politics more corrupt, and the threat of violence greater.

At this time, the USA got involved in the Vietnam War. This was a turning point in the modern history of the country. The USA sent hundreds of thousands of young people to fight a guerilla in a distant country. When it dragged on and eventually led to a defeat, this war was increasingly criticized, but in the beginning, everyone was in favour of it. King, however, went against it. He was against war on principle and he saw the impact of this war on the country's resources and energies. In his April 1967 speech in New York City, King called the U.S. government "*the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today.*" His outspoken criticism of American foreign policy caused mainstream American media to question him. Until then, it had been mainly positive toward him.

A radical change of society

King got increasingly radical in his criticism of the economical system in his country. He wanted a government compensatory program that would pay back the money that the slaves had never received for their work. After all, they had contributed enormously to the American economy without receiving anything. He also demanded aid for the poorest communities in the United States and sought an economic bill of rights that provided for massive government job programs to reconstruct society. Critics called this a new brand of democratic socialism. In those days, socialism was very suspect in the USA. King called it justice.

King's death



Peace Role Models: Martin Luther King

In the spring of 1968, King went to Memphis, Tennessee, to show support for African American city workers striking for higher wages and better treatment. He was shot and killed on April 4, 1968 as he stood on the balcony of his motel there. He was 39 years old.

The assassination led to a wave of riots in cities nationwide, and President Johnson declared a national day of mourning in his honor. Two months after the shooting, a man called James Earl Ray pleaded guilty to the murder, although he later insisted he was innocent.

With an oratorical style that drew directly on the force of the Bible and a serene confidence derived from his non-violent philosophy, King advocated a program of moderation and inclusion. Although later generations would question some of his message, few could deny that he had been the guiding light for 15 of the most crucial years in America's civil rights struggle. President Carter acknowledged King's contributions by posthumously awarding him the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1977.



SOME WORDS OF MARTIN LUTHER KING

We have been forced to a point where we are going to have to grapple with the problems that men have been trying to grapple with through history, but the demands didn't force them to do it. Survival demands that we grapple with them. Men for years have been talking about war and peace. But now no longer can they just talk about it. It is no longer a choice between violence and nonviolence in this world; it's nonviolence or nonexistence. That's where we are today.

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Many of us think we find a sort of security in conforming to the ideas of the mob. But, my friends, it is the nonconformists that have made history. Not those who always look to see which way the minority is going before they make a decision; not those who are afraid to say no when everybody else is saying yes, but history has been made by those who could stand up before the crowd and not bow. The great creative insights have come from men who were in a minority.

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Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.

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We must learn to live together as brothers or perish together as fools.

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The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy. The true neighbor will risk his position, his prestige and even his life for the welfare of others.

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Freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed.



Peace Role Models: Martin Luther King

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I submit that an individual who breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust, and willingly accepts the penalty by staying in jail in order to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the very highest respect for the law.

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We who engage in nonviolent direct action are not the creators of tension. We merely bring to the surface the hidden tension that is already alive.

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There comes a time when one must take a position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular, but he must take it because conscience tells him it is right.

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Let no man pull you so low as to hate him.

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Everybody can be great...because anybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and verb agree to serve. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love.

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Forgiveness is not an occasional act, it is a constant attitude.

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People fail to get along because they fear each other; they fear each other because they don't know each other; they don't know each other because they have not communicated with each other.

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A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual doom.



Peace Role Models: Martin Luther King

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Love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy to a friend.

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An individual has not started living until he can rise above the narrow confines of his individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity.

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Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars... Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that.



THE VISION OF MARTIN LUTHER KING

Martin Luther King got his vision from the Bible. The African Americans have been particularly inspired by the image of God leading his people through the desert, away from the land of slavery, Egypt, into the land of freedom. King often used this image.

This vision is very inclusive. King didn't have much reason to think inclusively about people of other faiths, because he lived in a country where the vast majority is Christian. There is little doubt, however, that the vision King had for his people was open to all. We are all God's children and we are all being led to freedom. King never wanted this freedom only for his own people. As he said: Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. The whole of humankind is one. He could not exclude the oppressors from the happiness he wanted for his own people. Indeed, there would be no real freedom as long as some are left out.

The image of God leading his people through the desert is in fact an image of human life. It can be taken individually or collectively. But the land of freedom is not a place. It is not something you can settle down in. The land of freedom is justice, and absence of fear. King often deplored the silence of those who don't speak up against evil. He said: *Not only will we have to repent for the sins of bad people; but we also will have to repent for the appalling silence of good people.* To speak up demands courage. Only with courage can justice be established. This justice then extends to everyone. This is the vision of freedom that King had.

THE IMPORTANCE OF MARTIN LUTHER KING TODAY

Differences and similarities

Martin Luther King faced a very different situation from the one we have in Bangladesh today. In fact, the situation of the African Americans is unique. Nowhere else has such a great part of the population come from another part of the world to be used as slaves. No other modern country has shown such a contradiction between its ideals and its reality. There are some similarities, however. The African Americans were not allowed to mix with the white population or eat together with them or sit beside them in public transport. This is very similar to the way that low caste people have been treated for more than a thousand years in the Indian Subcontinent. Some tribal peoples of Bangladesh still encounter the same kind of discrimination today. As matter of fact, many groups within this country are despised and rejected because of their ethnic origin. In this way Bangladesh is not so far from the USA that Martin Luther King encountered. But Bangladeshis can also feel close to the victims of discrimination. In particular Muslim Bengalis are often met with suspicion when travelling or when residing in a foreign country.

There are oppressed people within every society. The African Americans were in the particular situation of looking different and having a distinct history. This is not always true for other oppressed groups. But the way that Martin Luther King led his people and inspired them can be of great value for people in Bangladesh too. In particular two points are of great importance to this country today.

Respect the law

The first is the attitude towards the law of the land. Martin Luther King respected the law. He honoured the collective dream of the USA, even though his people had been excluded from it for a long time. In this way, he appealed to the better part of their oppressors. He was saying: Your country is good, your dreams are beautiful. Let's make them even better, even more beautiful by including everyone.

But the matter of law is complicated. There are good laws and there are bad laws. Bad laws confirm and support injustice. These laws must be resisted. But they must be resisted with respect shown to the good laws, the ones that create order and justice. This is extremely important for any nonviolent movement against oppression.

Why is this? The human society is built on respect for its institutions. Institutions are for example the parliament, the court, the administration. These can and sometimes must be changed; but if the institutions are rejected or destroyed, chaos follows. In this chaos, it's finally the strongest that wins. That is the law of violence and brute force, the law of the jungle. That's why institutions, even when they serve injustice, must be respected.

At the same time, however, an institution can never make injustice into justice. That's why Jim Crow laws, even if they were real laws, couldn't be obeyed: they were basically unjust. By appealing to justice in order to remove unjust laws, and by refusing to cooperate with these laws, King followed the Gandhian principle: *never cooperate with evil*. He was also appealing to the sense of justice of the oppressors.

This is very much needed today in Bangladesh. There is a great respect for the law in this society. But in reality, are all equal before the law in Bangladesh? Is the same law applied everywhere? Are all our laws just? Is there any law that promotes injustice? How can it be resisted? How can good laws be strengthened?

Economic justice

The second point is the link between economics and violence. Martin Luther King constantly stressed that. He pointed out that poverty is a form of violence imposed on other people and that nobody can expect an unequal society to be peaceful. In Bangladesh, the concern for equality and justice used to be reflected in laws and customs. Until recently, it wasn't good to show off your wealth. Today, this modesty has disappeared. Under the influence of a global, seemingly victorious capitalism, it has become acceptable to be very rich in a country where most people are very poor.

In Bangladesh, rich people rarely pay taxes. They use their influence and their power to increase their wealth. It's true that they create employment and advance business, but who is the main beneficiary? Instead of solidarity,

there is hard competition for the little that is offered. Everything becomes a matter of money. Poor people don't have money to make a case when they are harassed; they don't have money to defend themselves when they get falsely accused. Powerful people in the locality – chairmen, members and others – can break the law with impunity. All things – corruption, greed and social customs – conspire to make the poor poorer and the rich richer.

This is an explosive situation. It creates resentment. Resentment leads to hate and hate to violence. When rich people feel threatened, they build walls. Communication stops between different groups in the society. Distrust and fear grow. In order to protect themselves, the wealthy spend much money on arms. With the same amount of money, they could make the poor less poor and create security for all. But fear and distrust block them.

Opportunities

Martin Luther King saw this in the USA. On the surface, the African Americans got everything they asked for: civil rights, the vote, freedom. But the majority society never wanted to give them a chance and kept them in poverty. This was the new form of violence. As soon as African Americans moved in to a neighbourhood, white people moved out. In the same way, rich people tend to live in separate areas of towns in Bangladesh. But Bangladesh is a country where most people still live in the village or have grown up in a village. Most people have similar backgrounds. There is still time to prevent the creation of a class society.

We are also lucky to have a functioning kind of democracy in Bangladesh. It may not function very well, but the structures of administration and government are sound. There is a functioning legal system. It may be inefficient, slow and imprecise, but it exists. These are great advantages. Martin Luther King used the same advantages in the USA to help his nonviolent movement for justice.

YOU CAN DO IT YOURSELF

What can *you* do in Bangladesh today? What kind of work does the life and action of Martin Luther King inspire you to do? Is it possible to do something? The first thing to do is to answer yes to that question – always. There is no situation in which you cannot do anything at all. Whether you are a student, a day-labourer, a teacher or an engineer, you can always do something to promote justice around you. There are three steps.

The first step

Begin with yourself. Think about the people around you. There are poor people, people from other religious or ethnic communities, rich people. Do you despise them, envy them, behave badly with them? *Stop it*. If you are a man, what is your attitude toward women? If you are part of the majority community, what is your attitude toward the minorities in your country? If it's negative, *stop it*. You can never be an agent of change if you accept and indulge in negative attitudes about people who are not like you. *This is an important work of peace*. It is perhaps the most important of all and it will last your whole life. But you can do more alongside it.

The second step

Do you understand the situation of the people who are different from you? Do you realize their difficulties, their fears, their worries? Have you ever thought about what it would be like to be in the same situation? Use your imagination and be emphatic. Unless you *feel* something for others, you can never do anything for them. But feelings don't just come. That's sentimentality. Nothing can be built on that. *Deep feelings are cultivated and nourished by information and creative imagination*. This too is peace work.

Now, think about the customs, the habits and the laws of the country. Are they just? Are they respectful of all the different people who live in this country? Which laws can we be proud of and which should be changed?

Next, think about the way money flows in the country. Is there any solidarity, are there any good structures that prevent injustice in this field? Is everyone getting enough? If not, why so? Who is benefiting most? Why?

Asking all these questions will no doubt lead you to discover injustices in your own country and culture that you were unaware of. *This analysis is important peace work.* But now you are ready to move into action.

The third step

Share with your friends and colleagues what you have found. Some will not be interested. Others will be. Form a group. Discuss what you can do. Don't make revolutionary, big plans. Don't start an organization. Just think about your locality, your area and the injustice you have identified there. Use the means you already have. Use your creativity. Try to involve as many people you can. Make the local authorities feel that they have a responsibility and give them encouragement. Be creative.

You can do it

Whatever you do for justice, even if it's very small and in a far away village, will add to the great stream of justice that can transform a whole society and change a civilization. Remember the two points that we can learn from Martin Luther King: that just laws bring peace, but there will be no peace without economic justice. By using these three steps, you can contribute to the new society.