PREFACE

The beginning of the decade of 1990s saw some monumental changes in the world system. The collapse of the Soviet Union and of the Communist regimes of Eastern Europe, which followed thereafter, had implications beyond the political arena. In the absence of the Communist or Socialist ideologies, which had held the diverse ethnic groups of eastern Europe together under Communism, the old traditions of ethno-nationalism rushed in to fill in the vacuum. They provided once again the basic principles of social and political cohesion and organization. The limelight on that part of the world, coupled with the legitimacy granted to any anti-Communist ideology in the West by half-a-decade of intense politico-military rivalry, ensured renewed popularity for such principles.

The revolution that occurred in the field of Information Technology at this time helped this popularity. By bringing the different parts of the world in unprecedented intellectual proximity, Information technology ensured that a movement in one part of the world almost simultaneously developed counterparts in another. In this way, the emphasis on ethnic identity and ethnic political rights spread from eastern Europe to other parts of the West, including the United States. It found an already brewing problem in United States in the form of its old “race problem”. The race issue between African American community and the “whites” in the country had already had a long and troublesome history. The politics of ethnicity added one more dimension to it.
The new developments were important in three regards. As the oldest persisting ideological dichotomy in American history, race relations became more problematic as African Americans began to frame their identity in still newer terms. The community could not distinguish itself on the basis of language, values or culture from the majority "whites" but it accepted with a new vigour differences based on history and socio-economic conditions. The new definition, though generally called ethnic, was different in its nature from the earlier definitions of ethnicity. Ethnicity had previously been accepted as a group identity based on homogeneity of culture, language, religion, and genetic stock within a group and its distinction from others on these bases. The ethnic identity of African Americans was different in this respect.

The African Americans form the largest minority in America. Through their sad history of slavery, and later through the courageous Civil Rights movement in the 1960s, they have generally been prominent in the affairs of the country, whether in a positive or negative manner. This fact has put the community in lead as far as struggle for minority rights in the United States is concerned. Other minorities either follow the methods developed by it, like the Hispanics demanding a say in formulating history curricula in New York, or they try to prove their "whiteness" by contrasting themselves with blacks, like the Irish immigrants in former years. In a country like the United States, which can easily be divided into ethnic minorities till there is no real majority left, ethnic politics leading to social tension can be a real danger. Prominent historians, like Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., have sounded the alarm against threats of balkanization inherent in such politics. In the context of the
United States’ present position as an economic and military giant such warnings may seem alarmist as economic interests are vibrant enough to counter nascent fissiparous tendencies. But history has been witness to the rise and fall of so many civilizations that it is only natural for historians to see beyond present strength to a time when stress on ethnic identities may prove divisive in the absence of the current economic-military supremacy. Future dangers, however, cannot erase the injustice of the present. The twentieth century history of African Americans has been remarkable in the way it mirrors the growth and spread of “modern” values of freedom, democracy and individual rights through the world and the struggles entailed in the process. The new ethnic dimension of the minority problem in the United States, a country founded as the first modern republic, is a continuation of these struggles. Any observer of the community’s situation must grapple with the dilemma of choosing between the values of national unity and cohesion and individual and group rights. The implications of this situation in the United States actually extend beyond its territorial borders.

At the moment, the United States has become the metropolis of the world in a very real sense. In this capacity it influences the trends and movements in places far beyond its borders. An Indian student of minority problems in a democratic society has a parallel to the American race problem in the problem of Dalits in India. They have been historically discriminated against like the African Americans; independent India has instituted a system of “reservations”, which may be compared to the Affirmative Action programmes of the United States, to improve their condition and bring them at par with
the rest of society. The recent opposition to such programmes in both the countries forms another area of interest. With the spread of education amongst the Dalits, the African Americans have emerged as a model for the literate. The strategies and attitudes developed by the African Americans can impact upon the thought and approach of Dalits and so need to be studied.

Ironically, Indians have earned the epithet of a “model” minority in America, which is generally used in contrast against the African Americans. In certain places, like Connecticut, the Indians have followed the African Americans in demanding the benefits of Affirmative Action. In most other places, however, they have carved a niche for themselves quietly in American society and have become prosperous. The two minorities provide a contrast which can provide useful insights into the workings of ethnicity in a plural, democratic society. A study of the racial problem in America is particularly valuable for understanding the dynamics of group identity and politics in polities structured on the foundations of the “modern” meanings of justice, liberty, equality and merit as already a vast amount of research exists on the subject. This material can be usefully studied to appreciate the various aspects of the problem as they emerge from time to time.

Against this backdrop, this study seeks to study the main tenets of the history of African Americans—particularly the challenges faced and the strategies devised—within the overall American intellectual context. An attempt has been made to understand the effects of the emphasis on “race” by whites and “ethnicity” by blacks upon the community.

The first chapter traces the historical evolution of the race problem in the United States. Though as Carl Degler has rightly
pointed out, the quantum of writings on the subject is formidable and leaves very little scope for *new factual material*, there is still need to understand the history of slavery to appreciate the racial or "ethnic" aspect of the problem in the present. The current stress on presentation and interpretation of American history, led by a number of African Americans, bespeaks clearly the importance of this phase in formulating the present identity problems and response of the community. While no one can dispute the role of historical scholarship in making race an "American problem", the continuing discrimination and animosity against the African Americans is proof enough that new view points and interpretations are still required to understand the nature of the problem in its totality. The chapter is devoted to a brief narration of the history of slavery as well as the possible residue of it at the end of the twentieth century.

In the second chapter, the intellectual or philosophical context in which the race problem evolved is discussed. The inclusion of this chapter is premised on the belief that the philosophical and empirical context is relevant in determining the character of an issue in a particular society. In other words, the same issue will evolve differently in different societies. This is also supported by the fact that Negro slavery's legacy to the Latin American countries has not been the same as in the United States. Though the countries in Latin America were also colonized by West Europeans under the same impulse of mercantilism, territorial expansion, and missionary zeal as the United States but with very different results. As Frank Tannenbaum has shown, Negro slavery in Latin American countries did not lead to the caste system of the United States.
Though scholars have disputed his explanation of the reasons for this outcome, no one has seriously disputed its occurrence as such. The chapter picks out the intellectual and experiential underpinnings of the American context as they apply to the race problem. No attempt has been made to follow a periodical or chronological timeframe. The effort instead is to focus on elements—both intellectual and empirical—which are unique to the American experience.

The third and fourth chapters discuss the situation of the African Americans in United States in twentieth century. The issue-area is large and though covering both material and intellectual developments, the emphasis is on the latter. This is due to the understanding that the latter is greatly implicated in the former. Though the history of the community in the twentieth century involved a quest for material improvement as well as for self-respect, equality and justice, oftentimes the former was advocated as a means to the latter. And even in cases where, as for the black middle class, the material quest seemed to yield results, the quest for equality and justice continued unabated. This was evident from the attendance of African Americans at the Million Man March in Washington, DC, in October 1995, cutting across class barriers. The fourth chapter traces the slow growth of an ethnic identity for the African American community, its impact upon the community and the wider society as such.

The fifth chapter is a comparison between the African Americans and the "model" minority of Asian Indians. Once the legal barriers separating the African Americans from the rest of American society were removed in the 1960s there was a general expectation that the growth tangent followed
traditionally by new ethnic minorities in America would apply to
blacks as well. By 1980s, there developed severe disagreement
upon the validity of this expectation amongst the academics as
also the general public. It was in this context that the Asian
Indians found themselves in favourable light as a minority of
colour, which had managed to live the American Dream. Their
success reflected on the “failure” of African Americans to do so.
The chapter explores the issues involved in such a comparison
since it impacts seriously on the perceptions of “whites”
regarding the situation of the black community and their
approach to it.

The method followed is narrative and analytical wherever
necessary, the scope of the discussion has been expanded to
include the insights and methods of sister disciplines, like
sociology and anthropology, in an interdisciplinary approach.

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