

TOPIC - Martin Luther King

EARLY YEARS

Martin Luther King was born in Atlanta Georgia in 1929. His father was minister of Ebenezer Baptist Church and they spent every Sunday listening to his forceful sermons. Segregation laws kept blacks and whites separate and supported whites in their treatment of blacks as inferior. King enjoyed books and had learned to recite passages from the Bible.

COLLEGE YEARS

King went to Morehouse College, one of the leading black colleges in the country. At first he wanted to be a doctor or a lawyer but he realised he could improve the lives of black people more by being a minister. He attended Boston University where he was introduced to a music student, Coretta Scott. They fell in love and married in 1953.

RISE TO PROMINENCE

He joined the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People) and in 1954 he became pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. In December 1955, a black woman called Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a bus to a white man and was arrested. Black leaders decided to organise a boycott of the bus. King was now President of the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) which led the bus boycott and took a successful case to the Supreme Court. He was arrested twice and almost lost his wife and child when their house was bombed. But no one gave up the protest and they won a great victory in the Supreme Court – all buses were to be desegregated.

INFLUENCES

In 1957 he formed the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) to mobilise the moral authority and leadership of black churches behind non-violent campaigns for civil rights. He was influenced by the German theologian Reinhold Niebuhr who said that evil could not be overcome by reason but must be confronted. The non-violent campaign of Gandhi against British Rule in India also inspired him. King and the SCLC wanted to bring the deprivation and indignities suffered by Southern black people to the notice of white Americans.

KINGS VOICE

Martin Luther King was a powerful speaker and his skilful rhetoric, moderate goals, courage and insistence on non-violence built a powerful coalition of poor and prosperous black people with liberal white sympathisers, including Christian and Jewish leaders. On the morning of 28th August 1963, nearly a quarter of a million people swarmed around the Lincoln Memorial in Washington. King stepped forward to deliver his infamous "I have a dream speech".

NOBEL PRIZE

The movement successfully forced a reluctant Federal government to enact civil rights legislation and to enforce it in the South. In 1964 he was awarded a Nobel Prize in Norway. The coalition broke up after 1965 due to the Passing of the Civil Rights Acts, the explosion of black violence in northern cities, divisions among black leaders and King's growing opposition to the war in Vietnam.