UNIT 7: MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. : "I HAVE A DREAM"

UNIT STRUCTURE

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7.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit you will be able to:

- discuss the life and works of Martin Luther King Jr.
- explain the prose piece "I have a Dream" in its proper context
- appreciate and analyse the significant themes
- grasp an idea of the style of the prose piece

7.2 INTRODUCTION

In this unit, we will look at a speech delivered by Martin Luther King Jr. (1929-68). He was an American civil-rights campaigner and one of the most significant black leaders in modern American political history. He fought for the rights of the black people in America. The black population in America was severely exploited by the whites.They were not allowed entry into many public places and many **sanctions** were imposed upon them. King raised his voice

against such exploitation and tried to motivate the demoralized black population to fight against inequality and injustice.



Sanctions: bans of restrictions which prevent someone from doing something.

Discrimination: prejudice, bias or segregation.

He attended many protest rallies and delivered many speeches. The given speech titled "I have a Dream" was delivered by King in one of such protest rallies in Washington DC on 28th August, 1963. This speech called for faith and hope in the possibility that America would one day be freed from all racial **discriminations** and everyone, irrespective of race, religion and colour would enjoy real freedom.

To begin with, we will discuss the given text of the speech. We will then analyze the word-pattern and the important themes that emerge from a close reading of the text.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1. Which historical period did Martin Luther King Jr. belong to?

Q2. For whom and against whom did King raise his voice for equality and justice?

7.3 MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.: LIFE AND WORKS

As we have already seen, Martin Luther King Jr. was a black leader and a campaigner for **civil rights**. He dedicated his life to the mission of emancipating the black Americans from exploitation and inequal treatment at the hands of the whites. Now, let us have a brief look at his life and also at his writings which reflect his ideas about real freedom and universal brotherhood.

Martin Luther King Jr. was born on 15th January, in Atlanta, Georgia in the year 1929. He was the son of a Baptist minister. He was educated at Morehouse College and Boston University. He received his degree of Bachelor of Divinity from the Crozer Theological Seminary at Chester, Pennsylvania. He became a **pastor** in Montgomery, Alabama, but soon returned to his father's

church in Atlanta in 1956. As mentioned already, he played a very significant role in spreading awareness among the American blacks to rise up against racial discrimination and policies of segregation. He was greatly influenced by the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi and adopted the doctrine of non-violence as his guiding principle.

It was in the year 1955 when he first came into public notice as a leader who carried on a **boycott** of segregated public buses in Montgomery, Alabama. This boycott movement was hugely successful and as a result of it, the Supreme Court of USA abolished the unlawful practice of racial discrimination in public transportation. In another occasion, he organized a march of about 250,000 people in Washington DC in the year 1963 to voice his demand for racial equality. The speech prescribed in your course was delivered in that protest march. Between these two hugely popular public events, King also founded the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in 1957. King was a brilliant and **motivational** speaker and he was a leading figure in the campaign for racial integration and granting of equal rights to all sections of the American society in the late 1950s and 1960s. King received the Nobel Peace Prize in the year 1964. However, his adoption of the ideal of non-violence as well as his moderate approach to the civil rights movement was questioned by black militant groups. These groups believed in the **efficacy** of violent actions in order to attain their goals. His policies and actions were investigated intensively by the **federal** authorities of America. There were many who were opposed to his policies. On 4th April, 1968, he was assassinated in the middle of a peaceful demonstration in Memphis, Tennessee by a suspected white assassin named James Earl Ray. His birthday is observed as a public holiday in the USA.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q3. In which year did King come into public notice and why?

Q4. In which year did King win the Nobel Peace Prize?



Civil-rights: domestic rights, municipality rights.

Pastor: priest, reverend, clergyman, churchman or cleric.

Boycott: to avoid or reject the use or existence of something.

Motivational: inspirational, full of ambition.

Efficacy: effectiveness or usefulness of something.

Federal: a type of government having two sets of authorities– one at the centre and other at the state level.



LET US KNOW

Mahatma Gandhi, whose ideal of non-violence was adopted by King, was assassinated in a prayer meeting. He was shot dead by a Marathi assassin named Nathuram Godse.

King was a political activist and also a public speaker. He delivered speeches at several public gatherings held mainly for the political cause of freedom and emancipation from racial discrimination and policies of segregation. King's writings too had the same flavour of freedom and the call for unity amongst the blacks. Some of his outstanding works which carry this message to the public are *Stride Towards Freedom* (1958), *Why We Can't Wait* (1964), and *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community* (1967).

7.4 CONTEXT OF THE SPEECH

This speech was delivered by Martin Luther King Jr. in an important public event. On 28th August 1963, King organized a historic protest rally in Washington DC. This march was attended by about 250,000 Americans, both black and white. They had gathered in front of the Lincoln Memorial to listen to the powerful speech delivered by King. In his speech, King shares his vision of a future not too distant, when the shackles of racial discrimination would be broken and every American, whether a white or a black, would enjoy 'real freedom'. He expresses his **conviction** that the messages of friendship and unity would reach every corner of the country and all Americans would enjoy equal rights, irrespective of race and colour.



Conviction : confidence and firm belief in something.

Metaphor : figure of speech.



LET US KNOW

'The Declaration of Independence' was signed by the then thirteen colonies of America. It was adopted by the newly formed American Congress on 4th July, 1776. On this day, the thirteen American colonies declared their independence from the British

Crown. The signing of the Declaration of Independence signalled the end of British rule in America and the end of all political connections with Britain. Since then, 4th July is celebrated as the Independence Day in USA.

7.5 EXPLANATION OF THE SPEECH

Martin Luther King begins his address by extending a happy welcome to the audience who have come to listen to him. According to him, this demonstration would be the most significant one in the whole history of America. He goes back a hundred years ago when Abraham Lincoln, the great American President had signed the **Emancipation Proclamation**. He fondly remembers that moment which came with a ray of hope for the millions of Black slaves who had been so long treated with injustice and unfairness. But soon, King moves back to the present moment and realises that the situation has not yet improved at all. The Blacks still suffers from racial discrimination. He is still very poor in a country which has seen tremendous material prosperity and has not been able to attain a respectable position in the society.

King attempts to explain the situation with the help of a **metaphor**. He describes their act of gathering in their nation's capital as one of 'cashing a check'. According to him, when the American Constitution and the Declaration of Independence was written, a 'promissory note' was issued to every American, no matter whether black or white and it would guarantee rights to 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness' to him. But America has failed to keep her promise to the blacks. They have been given a 'bad check' which has come back because the nation does not have sufficient 'funds' or opportunities to accommodate the black population. King expresses his doubt regarding this lack of opportunity and calls for a united effort to demand for freedom and justice.

King feels that they cannot lose any more time. They cannot wait for the events to take shape gradually by themselves. It is time when the promises of democracy have to be fulfilled. They have to rise from dark corners of segregation and racial injustice on to the glowing path of racial justice and

universal brotherhood. They are God's children tooand, therefore, they deserve equal treatment with the whites. He hopes for a autumn of freedom and equality after this present summer of discontent and un-fulfilment.

King sees the year of their gathering, i.e. 1963 not as the end but as the beginning of the revolt of the Blacks. They would not rest content with **menial** jobs but would demand that his citizenship rights be granted. And till then, the nation would continue to suffer from this rude awakening which threatens its very foundation until the Black is treated with justice.



Menial : lowly or low-grade.

Astray : to go off the right track.

Motels : hotels or lodgings.

So far King speaks about what they need to do to achieve their aims, but now he moves on to speak about the way to do so. He addresses his audiences who have followed him on the road of freedom to follow the path of righteousness and not to be carried away by bitterness and hatred. This is where we can see how King sought and was influenced by the thoughts of Mahatma Gandhi. The freedom struggle must be carried on with dignity and discipline by following the path of non-violence. King dreams on conducting this struggle not with the naked power of physical violence but with the creative strength of the soul power. The re-awakened Black community must not be driven **astray** by their newly gained militant power. They should not distrust the whites. Not all the whites are against the blacks. This is proven by the fact that many white brothers are present in the protest rally. They feel that their freedom is closely tied with the freedom of the blacks. They have an equal share in the struggle for freedom. The blacks require the help of the sympathetic whites. With their help, King dreams on moving ahead in the struggle.

King then quotes a question made frequently to the Civil Rights activists by the Whites as to when the former would be satisfied. He immediately answers the question by citing many conditions. According to King, the Blacks would not be satisfied as long as he is made the sufferer of violence inflicted by the police. He would not find satisfaction in anything as long as he is denied access to the highway-**motels** and the city-hotels. The Black people must be allowed to move out from their ghettos and live in proper places. The Black child must enjoy a healthy upbringing. His right to opportunity must not be taken away by denying him entry into places which are so-called reserved for

whites. The Blacks living in Mississippi must enjoy the right to vote and the one living in New York must be educated with the knowledge of what will he get if he votes. King demands the fulfilment of all these conditions. Justice and righteousness must be allowed to flow into their community, and it is only then he and his fellow Negroes will be satisfied.

King expresses his awareness of the fact that parts of his audience have attended the rally after undergoing a lot of troubles. Some of his audience have been prisoners whereas some have undergone untold sufferings at the hands of **persecutors** and policemen. King regards these as 'creative sufferings'. He asks them to continue their good work in spite of sufferings because such sufferings which are inflicted through injustice are '**redemptive**', i.e. they would actually lead them on to the path of freedom and emancipation. He asks them to go back to their own respective cities and ghettos, with the hope in their hearts that the present situation of despair and misery would not last long.



Persecutors : one who tyrannizes or abuses.

Redemptive : something which frees one from sin or suffering.

Nourish : cherish or entertain (a hope or a wish).

Merit : excellence or worthiness.

Crooked : not in a straight line, bent or twisted.

King then announces his dreams! In the face of difficulties of the day, he still **nourishes** his dream. His dream has its roots in the glorious American Dream. He dreams that the American Nation will stay true to its dream. He believes the fact that all men are equal. And, therefore, he dreams that a day will come when the sons of the black slaves and those of the white slave owners of Georgia would forget the enmity of their fathers and would be united with the feeling of brotherhood. He dreams that states like Mississippi which are down heavily with the ills of injustice and oppression, would witness the birth of freedom and justice made available for all. He dreams that his four little children will be the inheritors of the American Dream. They would live in a nation where their worth would be judged not on the basis of their race or colour but according to their **merit** and character.

King dreams that the day will come when the state of Alabama, with its Governor always in a punishing mood and so plagued by racism, would see its little boys and girls, both blacks and whites, joining hands together as sisters and brothers. He dreams that the hills and mountains of racism and injustice would be laid low and in its place, valleys of freedom and justice would prosper. There would be no rough places and no **crooked** ways. Everyone

would travel on the plain and straight path to righteousness. Everyone would witness the glory of God whose choicest blessings would be showered upon all creatures of flesh and blood.

With his dream, King also expresses his hope in the faith that the day is not far when the ugly sounds of **discord** and exploitation would be drowned in the beautiful music of unity and brotherhood. This faith would keep alive their spirits when they decide to act together and face whatever comes in their way of attaining freedom from foreign rule. This faith would give them the confidence that they would be free one day. And on that day, all of God's children would sing in the praise of their sweet land of liberty. The song of freedom would be sung from every **nook and corner** of their sacred land – a land for whose freedom their fathers have laid down their lives. King realises the importance of this day in the history of the great American nation.



Discord : disagreement or differences in opinion.

Nook and corner : evey part of a structure.

Prodigious : huge or gigantic.

Terrain : an area of land.

Gentile : a person who is not Jewish.

Boon : blessing or godsend.

In the concluding stages of his speech, King calls for the sweet voice of freedom to ring from all over America. He specifically mentions a number of American regions like the **prodigious** hilltops of New Hampshire, the snow-capped Rockies of Colorado or the Stone Mountain of Georgia and many more. In short, he covers the entire physical **terrain** of the American nation. Let freedom ring from every mountainside. And when this song of freedom would ring from every village, every city and every state of America, then the day would not be far when people from all sections of the society, whether black or white, Jews or **gentile**s, Protestants or Catholics would be unified in their expression of thankfulness to the God Almighty for granting them the **boon** of freedom at last.



LET US KNOW

The great American President Abraham Lincoln (1809-1865) signed the **Emancipation Proclamation** in the year 1863. This proclamation freed the Negro slaves living in the southern states of USA from the bondage of slavery. This proclamation was made operative from 18th December, 1863 and it was supposed to abolish slavery throughout the USA. But, nothing of that sort actually

happened in the next hundred years. King delivered his speech to register his protest against the failure of that project to emancipate the blacks from slavery.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q5. What is the 'vision' that King shares with his audience?

Q6. Who signed the Emancipation Proclamation and when?

Q7. What was the promise made to every American citizen by the American Constitution and the Declaration of Independence? Has the promise been kept?

Q8. What, according to King, are the demands of the Blacks?

Q9. How does King intend to conduct the freedom struggle?

Q10. What does King mean by 'creative sufferings'? Why are they 'redemptive'?

Q11. What are the possibilities that King visualizes in his dream?

Q12. What is the faith that King speaks about along with his dream?

Q13. How will it help the black Americans in their journey to freedom?

7.6 STYLE AND LANGUAGE

"I Have a Dream" is a speech delivered by a revolutionary leader in a public gathering. King tries to inspire the black people to fight against injustice and exploitation. He, therefore, speaks in a motivational manner so as to touch the hearts of the people who are listening to him with awe and respect. As you read the prose-piece, you will see that King speaks in a manner which reflects his sense of urgency and desperation. His sentences are very **crisp** and heavily loaded with adjectives. The use of adjectives helps him to express the intensity of the situation. The present situation of the blacks is very depressing and

King's use of many negative adjectives adequately conveys this sense of **desolation** and despair. King also attempts to inspire the people to rise up against their oppressors. And he makes use of many inspirational symbols and metaphors to enable his statements to have their effect. At this point, if you go back and read the text, you will realize the power of his speech from the choice of his words.

Crisp : very clear, neat and decisive.

Desolation : unhappiness.

Two important themes of the prose-piece are that of freedom and justice. Both of these are equally important in the upliftment of an individual. Another important aspect of the essay is the emphasis on non-violence. King demands for freedom and justice for his people but not at the cost of human lives. He was tremendously influenced by the teachingsof Mahatma Gandhi and therefore he sought to attain his ideals of freedom and justice through peaceful and non-violent methods. It also shows King's concern for humanity as a revolutionary leader.



7.7 LET US SUM UP

This unit deals with the famous speech "I Have a Dream" by Martin Luther King Jr. You must have been able to comprehend the true meaning of this speech delivered by the Civil rights leader on 28 August, 1963 in Washington DC. We have cast a brief look at the illustrious life and works of this great American leader. We got to know how his entire life was committed to the cause of emancipating the black population in the USA from injustice and exploitation. His commitment became clear when we attempted to understand the context of his speech and then moving on to the explanation of the speech itself. King Jr. had been gifted with a great power of expression, as we can see from the manner in which he could enable the blacks to remember their history and the promises made to them about hundred years ago.

History is a witness to the untold sufferings which they were subjected to. King's sole purpose is to make his Negro audience realize the inequality and

injustice they are subjected to for this he has used choice phrases and expressions from important books. This helped him to add strength to his arguments and rightful demands.



7.8 FURTHER READING

1. Carson & Shepard. (eds). (2001). "Address at the Freedom Rally in Cobo Hall," '*A Call to Conscience'*
2. Carson & Shepard. (eds). (2001). "I Have a Dream" *A Call to Conscience.*
3. *I have a Dream: The Story of Martin Luther King in Text and Pictures* (1968). New York, Time Life Books.
4. King. "A Realistic Look at the Question of Progress in the Area of Race Relations," An address Delivered at St. Louis Freedom Rally, 10 April 1957.
5. King. "The Negro and the American Dream," An excerpt from address at the Annual Freedom Mass Meeting of the North Carolina State Conference of Branches of the NAACP, 25 September 1960.
6. King, "Unfulfilled Hopes," A sermon delivered at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, 5 April 1959.
7. Reston, James. "'I Have a Dream…' Peroration by Dr. King Sums Up a Day the Capital Will Remember," *New York Times*, 29 August 1963.



7.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q1: It was a significant moment in the modern-American political history when the black leaders led the American Civil Rights movement.

Ans to Q2: The black people who were severely exploited and discriminated by the whites.

Ans to Q3: In the year 1955, King first came into public notice as a leader who had led the boycott of segregated public buses in Montgomery, Alabama.

Ans to Q4: King received the Nobel Peace Prize in the year 1964.

Ans to Q5: The vision of a future not too distant.

Ans to Q6: Abraham Lincoln.

Ans to Q7: A 'promissory note' to every American, no matter black or white and it would guarantee rights to 'liberty and the pursuit of happiness' to him. There was no change and the black population lacked opportunities in America as equal citizens.

Ans to Q8: The Blacks would not rest content with menial jobs but would demand that his citizenship rights be granted.

Ans to Q9: The struggle of freedom to be solved not with the naked power of physical violence but with the creative strength of the soul power.

Ans to Q10: 'Creative sufferings' is the continuation of the black people's good work despite their sufferings which would lead them to the path of freedom and emancipation.

Ans to Q11: King's dream which has roots in the glorious American Dream also visualizes the birth of freedom and justice for all, in a nation where the worth of a black person would be not be on the basis of their race or colour but their merit and character.

Ans to Q12: The faith that the day is not for when the ugly sounds of discord and exploitation would be drowned in the beautiful music of unity and brotherhood.

Ans to Q13: This faith would give them the confidence that they would be free one day in the land for whose freedom their fathers had laid down their lives.



7.10 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q1. With what purpose was the historic protest march to Lincoln Memorial organized on 28th August, 1963?

Q2. What were the promises made to the blacks in the Emancipation Proclamation? How does King explain the present situation of the blacks?

Q3. In what words did King call upon the Black people to rise up against their situation? Explain the methods prescribed by him in order to conduct their struggle against injustice and exploitation?

Q4. What is the 'dream' that King speaks of? Explain the important points of King's dream for the American people.

Q5. State whether the following statements are True or False.

a) Two important themes of the essay are freedom and justice.

b) Martin Luther King (Jr.) was not influenced by Gandhi

c) Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation.

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