**Freedom in America**

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I moved to the US over 45 years ago to pursue graduate studies. It was an amazing and mind-opening experience, learning about and adjusting to this vast country – the world's largest economy and almost a continent unto itself.

America has been a country of immigrants from its founding. First came the Europeans and then the slaves who were brought forcibly from West Africa. Over the past century, immigrants from all parts of the world have arrived and settled here.

For most of us the story of assimilation and adjustment has been similar: learning one's way around, acquiring skills, getting a job and settling down. For the descendants of former slaves, however, the journey has been a lot rougher. Slavery was abolished in the 1860s yet overt discrimination against Blacks continued for several more generations - in education, employment, housing.

It was only in the 1960s with the passing of the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act that overt discrimination against Black Americans started to recede. This week the country marks the 60th anniversary of the ‘March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom.’ Several hundred thousand people participated. It is at this event that Martin Luther King Jr delivered his historic “I have a dream” speech. It is said this march led to the passage of the civil rights and the voting rights acts that gave minorities their due rights.

Since then, African Americans have come a long way in their quest for freedom and justice. Highly successful African Americans can be found in almost all fields of life from arts to music, sports to business, and they continue to make further progress. A sign of how this country has continued to strive to correct historical wrongs.

Yet, generations-long injustices cannot be wiped out in just a few decades. African Americans continue to be overrepresented in the lowest income and marginalized groups of the country. The legacy of historical injustices against Blacks are baked into many aspects of society.

Other minority groups, particularly Asians who are much more recent arrivals on the shores of America, have managed to excel professionally and financially become one of the most affluent ethnic groups in the country. At times, the success of Asians is pointed at to fault the lack of progress by many Blacks. Never mind the very different circumstances under which these two groups came to America.

Many Asians come to the US to pursue higher education. Some already with college degrees in hand, obtained through state subsidized education systems in their home countries or paid for by affluent parents. Clearly a very advantageous position compared to many low-income Americans who take out loans to go to college which remains a financial burden for years.

Many well-educated Asian-Americans have formed businesses that have been able to benefit from opportunities that were created to help historically disadvantaged communities, a result of the civil rights struggles led by Blacks. Little thought is given to how the path to their success was created through the sacrifices of those who came before them.

An egregious recent example is when a group of Asian students took elite universities to court, in an effort to rollback ‘affirmative action’ admissions policies that had been set up to help historically disadvantaged groups such as Blacks and Hispanics. Some Asians felt such policies disadvantaged them. Many white Americans had been wanting to reverse such policies for a while. In Asian Americans they found a group of willing litigants who did not have the burden of being historically privileged as whites are often seen.

A conservative-dominated Supreme Court ruled in favour of the Asian students and struck down affirmative action programmes in college admissions, which is likely to hurt Black and Hispanic students’ chances of entering elite colleges.

While there may have been issues in how some of the affirmative action programs were administered in the college admissions process, seeing Asians leading the charge to reverse such programs feels like a grave act of thanklessness.

When it comes to civil rights and freedoms, America stands at a critical juncture. All of us who immigrated to the US over the past many decades would be well advised to take stock of how the civil rights struggles led by Blacks paved the way for our success in America.

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