

## From Lenin to Xi Jinping

The 100th anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution this month has passed without too much discussion. This is for entirely understandable reasons: The meaning of 1917 has to a great degree been eclipsed by the meaning of 1989. The more we learn about the revolution from new archives, or rescue it from encrusted Cold War histories, the more difficult it is for even the last remnants of Communist nostalgia to hold onto any idea of commemorating it in a celebratory spirit. The revolution had far-reaching effects, no doubt. The ways in which Bolsheviks acquired, and more importantly, held onto power, still repays study.

The avoidable human catastrophe the revolution unleashed is still something the world is coming to terms with. Due to recent historiography, it has become even harder to detach the subsequent history of the Soviet Union from the revolutionary moment. The distinction between Stalinism and Leninism has become harder to sustain.

But in so far as there is some discussion of the meaning of 1917, there are attempts to recapture the revolutionary spirit in its more metaphysical form, to make some nostalgia about it more acceptable. Forget the events, this view goes, look at the meaning. The revolution was at least an assertion of political agency, a small group determined to remake the world. Without a revolutionary ideal we feel disempowered as political agents. But Hannah Arendt made short shrift of reading the revolution this way. On revolution as an act of historical agency, she wrote, "They were fooled by history and they have become fools of history."

The revolution, it was claimed, aspired at popular empowerment. It turns out its connection with popular uprisings was tenuous. It devoured the very peasants in whose name it spoke. The revolution was no dawn of freedom; like almost all revolutions it led to an unprecedented growth of state power and coercion. But the last sliver of metaphysical nostalgia about the revolution is that it had utopian aspirations. The revolution may have had a millenarian element, but it was not an embodiment of utopia.

In fact, one of the lessons is that you can hold onto a utopian imagination only if it is detached from a revolutionary one; revolution is the death knell of utopia. But finally, some hold onto 1917 as a signifier of alternative possibilities. It may have gone horribly wrong, but to entirely give up on the idea of revolution is to be trapped in current horizons, where we cannot imagine an alternative to the current system. The revolution is significant on this view as keeping open the horizon of an alternative world. But the question is: Why do you need a revolution to keep the idea of the alternative alive?

But the invocation of 1917 is dimmed not simply because the Soviet Union lost the Cold War, as it were. It has been dimmed by another spirit: The Chinese Communist Party. It could be argued that the triumph of the Leninist party system has been in China. China also sees itself as having the good sense to hold onto Communist party rule, even as it opened up the economy. The 19th Party Congress has raised the question of the extent to which China is an alternative model, a competitor that makes us think outside the current horizons of capitalist existence. China is, of course, a competitor to liberal democracy, and as it grows more authoritarian, the tensions with individual freedom become starker. There is some debate about whether China now seeks to export its model. Richard McGregor, an authority on the Chinese Communist Party, wrote in *The Guardian*, referring to the confidence of the 19th CPC: "It (China) has always extolled the value of its system, but has never explicitly suggested it was something that could be exported around the world."

There is no question China seeks greater ideological legitimacy for its model. It will propagate it as a model to learn from. Part of seeking status is to have the success and legitimacy of one's

political system acknowledged. China perceives the normative subordination to which it is subjected by the West as a matter of affront. But there are reasons to be sceptical about the idea of exporting a Chinese model. For starters, Maoism was more explicitly an exportable ideology than "Xi thought" might be.

Second, it is still worth remembering that while Xi may place himself in line with Mao, in some ways the legitimacy for order in China is a kind of anti-Maoist impulse, the dread of leaders speaking in the name of the people, causing disorder. Third, there is a more acute historical consciousness of Chinese exceptionalism. Ideologies can be exported, models cannot. This is a fatal confusion the Americans fell prey to in thinking of liberal democracy as an exportable model. That adventurism weakened America. Models require preconditions for success, and it is doubtful that the Chinese believe the conditions that made the Chinese Communist Party what it is can be easily replicated.

Fourth and finally, the Soviet-American competition was more explicitly an ideological competition, in a way that Sino-American competition, despite having some ideological elements, is not. And the nature of the economic relationship between China and the West is of a different kind.

But there might be a deeper reason to think why there are limits to China as an alternative. And these limits go back to thinking of the idea of revolution. In some ways, if there is a big lesson from recent Chinese history and self-understanding, it is just this: That the revolutionary spirit needs to be buried. Deng was a far-reaching reformer. But everything he and his successors did was predicated on an anti-revolutionary sensibility: Avoiding convulsive change, avoiding universalistic pretensions, a suspicion of political agency, pragmatism about institutional choices, improvisation in terms of the balance of freedom and control needed to retain power, the projection of continuity over change.

If the spirit of 1917 was buried, it was not just because capitalism with all its warts proved more enduring than Soviet-style socialism, or that liberal democracy became the only alternative. Ironically, 1917 has been buried, and the scepticism of revolution has been furthered even more powerfully by that Leninist Party: The Chinese Communist Party.

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## 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](mailto:views@livemint.com)*

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## Fusing Confucius and Karl Marx

Getty images

It was a dramatic morning on October 25, when Xi Jinping, General Secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) and the country's President, introduced the new leadership line-up that would steer China's destiny for the next five years. There was an air of optimism in the Great Hall of the People, when Mr. Xi introduced to the world his six fellow travellers who would form the Standing Committee of the Politburo.

The Standing Committee is on the top of China's leadership tree. As soon as the ceremony was over, a jet plane with all the seven members on board headed for Shanghai. Once in China's commercial capital, the team, including Li Keqiang, Li Zhanshu, Wang Yang, Wang Huning, Han Zheng and Zhou Leji, travelled to the city's Xintiandi area.

Xintiandi, whose name translates as "new heaven and earth", is usually a crowded place. China's new leadership was visiting this zone on a special mission. They headed straight to its well-known museum. Housed in an elegant grey brick building, in the tree-lined former French concession, this is the birthplace of the CPC. In 1921, Mao Zedong and 12 other delegates met secretly in the building, representing the 57 members of the nascent party. Now, in the same structure, China's new Standing Committee took its well-publicised oath. They were making it unambiguous to the world that time and money had not diluted the CPC's abiding allegiance to its 'red roots'.

A video clip posted by China Central Television showed President Xi leading the oath-taking ceremony. Behind him, standing in a row, the six dark-suited men, facing a hammer and sickle replica, repeated the oath: "It is my will to join the Chinese Communist Party... carry out the party's decisions, strictly observe party discipline, guard party secrets, be loyal to the party... be ready at all times to sacrifice my all for the party and the people, and never betray the party."

Later, the state broadcaster showed the leaders strolling in the compound. A poster on a big hoarding behind them read: "Raise high the flag of the Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese characteristics for a New Era. Stay true to the original aspiration and keep the mission firmly in mind."

The group then left for the South Lake in the neighbouring Zhejiang Province, where they gathered in the replica of the 'Red Boat', in which the founding members of the CPC had escaped, after the police had stormed into their meeting in Shanghai. In his speech, Mr. Xi said: "The tiny red boat that carried the nation's hopes 96 years ago has become a giant ship that carries the hopes of over 1.3 billion Chinese people."

### Party fundamentals

President Xi's emphatic focus on party fundamentals contrasts his first term in office. Soon after the 18th Party Congress in 2012, Mr. Xi had left for Shenzhen, the cradle of China's economic reforms. There, he placed a wreath at the bronze statue of former leader Deng Xiaoping, signalling China's focus on market-friendly reforms. But much has changed in the last five years. In a novel experiment, Mr. Xi is fusing Confucius and Marx to realise "advanced socialism" by 2050.

"No leader in the history of the People's Republic has so emphasised the importance of Chinese traditional culture as Xi. Yet, he is adamant in preserving a Marxist outlook in modern China," writes Eric X. Li, a political scientist based in Shanghai, in the *South China Morning Post*. He raises a pertinent question: "Can we weave together a coherent narrative that absorbs modern

Marxism into 5,000 years of China's heritage?" Only time will tell.

***Can China under President Xi Jinping weave together a coherent narrative that absorbs modern Marxism into 5,000 years of the country's heritage?***

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## 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](mailto:manas.c@livemint.com).*

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## The varied legacy of Russia's October revolution

In this photo taken in Oct. 1917, provided by Russian State Documentary Film and Photo Archive, Russian State Documentary Film and Photo Archive, armed soldiers carry a banner reading 'Communism' march along Nikolskaya street towards the Kremlin Wall in Moscow, Russia. The 1917 Bolshevik Revolution was long before the digital revolution allowed anyone to instantly document events, but the clumsy cameras of the time still caught some images that capture the period's drama. (Russian State Documentary Film and Photo Archive via AP)

A century ago, on November 7, [the world was shaken by a revolution in Russia](#). Public recollection on the centenary has been scanty in India thus far, perhaps out of the fear that remembering the Russian Revolution is tantamount to endorsing its outcomes. But that would be a sentimental approach to history. Historical events are to be evaluated in terms of their consequences.

Most of it horrific

There is no gainsaying that the revolution in Russia was momentous (*Picture, taken in October 1917, shows armed soldiers, with a banner reading 'Communism', marching on Nikolskaya street towards the Kremlin Wall in Moscow*). However, if we are to think of a legacy we might say that it has been both horrific and benign, much of it having been horrific for the people of Russia and some of it benign for the rest of the world. After a brief interregnum of endless possibilities in the early 1920s, the vacuum created by the death of Lenin was taken advantage of by Josef Stalin to assume power. For the next three decades, his role was not unlike that of the Tsar who had been deposed. The opposition was annihilated, labour camps for dissidents established, the free press disbanded and the peasantry dispossessed.

Among the nationalities, the Ukrainians who had once dreamt of independence were suppressed. The method was not just ruthless, it was innovative. Upon Stalin's orders, grain was shipped out of their country to the rest of the Soviet Union, causing famine and deaths. A people were crushed. What the Ukrainians faced as a people was the treatment meted out to individual Russians who opposed the dictator. Termed 'enemies of the people', they were stripped of all human agency when they were not marched off to Siberia. There among the tasks assigned to them would be to work nickel mines with their bare hands in sub-zero temperature. In a history reminiscent of the Third Reich, gypsies, Jews and homosexuals found themselves in Stalin's labour camps, the only difference being that Hitler had reserved a place also for the communists in his.

It may be said that some of Stalin's actions were no different from those of the European regimes in their colonies. While this is indeed correct, the colonial powers had not come into being promising emancipation of the oppressed. Churchill may have sucked grain out of Bengal thus tipping it into famine, but then he was unabashedly racist. On the other hand, the communist movement that eventually gave birth to the Russian Revolution was premised on the promise of power to the people. Instead, under Stalin, it gave rise to a bureaucracy, the rationale of which was to maintain the regime perpetrated by the communist party.

Despite the avowedly internationalist stance of the Comintern, Stalin was not sympathetic to the Indian national movement, painting it as bourgeois in character. It is odd therefore that the Communist Party of India chose to support the British government during the Quit India movement launched by the Congress, ostensibly on grounds that an Allied Victory held out greater prospects for Indian independence. Perhaps they were unaware of Churchill's speech in the House of

Commons in 1942: "I have not become the King's First Minister in order to preside over the liquidation of the British Empire...." Or perhaps the Indian communists just chose to follow their captain, who having once signed a non-aggression pact with Hitler, was later to fall out with him.

## Sets of reforms

After the death of Stalin, the former Soviet Union went through two rounds of reforms. The first was under Khrushchev and the other under Gorbachev. Following the latter, the country imploded and we are now left with Russia alone, most of the republics having gone their own way. The diminution of the former Soviet Union is of lesser importance than the fact that the political climate in what remains of its core, namely Russia, did not change.

It is moot whether the Russia under Vladimir Putin today is a major change from the Russia under the Romanovs. A once-proud civilisation is now ruled by a former secret-service agent. Mr. Putin represents the very spirit that the revolution had tried to expunge, a reactionary combination of nativism and authoritarianism. He was able to rise to power due to Soviet communism's success in preventing the creation of a free and vibrant civil society. At the ending of the former Soviet Union, the only free agents around were the communist apparatchiks and the crime syndicate. Together they divided the assets of the country built by the toil of the Russian people. This is the tragedy of the Russian Revolution.

While the very people whom it was meant to serve suffered unimaginably in the cataclysmic events in the former Soviet Union, elsewhere in the world there were to be benign consequences. Of these, the rise of social democracies across Europe. In their 'Communist Manifesto' Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels had written: "A spectre is haunting Europe, the spectre of communism." While they may have been right when they wrote this, it was a while before the vision could have an effect. It took the Russian Revolution to bring home to the ruling classes of Europe the urgency of making concessions to workers, and that too only after the Second World War and the consequent incorporation of almost half of Europe into a Soviet bloc. These took the form of the public provision of health, education and housing. Underlying this is the brilliant Marxian construction that all value is created by labour, entitling them to a larger share of the surplus than the bare necessities for their reproduction. Europe's social democracies have combined prosperity and freedom, and provided an alternative to raw American capitalism and repressive Soviet communism. They have also demonstrated an imaginative response to the ecological constraint on mankind, something that the communist model was incapable of imagining.

The other consequence of the Russian Revolution was for Europe's colonies. While Stalin's initiatives for ending colonialism were notably absent, the early communist movement had a global ambition aiming for the emancipation of all subject peoples. This was to have an impact on India. Though the communists never had a hold on the British working classes, the latter supported the revolution in Russia as did the British Labour party, which drew its support from the workers. It was natural that its commitment to socialism would extend to Indian independence. The Labour Party was to redeem its pledge. Winning the elections after the Second World War, the party withdrew British rule from India. Though the subsequent return to power of the Conservative Party under Churchill was to, predictably, delay the decolonisation process, Indian independence had a domino effect on Europe's colonial possessions.

To end on a more mundane note, for almost three decades after Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin, India enjoyed warm relations with the former Soviet Union. We received loans and other forms of economic assistance and political support in a notoriously partisan UN Security Council. An aspect of the former was the rupee-rouble trade whereby the Soviet Union accepted payment in rupees in exchange for vital goods needed by India, including defence equipment, oil and fertilizer. This mattered for the economy, for otherwise hard currency would have had to be earned

on the international market before these goods could be had.

After the collapse of the former Soviet Union, its erstwhile republics lost their confidence and India's power elites turned the country westward for approbation. And a brief moment in history, when a rare friendship between diverse peoples had flourished, evaporated into thin air.

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## Lessons of October

November 7, 2017 marks the anniversary and completion of the observation of the centenary of the great October socialist revolution that took place in Russia in 1917. As Marx and Engels predicted in the Communist Manifesto, the ruling classes trembled at the outbreak of the revolution. The proletariat and the peasantry captured political power for the first time in human history with a revolutionary historic optimism: They had “nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win”.

There are going to be many histories of the October Revolution. There can be a history of the Revolution from the point of view of its successes and achievements. There can also be a history from the point of view of the failure of Soviet socialism. There can also be a history of Marxist theory of socialist revolution and socialist construction.

The history of the 20th century cannot be written without a central role for the October Revolution. It is also the extraordinary story of a country by the name of Russia rising from being a poor agrarian country to become a military-industrial powerhouse in a very short period. Thus, it can be the history of the Russian people and their heroism, sacrifices and suffering of a magnitude unknown in history. There are also scholars who wish to study the October Revolution in its centenary year as the history of a great defeat. However, facts do not favour them.

The idea of the October Revolution was so powerful that it instantly caught hold of the imagination of the most oppressed people of all lands. The idea of the Revolution is one of the liberation of humanity from all kinds of exploitation and enslavement. It negates the capitalist system and constructs a new social order of socialism, which ends the exploitation of one human being by another, ensures harmonious relationship between nature and humans and empowers every one in every sphere of life.

The October Revolution changed the historical and ideological map of the world. It not only changed the fate of the Tsarist empire but also the world at large. The impact of the Revolution on national liberation movements across the world, including in India, was huge.

The historical implications of the October Revolution to Indian conditions remain the same even today. Its influence stretched beyond the communists and Marxists in India. Great political leaders including Gandhi, Nehru, Netaji Subhas Bose, Tilak, Ambedkar, Lajpat Rai, Acharya Narendra Dev, Periyar, Bhagat Singh and great poets like Subramania Bharati, Tagore and other innumerable personalities appreciated the ideas of the Russian Revolution.

Lenin, leader of the October Revolution, advised the communists of Asian countries that every country should make its own contribution to the theory of revolution on the basis of the experience and needs of that particular country. He did not ask the communists to imitate the experiences of the Russian communists even when they were the most revolutionary. On the other hand, he proposed to learn the specific reality of each and every country and apply Marxism appropriately to local conditions. “Concrete analysis of concrete conditions” is Lenin’s definition for dialectics.

The Asian reality was and still is much complicated. It has historically accumulated socio-cultural patterns, as Marx once mentioned, one kind of social relations superimposed on another. Marx referred to this complex reality as the Asiatic Mode of Production. Lenin asked the eastern Marxists to analyse afresh the given conditions and work out their strategy. Questions regarding the caste system and caste-based discrimination as well as gender discrimination are critical to understanding the Indian reality.

Lenin's idea of imperialism also immensely contributed to the original studies of eastern societies. The role of capitalism is complicated in eastern conditions. The advice that eastern countries must repeat the western path of capitalist development has proved destructive in eastern conditions. Capitalism in the east under globalisation has destroyed biodiversity, natural resources, the aboriginal people, peasantry and many eco-sensitive production systems. The Indian people are already confronting the crude implications of capitalist type of development. Pollution of air, water and soil, pauperisation of peasants leading to suicides, excessive use of chemical fertilisers leading to the pollution of foodgrains, milk and vegetables, the widespread expansion of killer diseases, road and construction site accidents India is witnessing is a fallout of the country pursuing the capitalist way of development.

Neoliberalism is the current stage of capitalist-imperialist development. It has created unprecedented inequality in the society. Social contradictions and conflicts have intensified. The ruling classes, in order to protect their political power, are adopting more and more right-wing and fascist positions, undermining democracy and democratic institutions including Parliament.

The October Revolution teaches us to have a better understanding of capitalism in eastern countries. In India, the situation demands the unity of all the oppressed and exploited sections to strive for a secular democracy, social justice and socialism. It is imperative that the communists apply Marxism as a science and ideology to Indian conditions and intensify class struggle while taking into account the non-class contradictions of our society. Humanity needs many more Octobers.

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## 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.

*Sidin Vadukut is editor, Mint On Sunday.*

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## Indian struggles in 1917: On the eve of the Russian Revolution

Seldom in history do things happen suddenly; they are often years in the making.

It is known that during his South Africa years [Mahatma Gandhi](#) had corresponded with Leo Tolstoy, described by Lenin in 1908 as the mirror of the Russian Revolution. This correspondence was three or four years prior to Gandhi's last major agitation in South Africa, in which tens of thousands of Indian mine workers and plantation workers and other indentured workers struck work.

By the time the Russian Revolution took place in 1917, Gandhi had already been back in India for two years, barely a month before the death of one of two leading statesmen who had guided Gandhi's politics in his South African life, Gopal Krishna Gokhale. The other, Dadabhai Naoroji, the Grand Old Man of India, would pass away shortly in the midst of the coming struggle in Champaran, Bihar.

The Marxist Socialist Narendra Deva, a keen student of Lenin's life and writings, would observe that the Bolshevik Revolution placed the masses at the centre-stage of history for the first time.

In India, too, 1917 was a curtain-raiser to events two years later that would mark the beginning of mass involvement in the movement for freedom. As Gandhi's critic M N Roy acknowledged in his memoirs, Lenin looked upon Gandhi "as the inspirer and leader of a mass movement" and "a revolutionary".

But what is significant is that while 1917 saw Gandhi devising methods of struggle to bring about institutional changes that would also lead to self-government, or swaraj, each of the four struggles preceded the climax of the Russian Revolution and was connected with the peasantry as well as labour.

### The Indentured Ultimatum

One of Gandhi's earliest ultimatums to the Government was to end indentured emigration from India. Recruitment of indentured labour for South Africa's Natal province had ended in 1911, but continued for Fiji and some other places. In 1915, Viceroy Charles Hardinge had himself urged abolition, but the authorities in London were reluctant. They wanted the Colonies utilizing such labour "(to have) reasonable time to adjust themselves to the change", hoping to delay the inevitable as long as possible.

On February 26, 1917, Gandhi gave an ultimatum to end indentured recruitment by May 31, failing which he would advise a passive resistance struggle. If the request was not acceded to, he said, "all practical steps should be taken to prevent Indians from leaving the country for labour in Fiji." The pressure had its effect. Recruitment of indentured labour from India was stopped on March 12, 1917.

### Champaran

His confidence in passive resistance strengthened, Gandhi now turned his attention to the grievances of peasants in Champaran. By April 15, he had reached Bankipore, Patna and from there, later the same day set out for Motihari in Champaran district.

India and Russia were moving, almost step for step, even if they were to different beats. Gandhi's country was under colonial rule, while in independent Russia the Tsarist monarchy had abdicated

more than a month ago. The day after Gandhi reached Champaran, Lenin, who had been in Switzerland till then, reached Petrograd, (now St Petersburg). On April 16, 1917, Gandhi sent instructions that his Kaiser-i-Hind medal be returned to the British regime; an order to leave the district, meanwhile, had been served on Gandhi and he had refused to obey. He had been arrested on his way to a village to inquire into the condition of indigo workers.

After struggles, surveys, and enquiries in the district, the Champaran Agrarian Act followed. The legislation abolished the Tinkathia system under which ryots had to set apart a certain proportion of their best land for the landlord's crops.

In retrospect, some historians have argued that the amendments then made did not go far enough. This somewhat Trotsky-like criticism may well be valid; yet the relevant question to ask would be what, if anything, the later Kisan Sabhas that emerged in Bihar in the decades before India's independence and which are believed to have been active and radical, did to take the Champaran struggle forward.

Fact is, Champaran initiated a wider engagement of the national movement with peasant struggles. It did not come about entirely as a matter of chance. When Gandhi was still in South Africa in 1908 there had been indigo-related disturbances in Champaran. This had revived memories of similar struggles in some Bengal districts from the 1860s. On January 8, 1910, Gandhi's South African journal Indian Opinion had devoted its entire front page to an account from the Calcutta press on this 19th century struggle which referred to the courage and self-sacrifice of the indigo ryots of Bengal as being without parallel in the world. Gandhi's journal had described that struggle as "thrilling" and commented that passive resistance "can have no better illustration". It had thus become an inspiration for and vindication of the passive resistance then being conducted in South Africa.

### **Internments in the Home Rule agitation**

In the year following Gandhi's return to India, two Home Rule Leagues had been founded by Annie Besant and Bal Gangadhar Tilak, respectively. In June 1917 Annie Besant and some of her associates were interned in Ootacamund. At this juncture Gandhi, who was in Motihari, Champaran, again advised passive resistance. In a letter at the end of June to J B Petit of Bombay, an early supporter from his South Africa days, Gandhi wrote : "The descent at the present moment upon the villages by you, Mr Jinnah and such other leaders cannot but end in arrests. This propaganda must be carried on in spite of Government prohibition and to that extent it may be considered illegal but for a passive resister not unlawful. There are various other methods which I am unwilling to advise until passive resistance in its present form has soaked into us a bit."

There are two noteworthy features about Gandhi's advice to J B Petit from Champaran. Firstly: go to the villages. In this attempt to reach out to the peasantry, Gandhi seems to anticipate the later emphasis on the peasantry within international Marxism which would come with Dimitrov in Bulgaria and Mao in China; he was reflecting also an obvious compulsion of India's social formation of the time, in that the peasant-based population was overlaid with a further layer of a full-blown foreign colonialism.

In the two scenarios, Lenin had gravitated towards the workers and soldiers. Gandhi moved toward the peasantry, which was drawn to the national movement as never before. Secondly, there is in Gandhi's communication to Petit evidence of an attempt at some planning of the sequence of the moments of passive resistance.

There were countrywide protests against the internments leading to withdrawal of the orders

against Annie Besant and her associates by September 1917.

## The Social Struggles of 1917

Perhaps the most fascinating of the four major Indian struggles of 1917 was the one against untouchability and the way this was reflected in the political and social conferences held in Godhra, Gujarat, from November 3, 1917, some four days before the climax of the Russian Revolution. The political conference was attended also by Bal Gangadhar Tilak, whose trial and sentence had been followed and commented on by Lenin in 1908.

Echoing the underlying message of the other struggles embarked on during the year, in his presidential address, Gandhi told the Political Conference on November 3, "We have to demand swaraj from our own people. Our appeal must be to them. When the peasantry of India understands what swaraj is, the demand will become irresistible."

He called for the entire law on indenture to be repealed: "It is no part of our duty to look to the convenience of the Colonies." The inter-religious question and the social inequalities prevailing in India had characteristics not known in many other countries, including Russia. Repeatedly, in 1917, Gandhi spoke for Hindu-Muslim accord. In the Godhra conferences he lashed out against the practice of untouchability. At least since September 1915, when he had taken in a Dalit and his family into his settlement in Ahmedabad and encountered some resistance over it, he had been considering "the efficacy of passive resistance in social questions" such that this would "embrace swaraj."

The Social Conference at Godhra, which was presided over by Gandhi, on November 5, 1917 included persons from the so-called untouchable communities and was attended by, among others, Abbas Tyabji and Vithalbai Patel. "Do not suppose", Gandhi told his listeners, "that that community belongs to a lower status; let the fusion take place between you and that community, and then you will be fit for swaraj."

Two days after the extraordinary Social Conference held at Godhra, precisely a century ago, the Bolsheviks seized power in Petrograd and inaugurated the Russian Revolution that would affect the course of history by creating a state that became for more than 70 years a countervailing force to the old colonial powers.

Along with the forces of nationalism that swept across the world in the 20th century, the new countervailing power too contributed, even by its mere existence, to the demise of colonialism. At the same time it also unleashed forces which both strengthened and through premature zeal, weakened the nationalist movements and sometimes even contributed to dividing them.

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## An idea dead & alive

World history is a history of big ideas. Big changes have always needed big ideas capable of appealing to the hearts and minds of the multitudes and energising them into action. Karl Marx, the originator of one such Big Idea — the theory of communism that envisioned a society based on equality and free of exploitation, and a state that would ultimately wither away — said it best. “Material force (violence used by guardians of the old social order) must be overthrown by material force; but theory also becomes a material force as soon as it has gripped the masses.”

A hundred years ago, Marx’s theory gripped the Bolsheviks in Russia, who, led by [Vladimir Lenin](#), acted like a material force to overthrow the Tsarist empire and established the first communist-ruled state. The Russian Revolution influenced the spread of the Big Idea. In 1919, Lenin founded the Communist International or Comintern, a coalition of national communist parties that advocated world communism. Even though Joseph Stalin dissolved Comintern in 1943, the revolution in China in 1949, led by [Mao Zedong](#), marked Marxist theory’s next major success. In the 1980s, communist parties in India used to proudly claim that “one-third of the world is already under socialism; and the rest of the world will follow.”

But where, a century later, is the Russian Revolution? Russia consigned it to history in 1991 when the Soviet Union, a child of the revolution born in 1922, died, and each of the 15 constituent “socialist republics” became independent nations. Russia itself overthrew communist party rule. Mikhail Gorbachev, the last communist ruler, had embarked on a reformist initiative called glasnost (openness) and perestroika (restructuring), but there was nothing left to restructure by the end of his five-year rule. Under Boris Yeltsin, his successor, Russia aggressively dismantled most parts of the communist state and economy. For a few years, it seemed the Russian state had actually “withered away”. Crony capitalism and corruption led to a massive transfer of national wealth to oligarchs. Hyper-inflation made life for most Russians miserable. Russia’s international glory faded. Journalist Artemy Troitsky, writing in Moscow News, has described those chaotic years thus: “If you want to see what a big, truly anarchic country is like — look no further than Yeltsin’s Russia. I called it ‘the land of unlimited impossibilities’ — people were free to do whatever they wanted.”

In came another Vladimir (Putin) in 2000. He has rescued and salvaged the Russian state in his strongman rule. He has attempted to make Russians proud again by reviving nationalism and the orthodox church at home and by militarily resisting the US in Europe and West Asia. According to Putin, the collapse of the Soviet Union was the “greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century.” However, he has not restored Russia’s continuity with its revolution. There has been no official commemoration of its centenary. Most young Russians I spoke to said they have no emotional connect to Lenin and his revolution.

I witnessed something ironical, albeit unsurprising in Yalta, where I was visiting to participate in a conference of the “International Friends of Crimea Forum”. In the morning I had not seen anything in the conference hall remotely suggestive of the centenary. In the evening banquet, however, many Russians were wearing an attractive badge in blazing red, with a hammer and sickle at the centre and “The Great Russian Revolution (1917-2017)” inscribed in Russian and Chinese. The badges had been given to them as gifts by the Chinese participants. It looked as if China is more interested than Russia in keeping alive the memory of the first Marxist-Leninist revolution.

Not surprising, because the Communist Party of China (CPC) continues to swear by Marxism-Leninism, although it also extols Mao, Deng Xiaoping and Xi Jinping. Soon after he became party chief in 2012, Xi told his colleagues that the Soviet Union had collapsed “because nobody was man enough to stand up and resist”. As is amply clear from his speech at the 19th CPC congress

last month, where he was re-elected, Xi sees himself as someone who would “stand up and resist” any attempt or reform that could possibly lead to the end of the CPC rule. He has audaciously announced that China’s own “Two Centennial Goals” — 100 years of the founding of the CPC in 2021 and, in 2049, of Mao’s revolution that founded the People’s Republic of China — would serve as major milestones in the triumphant march of “socialism with Chinese characteristics in the new era”. With the US and Europe in decline, the world will surely look to follow, or create, new models of equitable development.

This begets the question: Whither Marx’s Big Idea? The short answer — it’s both dead and alive. All history-changing ideas undergo change themselves. China has changed Marx by Sinifying him. In Russia, I met several intellectuals who said, “Not everything about the revolution and the Soviet era was wrong. What was wrong was the horrific use of violence by the communist state against its own people, the brutal suppression of freedom and democracy, and the ubiquitous personality cult of Lenin and Stalin. But we don’t forget that it was also the era when we defeated Hitler, when we made much progress in education and scientific research, and when most citizens shared both limited prosperity and limited poverty, without the kind of disparity we now see in Russia and in many countries. We should learn from our past mistakes and attempt to create a better future.”

As I looked at the vastness of the Black Sea in Yalta, where Stalin, Roosevelt and Churchill — three victors of World War II — met in February 1945 to design a new global order, I was overwhelmed by a sobering reflection: We imperfect humans create, destroy, and strive to re-create our dreams and revolutions... again and again and again.

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## 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 a 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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## Indian Muslims must re-read Syed Ahmad Khan

As we celebrate the 200th birth anniversary of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, the founder of Aligarh Muslim University, as an alumna I realize that although women's education was not part of his vision at the time, the University over the last several decades has played a pivotal role in the education of Muslim girls. For his time, Sir Syed was a modernist and progressive thinker. As the remnants of Mughal rule crumbled with the debacle that was 1857 and Indian Muslims began to be seen as the perpetrators of the uprising and therefore against the British, Sir Syed realized that education was the key for their rehabilitation.

Not any education, though, not the madrasa-led religious education that was a byword in small towns and big cities, but an English education that would allow Muslims to win government jobs and thereby expand their influence inside the newly powerful British India. That is why Sir Syed's legacy is so immense. He played a critical role, at a historic juncture, in the life of the Indian Muslim community. In the aftermath of the 1857 uprising, Muslims were disfranchised, thrown out of their homes in Shahjahanabad and generally looked upon with suspicion.

In 1859, Sir Syed first established a Farsi Madarsa in Moradabad, but soon changed track. Since English was the language also of science and technology, and therefore a method to keep in step with the outside world, in 1863 he opened the Victoria School in Ghazipur, where he was posted. Here, apart from science and history, English, Urdu, Arabic, Persian and Sanskrit were also taught.

The following year, in 1864, he established the Scientific Society in Ghazipur for translating English, Persian and Arabic writings into Urdu. Significantly, Sir Syed was quite willing to take on the religious clergy, which opposed scientific education, and was even called a kafir for his pains. He was ridiculed and ostracized but he forged ahead. As Akbar Ilahabadi noted in his famous, and adulatory, verse: Saiyyad uthe jo gajatt le kar to laakho'n laaye Sheikh, Quran dikhaata phira, paisa na mila. Syed rose, Gazette in hand and got lakhs in donation The Sheikh kept showing the Quran and got not a penny

"Call me by whatever names you like. I will not ask you for my salvation. But please take pity of your children. Do something for them (send them to the school, lest you should have to repent," he would say.

So committed was he that he even performed a skit on stage and recited a ghazal of Hafiz to collect funds for the college. His other friends even sang songs and enacted short plays.

In the first edition of the journal 'Tehzeeb al-Akhlaq' in 1871, he wrote: "The objective of issuing this journal is to persuade Indian Muslims to adopt a complete degree of civilized culture, so that the hatred with which the civilized (cultured) nations view them should go away and they may also be said to be exalted and cultured nations of the world."

This journal was aimed at the social reformation of Muslims. Sir Syed believed that "ijtihad" (re-interpretation of tradition according to changing times) was the need of the hour, while "taqlid" (copying and following old values) should be given up.

Irfanullah Farooqi in an interesting article writes that, "He categorically insisted that the reputation of Islam depended on the doings of Muslims. These doings did not have to do with prayer and fasting as much as with compassion, kindness, and a genuine drive towards maintenance of a healthy social order."

Farooqi also writes that “tehzeeb, according to Sir Syed, was a perpetual endeavour. According to him, there was no end to moral progress. In this regard he was directly borrowing from Islam where it is categorically specified that a believer must strive ceaselessly to improve his or her conduct till the last breath.”

This is especially important today when the reprehensible acts of a handful of Muslims who indulge in acts of terrorism are confused with Islam.

As Sir Syed advised, Indian Muslims have to stop playing the victim card. As we face new challenges and are increasingly being made to feel the “other”, the only way out is to go back to educating ourselves, and a scientific education at that.

In fact, Yogi Adityanath’s government, by insisting on the introduction of NCERT textbooks and making study of math and science compulsory is doing the community a big favour. In 1875, the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College was founded, which gave way to Aligarh Muslim University, whose motto is “to preach the gospel of free enquiry of large hearted tolerance and of pure morality’

Sir Syed’s vision was of a strong India with Hindus and Muslims being “the two eyes of the beautiful bride that is Hindustan.”

He said, “O Hindus and Muslims! Do you belong to a country other than India? Do not you live on this soil and are not buried under it or cremated on its ghats? If you live and die on this land, then, bear in mind, that... all the Hindus, Muslims and Christians who live in this country are one nation.”

In the bicentennial year of this reformist, nationalist and propogator of scientific thought we must take up the cause of education once again. Why is it that a community which accounts for 14% of the country’s population only has 4.4% students enrolled for higher education? Simply devoting time to religious studies is not the way forward.

As he said, “Look forward, learn modern knowledge, do not waste time in studies of old subjects of no value.”

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## Bolshevism: A hundred years on

The Great October Revolution of 1917 in Russia began with a minor revolution in February of that year. Tsar Nicholas II, who had ruled since 1894, was forced to abdicate his throne by Petrograd insurgents and a provincial government was installed. The last tsar was brought to that situation by factors that included the bloody suppression of a revolution in 1905, anti-Semitic pogroms, a Bloody Sunday in 1905 in which the Imperial Guards fired on unarmed demonstrators, and defeat in the Russo-Japanese war. The Bolsheviks were themselves a ragtag team of anti-imperialists. Vladimir Lenin, Joseph Stalin and Leon Trotsky were not united or cohesive in their violent protests against the establishment. Lenin's *April Theses* eventually became the foundational principle for the Soviet worker councils of workers' and soldiers' deputies and they seized power from the liberals in early November 1917 (the Gregorian calendar records the October revolution as having started on 7 November). Political communism in Soviet Russia, which was to last 72 years, was born.

Lenin's *April Theses* called for power to pass to the proletariat and away from the bourgeoisie. He called for all land to be nationalized and for banks to be consolidated into a single Soviet-controlled entity. Importantly, he also advocated a Comintern, or an organization created to spread communism internationally. This last edict, to create a de facto "marketing" department, led in the following decades to Mao Tse-Tung's revolution in China, and the advent of political communism in many countries like Spain (the only Western European country to have a Communist revolution), Vietnam, North Korea and India.

Indian communism was born in the first plenums of the Comintern. M.N. Roy attended the second world congress of 1920 as a delegate of the Communist Party of Mexico (which, bizarrely, he helped found). Roy was also the common link between Marxism and the Anushilan Samiti, a revolutionary nationalist organization born in Calcutta (now Kolkata) that advocated violent overthrow of British rule. Other members of Anushilan and its sibling Jugantar group were also converted to Marxist-Leninist thinking during long periods in jail. A separate strand of Indian communism was born in Maharashtra with Shripad A. Dange, who, having become disillusioned with Gandhianism, wrote a pamphlet titled *Gandhi vs Lenin*. The pamphlet led to a meeting between Roy and Dange and the Communist Party of India (CPI) was activated. This organization gained prominence and notoriety when Roy, Dange, Singaravelu Chettiar and others were charged in 1924 under the Cawnpore Bolshevik Conspiracy case with seeking "to deprive the King Emperor of his sovereignty of British India, by complete separation of India from imperialistic Britain by a violent revolution". A third thread to Indian communism, banned during British rule, came from those who were persuaded by Marxist-Leninist thinking but were part of the mainstream Congress Socialist Party (CSP). The ban was lifted during World War II when Britain and Russia became allies against Nazi Germany.

Caught between the diktats of Moscow and a national cause, the CPI made a major decision to abstain from the Quit India Movement, believing the freedom struggle would compromise its fight against fascism. This marginalized the CPI as India proceeded towards independence. When China and the Soviet Union broke with each other in the early 1960s, the CPI split as well, adding CPI (Marxist), or CPM, as a more moderate and national version relative to the internationally guided CPI. Dange and the CPI lost steam after the split and the party splintered and drifted into extremism. The CPM became a mainstream political party that has had continuing influence in the state politics of West Bengal, Kerala and Tripura.

Even as the All India Trade Union Congress threatens strikes and information technology workers in Bengaluru contemplate a new union, the CPM's influence on national politics has been waning. Bolshevism, and more generally communism of the Marxist-Leninist variety, which defined the

major political competition of the 20th century, has receded. China is the only large country to hang on to the tag, but its political practice today is that of a one-party state with a unique combination of central political control and market economics. As the world evolves from the industrial age to an information age and more workers become freelancers, the very nature of a “soviet” has become obsolete. Paradoxically, tsar-like authoritarians, professing to speak for the people, have filled the void.

The defining political competition of the 21st century is likely to be between populist-nationalism (Pop-Nat) and liberal democracy. Even though Bolshevism is probably dead, both the populist-nationalists and the liberals are likely to borrow strands from Marxism to address issues of inclusion and inequity. Neither the fully collective view nor the unbridled free-market view, both of which held sway for periods in the 20th century, is likely to prevail for decades to come.

We will have a very different political fight between the haves and the have-nots in this century, but that basic tussle that forced Nicholas to abdicate a century ago is set to continue. It is endemic to the human condition.

P.S. “The worst form of inequality is to make unequal things equal,” said Aristotle.

*Narayan Ramachandran is chairman, InKlude Labs. Read Narayan’s Mint columns at [www.livemint.com/avisiblehand](http://www.livemint.com/avisiblehand)*

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## Raja Mandala: A rediscovery of non-alignment

Why is a low-key meeting between officials from four nations — India, US, Japan and Australia — taking place after a gap of 10 years drawing so much attention? After all, India has joined so many mini-lateral forums since the end of the Cold War. That America is a big part of the quad provides a partial answer.

Although Indian officials have been sitting down with their American and Japanese counterparts for some years now, the quad comes amidst the growing Chinese unilateralism in Asia. India did much the same when it sought to hedge against America's unipolar moment by forming a political triad with Russia and China that later became the BRICS to include Brazil and South Africa.

If the explicit purpose of the triad was to promote a "multipolar world", the quad has the big task of preventing the emergence of a "unipolar Asia" dominated by China. But compared to the BRICS, which convenes annual summits and makes such big moves as creating new international financial institutions, the quad has a long way to go. It is also useful to remember the quad was formed a decade ago and disbanded soon after.

BRICS issues long joint statements on all contemporary issues. After their meeting in Manila, the quad officials did not put out a collective version of the deliberations. They issued separate national statements. If you are a foreign policy geek, you might find a nuanced variation in the emphases.

All the renewed quad did this week was to identify their shared interests on promoting connectivity, countering terrorism, addressing proliferation of nuclear weapons, and encourage respect for international law. It will be a while before they move towards effective actions on the ground. Meanwhile, the foreign ministers of India, China and Russia are gathering in Delhi next month. That should rule out much of the apprehensions of the quad as an "alliance to contain China". None of the four countries are interested in containment. In fact, the US, Japan and Australia have much deeper economic and political ties with China than India.

That India is open to both the quad and triad suggests not the construction of new alliances, but Delhi's return to the original conception of non-alignment. The persistent Indian anxieties on the quad are not about the high principle of strategic autonomy. They reflect the entrenched political distrust of America that expresses itself on any issue involving partnership with the US — whether it was the multilateral nuclear initiative, mini-lateral regional coordination through the quad, or the bilateral defence framework.

Contrary to the popular view, distrust of America was not written into independent India's DNA. India's founding fathers did not define non-alignment as "anti-Americanism". That distortion was a product of the 1970s. As US-India relations deteriorated and domestic politics drifted towards left-wing populism, a new dogma emerged. It decreed that working with Soviet Russia was "progressive" and cooperation with America meant "surrendering national sovereignty". In utter perversity, "non-alignment" was interpreted as "aligning" with Soviet Russia.

But this framework could not have survived without some correspondence with the new balance of power system that emerged around India. It was based on the deterioration of Sino-Indian relations after the 1962 war, breakdown of the socialist solidarity between Soviet Union and China, Sino-American rapprochement, and the Indo-Soviet entente. If America and China drew closer to Pakistan, Delhi tied up with Moscow.

This system began to slowly unravel after the Cold War ended. In the new era, conflict among the

major powers ebbed. India opened up its economy to globalisation and Western capital and technology. Restoration of cooperation with America became central to the recalibration of India's foreign policy since the 1990s.

If America has become more empathetic since then to India's concerns on terrorism, Kashmir and global nuclear order, a rising China has turned hostile. To make matters worse, tensions on the disputed Sino-Indian border have become more frequent and intense. Moscow, which once helped India balance China, is now in a tight embrace with Beijing.

The proposition that India must tilt to one side, towards Russia and China, and keep distance from America is a legacy from the 1970s. It does not square with contemporary reality. Russia and China, which are both eager to cut separate deals with America, can't demand a veto over Delhi's ties to Washington.

The original conception of non-alignment was about building strong ties with all the major powers and making independent judgements about international affairs. In what was described as "suckling from two cows", Delhi benefited immensely from simultaneous cooperation with Washington and Moscow in the 1950s and 1960s.

Discarding the ambiguities inherited from the 1970s, Delhi now appears ready to expand cooperation with the West or East on the basis of enlightened self-interest. If the quad helps India improve its ability to defeat terrorism, improve regional connectivity and extend its naval reach, Delhi is not going to thumb its nose. If China is ready to cooperate on terrorism and stop blocking India's rise, Delhi will be happy explore the multiple possibilities with Beijing. If this is not non-alignment we really don't know what is.

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## The lessons of the Bolshevik Revolution

Last week marked the 100th anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution. On this centenary, the main cause for celebration is that most parts of the world are rid of communism—one of the worst, most dangerous ideas in political economy.

In November 1917, the Bolsheviks and Vladimir Lenin led a revolution, inspired by Karl Marx's theory of class struggle. Once in control, they set about implementing a new economic system. The crux of Marx's theory in the *Communist Manifesto* was the abolition of private property. And so, Russia's Communist Party began its great tasks—replacing private property with collective ownership, and replacing markets and the price system with planning.

Lenin created a new planning establishment called the Supreme Economic Council, which brought firms, banks, foreign trade, and labour committees to run firms, etc., all under state control. Soon after came the abolition of private trade and exchange. By August 1918, the council decreed the abolition of money and required all transactions to be carried out using accounting operations.

The lack of a price system to coordinate economic plans resulted in disarray. To use Leon Trotsky's famous metaphor, "Each factory resembled a telephone whose wires had been cut." The result was a dramatic drop in industrial output, food shortage, chaos, and famine in the countryside. The food shortages were followed by famine, mass exodus from the cities, workers' strikes and soldier rebellion.

At the time, Ludwig von Mises, a revered economist from the Austrian tradition, issued a fundamental challenge to the Soviet planners. In 1920, he argued that the planners had not addressed a basic problem imposed by scarcity—choosing how to combine resources to produce goods economically. Without the institution of private property, individuals don't have the incentives to economize resources. Without the system of market exchange, market prices which reflect the relative scarcity of these goods cannot emerge. And without market prices (reflecting the relative scarcity of resources), planners cannot calculate profit and loss, and therefore cannot rationally allocate goods. He broadly summed up this problem as the impossibility of socialist calculation.

The consequences of the impossibility of socialist calculation were felt immediately by Lenin's government. In response, Lenin's New Economic Policy of 1921 stopped the collectivization of property in the countryside and re-allowed market exchange, allowing peasants to sell their produce. Controls on smaller businesses and trade were relaxed and private trading and market transactions were allowed once again. However, the Policy retained control of the commanding heights—banking, foreign trade and large firms were still within the state planning machinery.

The task of replacing private property and market transactions with a fully planned economy was so difficult that Lenin retreated, and allowed the country to split into dual economies. The farming sector was allowed to largely operate in a decentralized way with quasi markets. The industrial sector and the major cities were brought under complete socialization of property and planning.

While Lenin retreated, Joseph Stalin was not as easily deterred from his goal. In 1928, he started eradicating any remnants of capitalism from the Soviet Union. This could only be accomplished with Stalin's ruthless will and utter disregard for human life. Stephen Kotkin in *Stalin, Waiting For Hitler, 1929-1941* details the mass murder, mass deportation, and the famine that followed Stalin's famous decision to unify the economy. The famine resulting from forced collectivization killed between five million and seven million people. Another five million kulaks (rich peasants) were arrested, deported or murdered.

While Stalin was a political opportunist, it is important to remember that everything he did was consistent with his intention of bringing the Soviet Union into a singular economy and eradicating capitalism. The level of control and coercion required to execute the Marxist dream of abolishing private property and the market system is part of the Communist ideology. This is not the error of a few tyrants, but integral to this flawed economic idea and dangerous political ideology.

F.A. Hayek, who joined Mises in demonstrating the impossibility of socialist calculation, also foretold this terrible consequence of socialism. He warned that there would be no social and political freedom within a system where the economy was completely controlled. After the revolution, power rarely transfers to the people, and is instead concentrated in the state—because such vast power and discretion is required for economic planning.

This was not just a Soviet malady. A similar pattern has emerged in every Communist regime, big and small. In 1958, Mao Tse-Tung attempted to collectivize property in the Chinese countryside on a much larger scale, triggering a famine that killed around 30 million people. This was repeated in Cambodia in the 1970s, and yet again in North Korea today.

Collectivizing property and replacing a decentralized system of exchange with central economic planning requires more than a revolution. It requires coercion of the most extreme kind, to bend the will of an entire nation to fit the plan. It is this level of violence, economic and social coercion that has become the lasting legacy of communism. Communism was represented by the colour red for those who died in the revolution. After a hundred years, it is still coloured red for those it killed to keep communism alive.

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