Title of Lesson: “The Soul of Music” – music’s role on Gandhi and King’s movements

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<th>Grade Level/ Subject Areas:</th>
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<td>Grade 1 to 3, Social Studies</td>
<td>20 to 25</td>
<td>3 to 4 days, 45 minutes each lesson</td>
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Guiding Questions:
- How did music and song affect Gandhi and King’s movements?

Lesson Abstract:
Students will learn about the impact of music and song on the Civil Rights Movement in the U.S. and in Gandhi’s life & his nonviolent civil disobedience.

Lesson Content:

Music and rhythm exists in the world around us. From our own heartbeats to the ebb & flow of ocean waves, it seems that there is an innate melody in all of us and in nature. Bernice Johnson Reagon once said that “music is in the air like currents; and in order to hear, they need the air moving through instruments …bringing song into hearing spaces” (http://www.bernicejohnsonreagon.com/music.shtml) Music has the profound ability to touch & move the deepest yearnings of every human heart. In the same way, music was instrumental in shaping Gandhi and the Civil Rights movements. It often represented the heartbeat and the core of Gandhi and Dr. King’s beliefs.

Gandhi was a political and spiritual leader for India in the early 20th century. He employed satyagraha, or “soul force”, and civil disobedience to bring equality and justice to the poor in South African and India. His efforts were inspirational to other liberation movements around the world. The formation of his nonviolent framework stems from the studies of different religions and philosophy.

To understand how music and poetry affected Gandhi, let us take a closer look at some of his favorite songs and prayers. Vaishnav Jan To Tene Kahiye was one of Gandhi’s favorite songs, which in English means Speak only as godlike of the man who feels another’s pain. The lyrics flow like a personal prayer and they have many parallels to what Gandhi desired and achieved in his life. It encompassed the vision he had for his spiritual journey and his people. For example,

“…shares another’s sorrow and pride … who regards himself lowliest of the low”

Gandhi embodied his compassion toward the untouchables. Considered the lowest class in the Indian society, the untouchables were people who worked in ignominious and unclean occupations. They have very few rights and were marginalized by the Indian society. In this
song the lines “speaks not a word of evil against anyone… who looks upon everyone as his equal,” correlates to Gandhi’s sense of fairness toward everyone, even his enemies such as General Smuts of South Africa.

> “Lust he has renounced … he has conquered greed, is free of deceit, lust and anger”

Gandhi abided by celibacy, or Bramacharya, for more than 40 years. It means to search after God and it “signifies control of all the senses at all times and all places in thought, word, and deed…it transcends sexual restraint, it embraces restraint in diet, emotions, and speech. It rules out violence, untruth, hate, and anger.” (Fischer, 1982, p33) Clearly the renunciation of such carnal desires fueled Gandhi’s soul force. This is also elaborated from the song’s following lines:

> “Whose tongue knows not the taste of falsehood Nor covets another’s worldly goods Who longs not for worldly wealth (or fame) For he treads the path of renunciation”

Gandhi’s personal transformation is not for his own pride or achievement. In the song’s final line, “…his generation to come will attain salvation”, this clearly indicates that the spiritual transcendence he sought was to liberate the oppressed and to create a just world for the future generations.

Another song that had impact on Gandhi was a Hindu devotional song called Raghupati Raghav Rajaram or “Song of Rama”. This was sung by Gandhi and his followers during the Salt March in India. This short yet powerful song translated into English reads:

> “Rama, the Lord of heavens Blessed is thy name Some of us call you as Shiva and some others as Allah But we beg you Lord that you bless us all”

One of the greatest achievements of the Salt March was its ability to unite the Hindus and Muslims to the liberation cause. The Salt March of 1930 was a nonviolent march to protest the British Salt Tax. Under this law it would be illegal for Indian workers to collect salt freely and they are required to buy salt at prices they cannot afford. Both religions evoke different forms of higher beings, but Gandhi was able to unite such opposing forces to a greater purpose. This song signified and represented a monumental moment in India’s history. It also reflects Gandhi’s various sources of spiritual enlightenment; he drew inspiration from Hinduism, Christianity, and Jainism.

Gandhi’s choice to follow asceticism was often misinterpreted as a renunciation of art and music. However, he spoke of how vital music was to his understanding of life. Mahadev Desai, the personal secretary of Gandhi for nearly 30 years, recalled in his diary a conversation Gandhi had with Dilip Kumar Roy, the son of a famous Bengali dramatist. Gandhi said that
Asceticism is the greatest of all arts and the evolution of India's religious life involved music. He recognized that art and music served as inspiration, and looked for inspiration from mother nature. Gandhi said, “have I not gazed and gazed at the marvelous mystery of the starry vault, hardly ever tiring of that great panorama? Could one conceive of any painting comparable in inspiration to that of the star-studded sky, the majestic sea, the noble mountains? Beside God's handiwork does not man's fade into insignificance?”

Gandhi also summed up the relationship of art and life in such profundity yet simplicity. He said, “art has a place in life, but art is not life. Life, on the contrary, is Art. Art should be subservient to life. It should act as its handmaid, not master. It should be alive to life and the universe.”

In sum, it is evident that music was influential in shaping Gandhi & his ideas. He recognized the importance of music and its ability to propel a movement and inspire the people involved. In the same way, music was also vital in sustaining and propelling the Civil Rights movement. “The freedom songs are the soul of the movement,” (Carson, 1998, p 177) King recalled. Many songs were adaptations of Negro spirituals that brought comfort and hope to the African-American slaves. Some of the well-known freedom songs were “This Little Light of Mine”, “We Shall Not be Moved”, “Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around”, “I’m On My Way”, and “Keep Your Eyes On the Prize”.

Music also has an equalizing effect in the sense that women, students, and children had the opportunities to be in the forefront. Dr. Clayborne Carson, the editor of Dr. King’s autobiography and his own writings, said that when people sang together during the movement, it opened the floor for different people to take the lead. “The leader of a group singing often changes,” said Dr. Carson. It was a safe climate for anyone to overcome fear and be courageous. At a workshop in the Highlander school in 1959, the Tennessee police broke in and hustled all 60 students to sit in dark corners. Someone started humming “We Shall Overcome” and soon everyone was singing too. Then one high school girl began to add her own words to the melody and sang,

We are not afraid, we are not afraid,
We are not afraid today
Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe
We shall overcome someday

Dr. Bernard Lafeyette, Jr., who partnered with Dr. King in the Nashville sit-in movements, claimed that “You know the movement is in you when you start to sing songs of your own.” Indeed the adding and changing of the song lyrics reflected the increasing commitment and convictions of the participants.

Music also had transformative power in changing the aches of the freedom fighters’ hearts to
hope and deliverance. King said in the opening address of the Berlin Jazz Festival that the blues “take the hardest realities of life and put them into music, only to come out with some new hope or sense of triumph”.

(http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=99315652). What once were songs of bondage and sorrow became the anthems of the movement.

Though faced with difficulties and opposition, Gandhi and King never wavered from their convictions & beliefs in nonviolence. Music and songs inspired the people involved, providing a venue for collective expression, and mobilizing the young and old, men and women, rich and old to one united cause.

State Content Standards:
NYC Social Studies Scope & Sequence, K-5

Unit 3: Families in Communities: Different events & people shape a community’s history (1.4b, 2.4b, 5.3a)

Materials Needed:
- Audio recordings of the Civil Rights Movement’s freedom songs (such as “We Shall Overcome”, “This Little Light of Mine”, “We Shall Not be Moved”
- Photos of Participants of the Civil Rights Movement singing and marching. Highlight the photos that have children or teenagers.
- Photos of the Salt Marsh
- Sound clips of Vaishnav Jan To Tene Kahiye
- English translation of the song Vaishnav Jan To Tene Kahiye
- Chart Paper & Markers.

Suggested Teaching Activities:
Activity #1:
Learning goal: Students will learn about the meaning of the Civil Rights Movement and the different songs associated with it.

Lesson Activities:
1. Students first listen to the recording, “We Shall Overcome”. Explain to students the meaning of overcome. Discuss with students what problems have they experienced and how were those problems fixed and solved.

2. Discuss with students that during the Civil Rights Movement, the problem that needed to be addressed was segregation and inequality. Explain to students that the song “We Shall Overcome” was sung by the people who felt unfairly treated.

3. Sing the song with the class. Talk about what feelings are conjured when we sang the song. Does it comfort? Motivate? Encourage?

4. Play the song “This Little Light of Mine” and let the students listen to it. Talk about how you feel while you listened to the song. Does it make you feel happy? Excited?
Jump on your feet?

5. Explain to the class that this was a song often liked by children. Ask the students if they like the song. Elicit reasons for their choices. Explain the meaning of the song to the class. What kinds of beautiful things inside each of us that can ‘shine’? Encourage students to think of one thing about them that they are proud of. Reiterate the meaning of the song after class discussion.

Activity #2:
Learning goal: Students will explored & learned about the song *Vaishnav Jan To Tene Kahiye* that inspired Gandhi.

Lesson Activities:
1. Students first listen to the recording, “*Vaishnav Jan To Tene Kahiye*” or watch the video clip.

2. Discuss with the students what feelings are evoked from listening / watching the song. Some responses might include: peace, hope, happiness, togetherness.

3. Explain to the class that the song is about characteristics of a virtuous person. Define *virtuous*. Brainstorm with the class a list of qualities of a virtuous person. Some possible responses are: kind, generous, understanding, treats everyone equally.

4. Show the translation of the entire song *Vaishnav Jan To Tene Kahiye*. Discuss with the students the meaning of this song. Notice any similarities between the characteristics of a virtuous person and the song’s description of a ‘godlike’ (virtuous) man.

5. Create a class poster that shows the good qualities a person should have. Ask students to illustrate situations where we can practice these good qualities.

Bibliography:


