CONCLUSION

The history of African Americans in the twentieth century has been both old and new in terms of timeframe. It is old as it carries certain threads unchanged from the past, and it is new in the sense that there has been a struggle throughout the century to alter the situation with the hope of some positive results. The African Americans were brought to the English American colonies for the first time in 1619 and within a century were found generally in an enslaved condition.¹

Winthrop Jordan suggests, quite plausibly, that the enslavement of blacks was aided by the long-standing prejudice of the English against the colour black.² It was, however, the discovery of tobacco as a cash crop that made Negro slavery a pillar of evolving southern economy in eighteenth century. As an institution, Negro slavery might have died out by the opening of the nineteenth century because tobacco cultivation was becoming unprofitable in large areas of American South by this period. Yet, in 1793, Eli Whitney invented the cotton gin and put life back into the institution. Cotton was another cash crop and needed the same kind of steady, cheap and tedious labour demanded by tobacco. Slavery was reinvigorated. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it was considered almost indispensable on large southern plantations growing the staples of cotton, rice, sugar, hemp and tobacco.³

During eighteenth century, Negro slavery was instrumental in the creation of a wealthy leisured class of landowners in the South that could engage in the cultivation of intellectual and artistic pursuits. It was this class which, to a large extent, shaped the contours of the emerging nationalism in the English American colonies. True to its European heritage, it was influenced by the European Enlightenment and articulated American identity in humanistic, rational and positivist terms.

The American context, meanwhile, was a powerful opponent to slavery and racial inequality. From the very beginning, the settlers in the colonies, later to form the United States of America, were inspired by what they considered were their unique circumstances. America became a magnetic force drawing to itself visionaries of all kinds—people who found the settled societies too imperfect and were looking for virgin land on which to plant a more perfect civilization. It meant that contemporary European feudalism, with its concomitant doctrines of social hierarchy, the importance of a person's birth and inherited social position, failed to take root in the emerging society. The influx of settlers mostly from lower strata of society, looking to improve their material conditions, made wealth, and not birth, the arbiter of social standing. The abundance of large empty spaces, coupled with lack of adequate manpower promoted individualism and democracy as basic features of American civilization. As the situation emerged, moderate wealth could be acquired by any white, male individual with

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merit, hard work and the favour of fortune. But luck was never counted as a factor in success in America and the belief grew that anyone with adequate effort and merit could be successful.\(^5\)

These factors worked upon events in America in the form of diffuse and often unconscious assumptions but their force was strong. What caused a sudden and forceful statement of Americanism was the American Revolution or the war of independence from Britain in 1776. Since the colonists had to fight a people of the same "racial" or ethnic stock it was difficult for them to declare their difference except on ideological grounds. The Declaration of American Independence and the constitutional debates that followed were instrumental in defining "Americans" not in terms of a shared genetic pool but a shared body of ideas. It was implied that anyone who adhered to these ideas could become an American. This definition injected an ontological tension in the body politic which could not be resolved even by the twentieth century.

By making the constitution not only the supreme law but also the most authoritative definition of the country, the Founding Fathers hoped to provide an adhesive force that could hold the new country together in the absence of obvious ethnic or civilizational bonds. The process was carried forward in the nineteenth century through the creation of a nationalist school of history and works of artists and poets proclaiming the United States to be a trailblazer amongst nations toward a more just

and equitable world. But the very emphasis upon American exceptionalism, proven through adherence to a body of ideals, also opened the society to severe soul searching, at least in the form of religious and political reformers and perfectionists. The Founding Fathers had compromised on the issue of slavery by counting the Negroes as three-fifths of a person and providing for a ban on the slave trade in 1807. But their own ideals of equality for all militated against this arrangement. The cause of attacking the discrepancy was taken up by a group of reformers known as the Abolitionists. They were a minority and militant and disliked but they were also vocal, well-organized, persistent and therefore difficult to ignore.

The Abolitionists, by mid-nineteenth century, gained a powerful ally in the economic interests of northern industrialists requiring labour then tied to land by slavery. The Civil War, propelled by this alliance, ended slavery and theoretically removed the ideological tension in the republic caused by the acceptance of slavery by a liberal society.

In practice, at the opening of the twentieth century race relations were different only in that legally the blacks were now free; and that in their uninformed, poverty-ridden, and weak fumbling at independence there was not even an oppressive master now to call them their own. The white reactionaries were back in power in the South of the United States where most of the African American population was concentrated.

The Herculean tasks facing the blacks at the turn of the century included organizing and educating the community, obtaining economic viability, formation of a new identity and

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6 Joyce Appleby and others, Telling the Truth about History (Princeton, 1994).
breaching the white-only walls of Americanism to claim equality with other American citizens. Despite legal Emancipation, the law in most southern states had reverted to segregating the blacks in all spheres of life. A terror regime operated through organizations like the Ku Klux Klan, often with tacit support from the legal machinery, to enforce not only legal segregation but also socio-economic subordination on a racial basis as earlier.

In almost imperceptible ways, the situation began to prepare for change in the twentieth century. The Civil War, despite the white reaction that followed, had put the law on the side of African Americans. The agricultural depression in the South in the second decade of the century led to massive migration of the community's members to urban areas and to the North. This movement had a phenomenal potential of protest because it ended the isolation of large numbers of African Americans till then living in rural areas. By throwing thousands of blacks together in overcrowded and ill-maintained urban ghettos, it gave them a measure of their numerical strength while bringing in sharp relief their poverty and alienated existence.

Though the country seemed almost oblivious to the plight of blacks as it busied itself with two world wars, a catastrophic economic depression and European affairs, the leaders of the community debated amongst themselves the best approach to tackling the tasks faced by them. Three main approaches emerged from this intellectual ferment: the first, advocated by Booker T. Washington and the NAACP was to use the existing mores of American society to change the experiential context within which the community functioned before attacking the
intellectual one. Despite ostensible differences they were both gradualists. W. E. B. DuBois and A. Philip Randolph, on the other hand, attacked the inequity of the American intellectual tradition in branding the blacks inferior, as a priority. A third approach, symbolized by the Nation of Islam and the Back-to-Africa movement of Marcus Garvey, was of total rejection of America and Americanism. Together, they made the first half of the century a time when the masses of African Americans were made conscious of the position of freedom, individual dignity and equality of opportunity in American tradition and the severe injustice of their exclusion from it.

From the 1930s, racism began to lose one of its respectable allies, viz., "heroic science". Once the sanction of science for racial division of humanity became doubtful, the whole issue lay open to attack. Social scientists in the next two decades were the means of exposing the fallacy of the notion of race. From the 1920s itself, African Americans under the guidance of Carter G. Woodson, too, had been carrying on a steady campaign to bring out the historical truth about the contribution of their people to the creation of the American nation in a variety of fields.

The effects of the internal and external forces, related to the race issue, burst upon the national stage in 1956. By that time it was clear to any aspiring leader that the majority of African Americans were assimilationists. However, the constant protest advocated by leaders like DuBois, Randolph and Garvey promoted among the people the determination to fight for their American heritage. The internal debate of the first half of the community, the urbanization and ghettoization of large segments of black populace, the rising self-respect as well as
disillusionment and the doubts in influential sections of the white community about the scientific or ideological rationale for the continuation of racial discrimination determined the nature of black reaction. The changes in political environment made some sections of the national elite more amenable to the cause of justice for African Americans. The years between 1950 and 1990s have witnessed a more articulate, vocal and mass-based struggle for black rights. There were impressive results: Though the community’s African heritage was acknowledged, there was no more talk of going back to Africa either from blacks or whites. The African Americans have successfully asserted their American identity. All legal discrimination against them has been struck off the statute. Affirmative Action policies have been instituted to help the community leapfrog over the material effects of discrimination for centuries.

There can be little doubt that since the 1960s a sizeable black middle class has come into existence. It now constitutes one-third of the total black population in the United States. Since the mid-twentieth century, the number of black Congressmen has risen steadily. They have been elected not only from black-majority districts but also from white-majority ones. Poverty amongst blacks has declined consistently since the Civil Rights era. Their educational and employment statistics have also been showing improvement.

But the problem of race refuses to be resolved and gray areas of gloom continue to mark race relations. Despite

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7 Hochschilld, n. 5, blurb.
8 Carol M. Swain, Black Faces, Black Interests: The Representation of African Americans in the Congress (Cambridge, MA, 1993).
impressive gains, blacks rank near the bottom in all social indicators, like, education, income and housing. "Ghettoization" of the population continues even when later immigrants of colour, like the Indians and Japanese, are finding greater acceptance from whites as neighbours and life-partners. In fact, the second half of the century has witnessed a subtle shift from racial to a minority paradigm in discussing the problems of blacks. With the dismantling of legal barriers, blacks were expected to struggle and rise like any other community of immigrants in America.

Even in 1990s, however, racial discrimination still existed. In 1994, the Glass Ceiling Commission received 94,000 complaints of discrimination. Till the 1990s, even middle-class blacks found it difficult to move out of the ghettos and into the suburbs where the whites generally resided. Black households have had lower homeownership rates than the general populace since 1950. However, rates for these households had a major increase from 35 percent in 1950 to 44 percent in 1980. From 1980 to 1990, however, there was a 1 percent decline. Alabama, Mississippi, and South Carolina posted the highest black homeownership rates in 1990, at or near 60 percent. Forty years earlier, Iowa and Kansas had black owner-occupancy rates at or above 60 percent. Yet, in 1990, the homeownership rates for black households in this pair of states had shrunk drastically (39 percent for Iowa and 43 percent for Kansas). In 1990, there were seven states where over half the black households lived in a home they owned; six of these were in the South -- the one exception was Pennsylvania.\(^{10}\)

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Though the lower rates are not always due to racial discrimination but they are in a large number of cases. Even where racial oppression is not the culprit, its perception is strong.

The bone of contention in the 1980s and 1990s has been a far more nebulous area of race relations than the legal and economic discrimination of pre-Civil Rights era. It involves matters of perception and ideology on a much larger scale than before. For the first time, the whites are as strong in their perceptions of ideological wrong done to them by Affirmative Action policies as the blacks have traditionally been about the injustice of racial discrimination. Though most serious commentators agree that racial prejudice continues in America, they are divided about its impact upon blacks' standards of living. Many acknowledge that socially the whites may still be avoiding blacks but institutionally, in ways that matter, black economic backwardness is not due to racial prejudice. They decry the exploitation of black masses by the new black elite who increase their own power and influence by pitting the races against each other. This concentration on racial interpretation of all events expends black energies in fruitless and harmful ways rather than channelising them to more productive ends. The strengthening of Republican influence in the last two decades testifies to white perceptions that the Republicans are correct in blaming the blacks for neglecting internal improvement of their community. They point to the large number of female-headed households, out-of-wedlock pregnancies, high dropout rates in schools, high crime rates, widespread addiction to alcohol and drugs as proof that the blacks expect far too much from society without making
personal efforts for their betterment. Though there have been studies testifying to the long-term and severe impact on the morale of people confined to congested living conditions and constant denial of opportunities and improvement, they have found little popular acceptance. The battle has turned on the issue of merit. The idea of merit as the individual's passport to success has been as much a part of American folklore, of the idea of Americanism, as have been justice, freedom and equality. In opposing Affirmative Action and suspected quotas the whites have taken their stand on merit and felt that lowering standards to give a larger share of the pie to an ethnic minority goes against the American grain. American Dream, which has been the common person's understanding of Americanism, has involved only equality of opportunity and not equality of results. In this battle of ideologies no side is prepared to give way since white guilt which propelled the success of the Civil Rights struggle is absent this time around. The whites are adamant in their belief that if at all there is any exclusion of blacks from the benefits of being in America it is not based on racial criterion (hence there is no violation of American ideology) but on lack of merit (hence it is consistent with Americanism).

It is pointed out that like all ethnic minorities, they have also endured social and economic discrimination in America. However, they have proven themselves equal to the situation on the basis of their merit. However, the problem has some less obvious dimensions to it. While it is true that the Asian Indians have faced, and continue to face, social discrimination, they have another "in-group" to which they can look for emotional sustenance. Blacks, on the other hand, have no such
alternative "in-group" available. Their identification with Africa is more an angry reaction to the lack of acceptance in America than based on real memories. Second, the aura of success around Asian Indians has been created largely by immigrants who entered the country after the 1960s. The immigration laws were designed to accept qualified and highly-educated personnel on a priority basis. The high educational achievements of the first generation immigrants, therefore, were a function of opportunities available to them in India rather than in America. In fact, the performance of this community in areas of education and income has in a significant number of cases been better than that of whites. However, so far there has been no talk of their being genetically better endowed than whites.

The discrimination borne by blacks, on the other hand, has extended over nearly four centuries. It is unrealistic to compare these two communities simply because they are both "minorities" in numerical terms. The discrimination borne by Asian Indians, in its nature and duration, is much like that meted out to most ethnic minorities upon first coming to America. Though the colour of Asian Indians may have singled them out for worse treatment but in absolute terms there is no real evidence to suggest that the extent of digression from the usual was crippling. In a short time they have been able to acquire some positive stereotypes to compensate for the negative ones, the obvious differences of culture and ethnicity notwithstanding.

But in case of blacks, not only duration but also the distortion of the normal patterns of discrimination seem to have been stifling to an extent where they have caused a break down
of the normal pattern of assimilation in American society. For other minorities, material progress was the key to later assimilation but even middle-class blacks are acutely conscious of their racial heritage and the treatment it receives. Another striking feature of the position of African Americans is the reversal of normal progression of assimilated characteristics. While other minorities found it advantageous to cling to their ethnic heritage as the source of identity till materially accepted in the American fold, circumstances impelled the blacks to learn the philosophical mores of being American far in advance of opportunities for material advance. This has robbed them of a tradition and a history of which they can be proud and which can be the source of a positive identity for them. Even after Emancipation, therefore, throughout the twentieth century, blacks have been engaged in an exhausting battle on several fronts: legal, material, spiritual. Their harking back to Africa, even when they have no real memories of the place, Afrocentric visions and philosophies and efforts at a personal level to trace their roots back to Africa, are all unhappy attempts to fill the vacuum created by the rejection faced in America. For the African Americans are not an ethnic group in any real sense of the term because they have no separate cultural component in their historical heritage. Thus, they fail to fit either into a typically ethnic or a minority mould.

At the end of the twentieth century, African Americans have been successful to a limited extent in breaking free of the chains of their history. However, the success is mostly in the

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11 For empirical evidence of the surprising similarity in fundamental values held by the whites and blacks, see, Hochschild, n. 5, pp. 91-155.
material field. Despite their being perhaps the only group which shares so completely in the history and philosophy of the "original" settlers, they have not found social acceptance. Their disillusioned reaction at the end of the century in the form of Afrocentricity has been more successful in making the real "ethnic" minorities heard than in turning them into an ethnic minority. Black response to the issue has been vital in ushering in the idea of multiculturalism as the desired basis of social organization in America. With the ousting of "race" as a valid argument, the space has been taken by "ethnicity" and "minority-majority" models of interaction to study the black-white relations in America. It has been standard practice to point to Asian minorities as examples of "model minorities" who have utilized American opportunities in the economic field without threatening the political or social peace of the host country.

The total result of this situation—of continuing poverty amongst blacks and the perception of racial discrimination has given rise to a militant group identity. Whether known as a racial or an ethnic identity, the enhanced group consciousness has had definite implications for the situation of African Americans in America. First, by giving them solidarity and common goals, it has been responsible for concerted action. Ever since the Civil Rights revolution, the African Americans have shown remarkable capacity to organize and struggle for their rights as Americans. The legal equality and state support granted to them, like Affirmative Action, are largely a result of their unity whether organized as suffering masses or as a vote bank.
On the other hand, constant emphasis upon “race” as identity has caused the community to view almost all questions of minority-majority relationship through a racial prism. This often translates into tremendous peer pressure to jettison one’s views or sense of justice in favour of the group stance. As discussed earlier, the ethnicity of African Americans is negative in its nature in that it is based on a felt need to oppose something, in this case white racism, than on positive bonds of culture or language. As a result, black educational performance has declined in the 1990s in several areas compared to 1980s and has therefore lessened opportunities based upon education. In many cases it has led to a mentality of victimization which makes black youth cynical about any improvement in their situation in America. This prevents them from taking advantage of opportunities even where they exist. There can be little doubt that racial discrimination continues in America, often in the form of “aversive racism”, but the slow but definite improvements in the condition of African Americans cannot be denied either. The mentality of victimization, therefore, becomes a serious obstacle in the way of betterment of the community.

The minority paradigm, in place since the 1970s, has forced blacks to opt in other minority groups in their struggle for empowerment. Since they were equated with other minority groups, not with justice as discussed in chapter 5, they had to turn their cause from a racial to a minority cause. Though they have been successful in their objective but the entire exercise has opened a Pandora’s box. Other minorities, like the Asian Indians and Hispanic groups, have sought the benefits of Affirmative Action in a spiralling movement that can be termed a minority syndrome. In this case, merely being a minority
seems to give a group the right to national assistance to improve its situation and attack majority practices as subversive of equality for minority groups. As is clear from the current debate on the report, *Reaching the Top*, commissioned by the College Board, there are efforts to lump all minorities together in any debate on national assistance to the disadvantaged. The condition of Hispanics, in particular, cannot be compared with the African Americans since whatever injustice they may have faced has been outside the United States. Their progress in America can be compared with that of other immigrant groups in the past. As discussed in chapter 5, discrimination against new immigrants has been a feature of American society for long but it has not crippled the abilities of any group to finally find accommodation as has been the case with blacks. The minority paradigm, by forcing the blacks to join with other minorities, has diluted their own claims to national justice on grounds of their history in the United States. By forcing them to imitate the process of assimilation followed by other ethnic groups in the past, it has actually sharpened their race consciousness since they cannot base their ethnicity on any other ground except collective memories of slavery, victimization and racism. There is need for both African Americans and white liberals to detach the case of blacks from other ethnic minorities. That will address the fears of "balkanization" which can have no validity if "minority ethnicity" of the black variety and not "cultural ethnicity" of Hispanic type is made the basis for special treatment. It may also reassure the African Americans of national consciousness of their special case and remove the need for a constant focus on racial identity and racial unity, lest the nation forget the tragic violation of
American Creed written in the history of African Americans. If that happens, the cynical, negative edge of African American ethnicity can be blunted and its positive features will help revivify the American Dream for all Americans as during the Civil Rights era.

Hence, it may be a worthwhile proposition to understand the ethnic aspects concerning African Americans as a key to the understanding of their placement in American society. While ethnographers have been at pains to stress some of these points in the context of US, it may not be out of place to mention that recent violent outbursts in Europe (former Yugoslavia and surrounding areas) have witnessed worst phases of such ethnic differences at the end of the twentieth century. It almost seems to have become a socio-cultural evil that plagues the humanity at large.