

Red dawn over India: the long shadow of the Russian Revolution

Some weeks after the October Revolution in Russia, which took place a hundred years ago this month, the great Tamil poet Subramania Bharati wrote *Pudiya Russia*:

The people are master of their lives,

Their welfare advanced by their own laws.

Lo! In a trice has it arisen.

This is the people's state they proclaimed,

So that the whole world might know

"Gone are the slaves' shackles, knew ye all,

No more shall men be a slave", said they.

Like a thunder-riven wall

Collapsed the Iron Age

Arise ye, the Golden Age.

Translations into English seldom do justice to Bharati's work. Regardless, it is not hard to see what the explosive events in Russia meant to sympathetic viewers from afar. For Bharati, this was the Golden Age after the Iron Age—when the workers of Russia would emerge from servitude in the iron shackles of industry and oppression, to a golden dawn of self-determination and freedom.

This was just one of numerous hopeful interpretations that subject peoples all over the world drew from the events that took place in Russia. All around Russia, from Turkey to Afghanistan to Iran to India, the events in Petrograd became a beacon of hope. With each Bolshevik statement about self-determination and liberty, nationalist movements all over Asia began to look to Lenin for ideological, political, even military inspiration.

What did the revolution mean to India, Indian politics and Indian political leadership? And how did colonial authorities react to these influences and interpretations?

Archives from the erstwhile India Office of the British government, now housed at the British Library in London, tell a story of confusion and chaos. Files once secret but now declassified tell of an imperial government in India stretched to its wit's end as the looming spectre of Bolshevism seemed to cast its shadow over the Himalayas at the greatest colony in the world.

File 1229/1920 titled "Russia: Bolshevik menace to India; anti-Bolshevik measures" is a remarkable series of secret telegrams, intelligence despatches and translations of Russian documents procured and translated by British spies and agents, dating from the summer of 1919. The series starts with a message from London to the viceroy to confirm that an "Indian propaganda bureau" was now functioning under a Suhrawardy. Presumably this is a reference to Shahid Huseyn Suhrawardy, later to become prime minister of Bengal and then Pakistan. Suhrawardy, a lecturer at the Imperial University of St Petersburg between the fateful years of 1914 and 1920, not only witnessed the events of the Russian Civil War first-hand, but also taught

English to Alexander Kerensky who was later overthrown by Lenin's Bolsheviks. This message ends with a fervent question of the viceroy: "Have you considered whether special precautions are required to prevent Bolshevik agents from entering India either by sea or across land frontiers, and what measures do you contemplate for countering propaganda?"

The rest of the file is a blow-by-blow account of the British government's frantic efforts to undermine any and all Bolshevik meddling in India. The question was: How were the Indians responding to these titanic events?

The Russian Revolution was arguably the last in a series of three "Asian" events that energized nationalist leaders in India in the years just before and after World War I. The Meiji Restoration in 1868 and then, to a far greater extent, Japan's success in the Russo-Japanese War of 1905 had become a source of great "Asiatic" pride for Indian leaders such as Bal Gangadhar Tilak. In the Marathi newspaper *Kesari*, Tilak wrote that Japan's victory had given a rude shock to the prevailing belief in Europe that "Asiatics lacked the sentiment of nationality and were therefore, unable to hold their own..."

The partition of Bengal added the fuel of outrage to the lambent flame of native self-belief. In India and overseas, a clutch of Indian leaders began to militate against the British government. Tilak was the foremost of those in India. In the early years of the 20th century, Jawaharlal Nehru mentions in his memoirs, "Almost without an exception we were Tilakites or Extremists." Violent anti-British revolutionaries increasingly became a thorn in the imperial side. So much so that in July 1908, Tilak was sent to prison in Burma on sedition charges.

Far away in Russia, these efforts did not go unnoticed. In an article published in 1908, Lenin wrote in his typical style of "The infamous sentence pronounced by the British jackals on the Indian democrat Tilak—he was sentenced to a long term of exile... this revenge against a democrat by the lackeys of the money-bag evoked street demonstrations and a strike in Bombay.

"There can be no doubt that the age-old plunder of India by the British, and the contemporary struggle of all these "advanced" Europeans against Persian and Indian democracy, will steel millions, tens of millions of proletarians in Asia to wage a struggle against their oppressors which will be just as victorious as that of the Japanese. The class-conscious European worker now has comrades in Asia, and their number will grow by leaps and bounds."

The British, then, were quite right in keeping an eye on Bolshevik plans for India. As late as 1921, a full two years after that first alarmed telegram, British intelligence reports still considered India the main objective of Bolshevik foreign policy.

Communism would indeed gain a foothold in India, inspiring numerous leaders, establishing communist and socialist political parties, and leading to trade union movements and labour mobilization.

The uprising of million of proletarians, however, was not to be. Communism was not to be the force that swept the British out of India. The Russian Revolution was ultimately not to inspire a revolution of the oppressed in India. Why was this so? A number of theories have been put forward by historians and other scholars writing in the years after Indian independence.

One suggestion is that Bolshevism simply became yet another political movement co-opted by the "big tent" that was the Indian National Congress. Writing in *International Socialism* in 1977, Barry Pavier cites the example of the Ahmedabad textile workers' strike of 1918 to highlight how establishment nationalist leaders co-opted workers' movements and smothered them.

Following the withdrawal of a plague bonus that had been paid out to mill workers in order to keep them in the city after an outbreak, workers in Ahmedabad went on strike. M.K. Gandhi intervened and acted as an intermediary between the mill owners, one of whom was Ambalal Sarabhai, and the workers whose representatives included Anasuya Sarabhai, Ambalal's sister. Indian politics, thus, appeared far too much like a cosy club.

"The workers' movement," Pavier writes, "was totally dominated by the bourgeois nationalists of the Congress... The revolutionary aspect—the overthrow of capitalism and the establishment of a workers state—appealed to them not at all."

Another suggestion is that there was quite widespread disagreement among Indian leaders about how to deal with Bolshevik interest in India. Should Indian revolutionaries seek to replicate the Russian Revolution, merely find inspiration in Lenin's success, or find some in-between route to freedom. As the memoirs of M.N. Roy, previously excerpted in *Mint On Sunday*, and many early histories of the Communist Party in India show, early Indian communists themselves disagreed on a Communist Indian response to British imperialism.

Third, and perhaps simplest of all, is the explanation that many Indians simply had no idea what was really going on in India. As M.A. Persits has written in his widely quoted *Revolutionaries Of India In Soviet Russia*, the Indians who perhaps best understood the theory and practice of Leninist revolution in the early years all tended to live outside India. It would be many years before communism in India stepped out of the shadows of the establishment nationalist parties and became a movement with coherence and strength.

Still, that is not to say that at least some Indians didn't find a way of putting the Bolsheviks to some use. The somewhat amusing story of Awadht Ahmed Hadrami, an Indian agent for seamen in Aden, can be pieced together from a 1923 intelligence file at the British Library. British authorities received a tip-off that Hadrami was a globetrotting agent meeting communist leaders in Europe, Indian revolutionaries in North America, and then sailing to India to transfer funds and information to his local operatives. Instructions were sent to the postmaster in Aden to open every single letter that reached Hadrami's address. Empire is nothing if not bureaucratic, and the Hadrami file is full of page after page of handwritten notes pertaining to each and every letter Hadrami received. At one point, Hadrami caught wind of the order and asked why his mail was being censored. He had nothing to hide, he said. So he was happy to have his mail opened, but could he at least be present at the post office when it was? The authorities seemed to agree.

Eventually, authorities realized that Hadrami had absolutely nothing to do with communists or Bolsheviks. His travels to Europe and America mostly had to do with business and with the purely humanitarian aim of checking on poor Indian sailors. It later turned out that Hadrami was a frequent target of harassment by competing manpower agents in Aden.

Sensing the red paranoia of the British someone had decided to get Hadrami into some trouble. They decided to spread a rumour that he was a leftist anti-national.

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