

Communism, 100 years after the Russian Revolution

A hundred years ago, a group of Communist revolutionaries stormed the Winter Palace in St Petersburg to overthrow the first democratic government in Russian history. The new dawn they promised eventually became a nightmare for the millions of people who lived under Communist regimes. A group of European historians, in a book titled *The Black Book Of Communism*, estimated that 94 million people have been killed by Communist regimes around the world over the years.

This body count needs to get salience when the 100th anniversary of the Russian Revolution is celebrated next week. The Communist ideology is derived, on the one hand, from the penetrating insights of Karl Marx on the contradictions of Victorian capitalism and, on the other, from the violent determination of Leninist regimes to impose their version of utopia on feudal societies.

The common totalitarian experience of Communist regimes is ample proof that the failings cannot be ascribed to specific situations such as the military threat to the erstwhile Soviet Union. The core project was at fault. The few experiments with a more moderate version of Communism—in Yugoslavia under Josip Broz Tito or during the Prague Spring led by Alexander Dubek—were too insignificant to make a lasting impact. The liberal Menshevik regime in Georgia was crushed by an invading Bolshevik army in 1921. The spectacular collapse of Communism across Europe as well as the embrace of capitalism by the Chinese Communists destroyed the last remnants of credibility.

There are many reasons why Communism failed.

First, capitalism in the advanced countries softened its hard edges in response to the Communist challenge.

Second, the industrial proletariat that Marx hoped would be the driving force of historical transformation lost its political clout in economies where services became more important.

Third, the innate failure of planning agencies to replace the price system as the primary institution of economic coordination amid rapid technological change ensured that Communist countries lost the race for global dominance.

Fourth, hope of the emergence of a new socialist man driven by political commitment rather than economic incentives such as higher wages or property rights proved to be vacuous.

Fifth, the totalitarianism of the international Communist movement snuffed out all fresh thinking, and intellectual movements such as the New Left, Eurocommunism and analytical Marxism were treated as heretical.

This newspaper is firmly committed to liberal principles. Yet, we recognize the fact that any modern society needs a left to articulate the needs of the poorest. The liberal consensus that has dominated the world since 1990, and which deserves at least some of the credit for the most spectacular decline in poverty in human history, in what the economist Branko Milanovi describes as the biggest reshuffle of global incomes since the Industrial Revolution, is now being challenged by a resurgent nationalism in the developed countries. The working class in these countries has seen its incomes stagnate as industrial jobs were shipped abroad or lost to automation. This working class has veered towards nationalist parties rather than the traditional left to articulate its grievances.

In India, the left has become a spent force. Its Pavlovian opposition to economic reforms, its failure to grapple with the complexities of caste, its restricted base in pockets of labour aristocracy such as bank unions, its readiness to compromise with Muslim communalism in an attempt to oppose Hindu communalism, its loyalty to Stalinist methods—these are just some of the factors that have sent it hurtling towards irrelevance. It is no surprise that the vacuum created by the collapse of the Congress has been filled by the Bharatiya Janata Party rather than the Communist parties.

The political philosopher G.A. Cohen—one of the most interesting Marxist thinkers of our time—used the parable of a picnic to argue why socialism is desirable. He argued that most people would prefer to go on picnics where everyone shares in a spirit of community rather than one where there is competition.

The problem is that what is true of an intimate group of people need not be true of large populations. The libertarian thinker F.A. Hayek once argued: “... If we were always to apply the norms of the extended order to our more intimate groupings, we would crush them.” The same logic can be used the other way round—the rules of intimate groupings cannot be imposed on the extended order unless you are prepared to use extreme violence. That is the big lesson of 100 years of Communism.

What are the lessons the left should learn from the last 100 years? Tell us at views@livemint.com

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