

BLACK POWER

Jewels in a Gutter

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The blacks in the USA, officially called 'African-Americans', are partly of sub-Saharan origin and most of them are offsprings of slaves. Some are, or descended from, African, Caribbean, Central American or South American immigrants. Their history in the USA began in the 17th century when their ancestors came to British North America in 1619 as indentured slaves and settled in Jamestown, Virginia. As English settlers died from harsh conditions, more of them were brought to work as labourers. In course of time, they were permitted to raise crops and cattle and be free of the Whites. They married other Africans and sometimes Native Americans or even English settlers. By the 1650's, several African families owned farms around Jamestown and some became wealthy too by colonial standards. Across three centuries, they passed through many rigours- of slavery, racism, US military conflicts and the Civil Rights movement. They presently are the single largest racial minority in the United States and form the second largest racial group after the Whites.

Only in the 18th century, the black slavery fully developed in the USA. Following the first Great Awakening in the 1730's and 1740's when a religious revitalization movement swept through British America, especially the American colonies, the first black congregations and churches were organized in northern and southern cities. By 1775, Africans made up 20% of the population in the US colonies, making them the second largest ethnic group after the English. In the 1770's, Africans, both slaves and non-slaves, helped rebellious English colonists win Independence by defeating the British in the American Revolution. James Armistead, a black African, played a major role in the 1781 Yorktown victory which established the United States as an independent nation. Other prominent African-Americans were Prince Whipple and Oliver Cromwell. By 1860, there were 3.5 million enslaved African-Americans in the United States because of the Atlantic slave trade; another 500 thousand African-Americans lived free across the country. In 1863, during the American Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation that declared that all slaves in states which had seceded from the Union were free. Advancing Union troops enforced the proclamation with Texas being the last state to be emancipated in 1865.

Their desperate conditions in the South that caused the Great Migration of the early 20th century, combined with their growing numbers in the northern United States, led to the Civil Rights movement from 1954 to 1968. The March to Washington for jobs and freedom put pressure on President Kennedy and President Johnson to ameliorate their condition. President Johnson supported the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 that banned discrimination in public accommodations, employment and labour unions. The Voting Rights Act, 1965 expanded federal authority over States to ensure black political participation through protection of voter registration and elections. By 1966, the emergence of the Black Power movement from 1966 to 1975 expanded the aims of the Civil Rights Movement to include economic and political self-sufficiency, and freedom from white authority.

On 1st July 2009, African-Americans in the USA, alias Black Americans or Afro-Americans, were 41.8 million, i.e., 13.6% of total population; next year, their percentage fell to 12.8 and their number by half a million. The US Census Bureau projects, the black population will soar to 65.7 million on 1st July 2050 and constitute 15% of the total population. Presently, one in eight US citizens is an 'African-American', the new name for 'American Negro'. ('Negro' has fallen into disuse for its acquired derogatory sense.) Mississippi State has the largest share of blacks (38%) and New York State (3.5 million) has their largest number. The other 16 States where they abound are Alabama, California, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Louisiana, Maryland, Michigan, New Jersey, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas and Virginia. They make up more than a quarter of population in five of these States- Louisiana (33%), Georgia (31%), Maryland (31%), South Carolina (29%) and Alabama (27%). District-wise, Columbia has the largest share (55%) of black population. Their highest concentration is in south-eastern States; the lowest is in the north-eastern. In Texas, they proliferate the most; their number rose by 72100, in one year, between 1st July 2008 and 1st July 2009. In as many as 23 out of 50 States, the blacks were the largest minority group; the seven States other than the 17 cited above are Arkansas, Delaware, Indiana, Kentucky, Maine, Minnesota, and Wisconsin.

Across the USA, 25.8% of African Americans were below the federal poverty line in 2009, up from 24.7% in 2008; 21.0% of them lacked health insurance, up from 19.1% in 2008. Of the 21% of US's children who live in poverty, about 46% are African-American. Across the USA, 44% of black households live in rented houses, but like jewels in a gutter, or as a Bengali saying goes, like 'lotuses on a dung heap', the African-Americans have excelled in

many fields, despite grinding poverty and racial discrimination. Literacy among the blacks is very high; 84% held high school diploma, 2.5 million studied in colleges and 1.5 million had advanced academic degrees in 2009. The annual median income of black households, that year, was \$32,584 and black businessmen earned \$137.4 billion in 2007, up by 55.1% over 2002. The number of businesses, owned by them, was 1.9 million in 2007.

African-Americans produced more than 250 black writers and academicians since 1773, when a woman of 20, Phyllis Wheatley published her 'Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral' which the first US President, George Washington praised. Another pioneer was Olaudah Equiano, alias Gustavus Vassa, whose autobiography, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*, published in 1789, contributed to the Civil Rights movement. The best writers on the blacks' poverty and backwardness have been blacks themselves, except a handful of white writers like Jack London and Erskine Caldwell who wrote on the lives and problems of the black. Some novels of Jack London dealt with unionisation, socialism and the rights of workers. Erskine Preston Caldwell also wrote movingly on blacks, in her novels like 'Tobacco Road' and 'God's Little Acre'. Among black writers writing about themselves, the most renowned was James Baldwin, born in Harlem, whose novels—*Notes of a Native Son* (1955) and *Giovanni's Room* (1956)—gave fillip to the civil rights movement. Some of the blacks were artists too. Novelist Tony Morrison, best-known for her three novels—'The Bluest Eye', 'Song of Solomon' and 'Beloved'—was given Nobel Prize in 1993. Sterling A Brown was poet laureate of district Columbia and a professor. William Demby, noted for 'Beetle Creek' (1950) was given a Lifetime Achievement award in 2006. Renowned among others were award-winning writer, Walter Mosley, Ivan Van Sertima, also a professor, historian, linguist and anthropologist, Frank X Walker, who co-founded Affrilachian poets and Stephen Whitehurst, awarded for excellence. Tony Morrison also won the Pulitzer Prize in 1988 and wrote the libretto of an opera, 'Margaret Garner' (2005). At the turn of the 20th century, writers like W E B Du Bois and Booker T Washington wrote on the black's dilemma, whether to fight, or appease, racist attitudes of the whites. During the Civil Rights movement, Richard Wright and Gwendolyn Brooks wrote about racial segregation and black nationalism. Today, African-American literature has become accepted as an integral part of American literature, with books such as *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* by Alex Haley, *The Colour Purple* (1982) by Alice Walker, which won the Pulitzer Prize. African-American literature reached its acme with slave narratives and for dealing with the Harlem Renaissance, African-American culture, racism and equality. The genre also incorporated oral forms, like spirituals, sermons, gospel music, blues and rap.

Famous black musicians, singers, composers and instrumentalists in the USA are well above a hundred; Paul Robeson, Louis Armstrong, Nat 'King' Cole, Duke Ellington, Whiney Houston, late Michael Jackson and Sarah Vaughan are world famous. Their ancestors introduced typically polyrhythmic songs from ethnic groups in the USA, which imbibed influences of polka, waltzes and other European music; later they saw considerable innovation and change and became globally popular. The influence of this genre on mainstream American music began in the 19th century, with the advent of blackface minstrelsy. The banjo's rhythms were taken up in popular songs by Stephen Foster and other song writers. The Second Great Awakening in the 1830's led to a rise in Christian revivals and pietism among the black; they performed a wide variety of Spirituals and other Christian music. Many of these songs were coded messages of subversion against slaveholders, or that signalled escape. The first musicals, written and produced by the black, debuted on Broadway in 1898 with *A Trip to Coo town* by Bob Cole and Billy Johnson. In 1901, the first known recording of black musicians was that of Bert Williams and George Walker. In the 1980s, Michael Jackson had record-breaking success with his albums *Off the Wall*, *Bad* and *Thriller*, transforming popular music, which eventually led to a revolution. Early this century, Usher and Beyoncé made a name in pop music.

African-Americans excel in sports too. In less than 50 years, they have become the dominant race in basketball and football, although they make up only 12.6% of the US population. In colleges 60% of male Division I basketball players and 51% of football players are black. Females constitute 35% of Division I basketball players and 31% of cross country-track and field athletes. From Jackie Robinson's time, a role reversal has come about. Black athletes emerged from segregated black leagues after World War-II and have become disproportionately represented in basketball, football, track and field, boxing, and to a lesser extent in baseball. Aspects of African-American culture are celebrated in the Black History Month of February, each year.

African-Americans have done well in US politics too, both in the States' and the federal. In 1989, Douglas Wilder became the first black elected governor. There is currently a black State governor- Deval Patrick in Massachusetts. Clarence Thomas became the second black Supreme Court Justice. In 1992 Carol Moseley-Braun of Illinois became the first black woman, to be elected to the US Senate. There were nearly nine thousand black officers in the US administration in 2000; next year, there were 484 black Mayors. As many as 2.3 million blacks were military veterans in 2009. On 4th November 2008, Democratic Senator, Barack Obama defeated Republican

Senator, John McCain to become the first African-American to be elected President. Next year, Michael S Steele was elected the first African-American chairman of the national Republican Party. The 'Black Firsts' in the USA also make an impressive list. The first Mayor of a major city, Cleveland was Carl Stokes and the first elected Governor was L Douglas Wilder. Hiram Revels became Senator from Mississippi in 1870. Colin Powell was first female Secretary of State, while Andrew Young became first US Representative to the UN. Three African-Americans won Nobel prizes- Ralph J Bunche in 1950 for mediating the Arab-Israeli truce, Martin Luther King, Jr. the Peace Prize in 1964 and Tony Morrison in literature in 1993. Gwendolyn Brooks was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in poetry in 1950; Robert Hayden was the first Black and Rita Dove first woman Poet Laureates. Daniel Hale Williams was heart surgery pioneer in 1893 and Robert H Lawrence, Jr. was the first black astronaut in 1967. Guion Buford became the first black astronaut to travel in space in 1983 and Mae Jemison became the first black female astronaut in 1992. Hattie McDaniel got the first Oscar in 1940 as supporting actress in *Gone with the Wind* and Sidney Poitier as best actor in 1963 *Lilies of the Field*. Jackie Robinson, a League baseball player, was elected to the Baseball Hall of fame in 1962. Four African-Americans won gold medals and two other medals in six Olympic Games, notably, De Hart Hubbard in long jump in 1924, Vonetta Flowers in Bobsled in 2002 and Shani Devas in 1000m speed-skating in 2006. The first black billionaire was Robert Johnson in 2001 and the first Miss America was Vanessa Williams in 1984. Matthew A Henson accompanied Robert E Peary on the first successful US expedition to the North Pole in 1909 and George Gibbs accompanied Richard Byrd in 1939-1941. Irving Barrington Irving from Miami Gardens, Florida, flew a Columbia 400 plane, named *Inspiration* around the world in 96 days, clocking 150 hours, in 2007. □□□∞