

## The legacy of the Russian revolution on the Indian national movement

The hundredth anniversary of the October Revolution in Russia, on November 7, is remembered as the starting point of the life of the defunct Soviet state, the origin of forms of Communism that are in retreat the world over. In the country in which the Revolution took place, in Russia, it is being downplayed, since memories divide opinion.

In the countries of Eastern Europe, the revolution is linked to the USSR, which curbed their Independence for half a century. While in states that had long associations with the Soviet Union, such as India, the Revolution marks economic connections with public enterprise, planning and autarky that are unpopular as well as Cold War foreign policy that many would like to forget.

Still, it is important to remember various aspects of the history of the Revolution itself, the emancipatory and liberation urges it generated in its own time quite independent of the future Communism its leaders would evolve. In a focus on all that would happen from the growth of Soviet Russia, the character and consequences of the Revolution itself are ignored: Not only the way in which the February Revolution and fall of Russia's autocracy and the October Revolution held together in an large Russian phenomenon, generating debates in Russia itself; but also in the outcome of that phenomenon for Russia's Eastern neighbourhood, from Iran to Afghanistan, India and China.

In this, in India, there is a strong tendency to downplay how the Revolution's course marked the way in which the national movement gained momentum towards the build-up to the Non Cooperation Movement — drawing stimulus and support from the Revolution. The tendency also downplays the remarkable ability of India's nationalist revolutionaries to draw in British India's neighbourhood into its own manoeuvres. Deeply nationalist in tenor, the tendency understates the global factors that contributed to the achievements of Indian nationalism.

The centenary of the revolution is thus an occasion to subject this tendency to critical review. In the case of India's engagement with the October Revolution, what happened was remarkable. The events played out against the background of the First World War. In the context of a global confrontation between the Entente powers (Britain, France and Russia) and the Alliance powers (Germany, Austria and Turkey), attempts were made by Indian revolutionaries of the Berlin Committee (associated with the revolutionaries Virendranath Chattopadhyay, Har Dayal and others) to find a way for furthering their efforts for the liberation of India from British rule, and establish a republic in colonial territory.

As a spin off, the revolutionaries Mohammed Barkatullah, Mahindra Pratap and Obaidullah Sindhi established a Provisional Government of India in Kabul with German assistance in 1916. This became a rallying point for opposition to British rule in India that looked to Ottoman Turkey's reforms as a frame of reference. The government generated a series of activities to generate endemic unrest in the North West Frontier in the region of Waziristan and the tribes who inhabited that area.

The Provisional Government of India repeatedly attempted to draw the Imperial Russian government into its efforts, but with little success. This continued to hold good, even after the February Revolution, although the war-inspired problems of autonomous territories in Central Asia (in the province of Turkestan and the Emirate of Bukhara) increasingly called such a position into question.

The October Revolution altered this state of affairs. Its leaders were sympathetic to anti-colonial movements, with Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, the leader of the Bolshevik party that led the Revolution,

firmly asserting that support publicly in November 1917. Mahindra Pratap found encouragement in Petrograd in February 1918, on his way to Germany. After Russia's departure from the World War in March 1918, the Bolshevik regime found itself the target of "interventionist forces" focused on its downfall and willing to assist anti-Bolshevik elements in the territories of the former Russian Empire. From its Indian armies, Britain contributed to such intervention in the Caucasus and Turkmen country in Central Asia.

A firm link now cemented between Indian revolutionary nationalism and the Bolshevik regime. By January 1919, a small group formed in Moscow to develop this connection, under the leadership of an associate of Lenin and Virendranath Chattopadhyay — the Ukrainian socialist, K. M. Troyanovsky. This connection developed further under the influence of Mohammed Barkatullah, who arrived as an unofficial emissary of the anti-British Afghan Emir, Amanullah Khan. After the somewhat inconclusive Third Anglo-Afghan War (May-June 1919), and the successes of Bolshevik forces in Central Asia under Frunze, the network between Barkatullah and Bolshevism gained strength, held together by radio communications between different towns and full scale participation of Barkatullah's supporters in sustaining anti-British propaganda. Indians became crucial intermediaries between Afghanistan and Russia in late 1919, when the Bolshevik emissaries N Z Bravin and Ya. Suritz arrived in Kabul.

Full-blown Russian monetary and munitions support now flowed into tribal insurgencies in Waziristan in 1920 — insurgencies that British forces found difficult to contain. The destabilization of the territory added to the impact of the Champaran and Rowlatt satyagrahas in British India, where post-war unrest was becoming endemic. Widespread acknowledgement existed in India of the "revolutionary" nature of the Bolshevik regime in Russia. And while responses were negative and positive, agreement existed that change of a radical nature was possible in world politics. A further source of support to the link between Indian nationalist revolutionaries and the Bolshevik state seemed to be promised by the arrival, in the summer of 1920, of tens of thousands of Muhajirs in Afghanistan, on their way to support Turkey against the Entente powers. Indian revolutionaries appeared on the podium of the Bolshevism international Congress of the "toilers of the east" at this time.

British authorities well understood this emerging threat in the context of the prevailing instability in India and mounted propaganda campaigns, taking severe military and intelligence action on the North West frontier. The public would see a profile of these activities later in the Peshawar Conspiracy cases of 1923. The implications of this gathering formation petered out, partly as a result of the divisive consequence of the actions of M.N. Roy at Tashkent during October 1920 — April 1921.

A decisive role, though, had been played by the Russian Revolution in the Indian freedom struggle, by this time. An overwhelming impression of possibilities of the imperial crisis had been generated — as well its emancipatory potential. The material threat of the consequences had been put firmly on display. Together they would be powerful inputs into the Khilafat and Non-Cooperation movements and the proper implementation of the Montague-Chelmsford reforms.

If, looking back from the 21st century, the Russian Revolution may occasionally seem to have led down paths whose value is disputed, its many aspects and histories counsel against easy judgment. India's early encounter with the October Revolution was one of those occasions.

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