

Russian Revolution: The promise of 1917

Why should anybody celebrate the 100th anniversary of a revolution that led straight to the Gulag, an oppressive police state and moribund state capitalism?

The short answer is that it was a revolution betrayed. Its emancipatory potential and its limitless promise were both squashed ruthlessly by the very party that claimed to speak on behalf of the people.

Well before the storming of the Winter Palace, the Russian people had been making the revolution. After the Tsar was toppled in March 1917, the peasants started taking over the landed estates and workers' committees sprang up in factories and in shops.

Directly elected councils of workers and soldiers, called soviets, took shape in towns and cities across Russia and soon became the real centres of power. Indeed, the Bolsheviks had no alternative but to promise "All Power to the Soviets".

Throughout the period, the people were more radical than the political parties, even the Bolshevik Party. As Trotsky said, "the masses were incomparably more revolutionary than the Party, which in its turn was more revolutionary than its committeemen."

Lenin was the only one among the Bolshevik leaders to have read the situation correctly, insisting that the time was right for seizing power.

Those heady days were best described by Yuri Zhivago, Boris Pasternak's hero—"Such things happen only once in an eternity... Freedom has dropped on us out of the sky!" And at first, the freedom was indeed glorious. There was a great explosion of art. Futurism, constructivism, suprematism and other avant-garde genres flourished in the visual arts, in architecture, in poetry. The poet Mayakovsky's slogan, "The streets our brushes, the squares our palettes" led to an outpouring of public art and sculpture.

Nor was the euphoria confined to the arts. As John Reed says in *Ten Days that Shook the World*, "The thirst for education, so long thwarted, burst with the Revolution into a frenzy of expression. From Smolny Institute alone, the first six months, went out every day tons, car-loads, train-loads of literature, saturating the land. Russia absorbed reading matter like hot sand drinks water, insatiable. And it was not fables, falsified history, diluted religion, and the cheap fiction that corrupts—but social and economic theories, philosophy, the works of Tolstoy, Gogol, and Gorky."

Social changes came thick and fast, many of them far ahead of their time. Equal status to men and women, ease of divorce, the legalisation of abortion, allowing a couple to take either the husband's or wife's name once married, sexual freedom, communal facilities for childcare to allow women to work, decriminalization of homosexuality, free education, and ensuring rights of minorities and ethnic nationalities were some of these far-reaching changes.

But it wasn't long before the slide towards despotism began and the state came down with a heavy hand on dissidents, including rebels on the left. As early as April 1918, a leftist newspaper warned of "bureaucratic centralization, the rule of various commissars, the loss of independence for local Soviets and in practice the rejection of the type of state-commune administered from below".

The power of the factory committees was whittled down, initially by promoting the trade unions and when the unions became too independent, their leaders were replaced by party nominees. This

was the beginning of the nomenklatura, with all important posts being filled by Communist Party appointees.

At every stage, workers opposed the increasing centralization and bureaucratization of government, but they fought a losing battle. The civil war was an excuse for the curtailment of workers' rights and at the Eighth All-Russian Congress of Soviets in December 1920, the Bolshevik leader Zinoviev admitted, "If we have deprived ourselves of the most elementary democratic rights for workers and peasants, it is time we put an end to this state of affairs." But that was just another empty promise.

Early 1921 saw an uprising by workers and sailors, known as the Kronstadt rebellion. "We fight", the rebels proclaimed, "for the genuine power of the working people while the bloody Trotsky and the gluttoned Zinoviev and their band of adherents fight for the power of the Party."

The rebellion was soon put down. The dictatorship of the proletariat became a dictatorship over the proletariat. The brief Russian spring turned into the long Russian winter.

There are many theories why the revolution went so badly wrong. These include the Menshevik notion that Russia was too underdeveloped for a socialist revolution; Trotsky's thesis on the impossibility of building socialism in one country; the civil war and foreign invasions; the view that the dictatorship of the proletariat would necessarily become the dictatorship of a new bureaucratic class; and the belief that all revolutions devour their children.

Nevertheless, the brief flowering of 1917 calls for celebration, because for a while, it opened a window to a whole new world, a world brimming with possibilities, pregnant with promise.

Yes, it failed.

Yes, the odds of success in so heroic an endeavour are always small.

But its promise is too precious to be left to wither away. What matters is the struggle, keeping the flame alive.

As Samuel Beckett said so pithily, "No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better."

Manas Chakravarty looks at trends and issues in the financial markets. Respond to this column at manas.c@livemint.com.

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