

October Revolution: A New Path for Humanity
(Booklet on the occasion of the year long Centenary Celebrations 2016-17)

The Great October Revolution was the first advance in human history of the creation of a society free from class exploitation. It was the first successful revolution by the workers, peasants and other exploited sections to establish a new socialist society.

What was the October Revolution?

The October Revolution in Russia in 1917 marked a new epoch in world history. The revolution led to the establishment of a new socialist state – the Soviet Union. It brought on to the world scene, the revolutionary movement headed by the working class.

The Russian Revolution took place on November 7, 1917 (as per the old Russian calendar, this date was October 25).

Russia was the centre of the Tsarist monarchy which presided over a vast empire which also covered the whole of Central Asia. The Tsarist system was marked by big landlordism. The last Tsar owned eight million (80 lakh) hectares of the best lands of the empire. There were 28,000 big land owners who owned 167.4 million (1.674 crore) acres of land.

Along with this semi-feudal landlordism, capitalist development had led to the emergence of monopolies in the industrial and mining sectors. Though capitalism was rapidly developing, Russia was still backward in terms of capitalist development compared to the big European nations.

The Tsar joined the First World War in 1914. This was an imperialist war which broke out because of the rivalries between the imperialist powers like Germany, Britain, France and Russia to control colonies and resources.

Millions of peasants and workers were conscripted into the Tsarist army and sent to the frontline to fight. Tens of thousands lost their lives in the war which the Russian side was losing to the Germans. The impoverished peasants were like serfs suffering under the whip of landlords.

First the February Revolution

It was in such a situation that the mass discontent arose and the revolutionary forces, particularly the Bolshevik Party, launched an insurrection against the Tsarist regime. This mass uprising took the shape of a revolution which occurred in February 1917. The Tsarist autocracy was overthrown and in its place, a bourgeois-dominated government was formed in which some of the social democratic parties participated. The provisional government formed after the February revolution sought to compromise with the reactionary forces and promote the interests of the Russia bourgeoisie. This government became increasingly unpopular given the reverses suffered in the war and the mass casualties of the soldiers.

The February revolution had thrown up a new organ of popular power – the Soviets. Soviets of workers, soldiers and peasants sprung up in all the major cities and in the rural areas in the wake of the February revolution.

The Bolshevik Party (which after the revolution became the Communist Party) gained increasing support from among the workers' Soviets and in the Soviets formed in the military contingents. By the end of September, the regime of the provisional government was faced with growing ferment among the workers, peasants and soldiers. The proletariat in the capital Petrograd and in cities like Moscow had set-up their own soviets and armed detachments to defend the ongoing revolution. Across rural Russia, peasants and agricultural workers began taking over the lands of the landlord and aristocracy. Soldiers in the army had elected their own Soviets and were calling for an end to the war and establishment of peace. Lenin pointed out that the bulk of the soldiers were “peasants in uniform”.

Onto the Socialist Revolution: All Power to the Soviets

It is in such a situation that Lenin, the leader of the Bolshevik Party, declared that the country is passing from the first stage of the bourgeois revolution to its second stage which must place power in the hands of the proletariat and the poorest sections of the peasants.

With the call of the Bolshevik Party “All power to the Soviets”, finally on October 25 (November 7), the armed detachments of the workers (red guards) and the revolutionary soldiers in the army moved to oust the provisional government. The revolution succeeded in taking power in the capital Petrograd. In the following weeks, in Moscow and all other centres after overcoming the resistance of the counter revolutionary troops still loyal to the old regime, Soviet power was established in the whole of Russia and the other parts of the old Tsarist empire.

The revolution led to the formation of a new government headed by Lenin with the Council of People’s Commissars.

The Bolsheviks had rallied the people on the slogan of Land, Peace and Bread. The first step taken by the new government was to place a decree on land and a decree on peace before the All Russian Congress of Soviets of Workers, Soldiers and Peasants deputies. The land decree adopted took over all the landed estates and all lands of the church and monastery with their livestock, implements and buildings and place them in the hands of the local land committees and district Soviets of peasants deputies.

The decree on peace called for an end to the war with immediate peace negotiations between all the governments and peoples involved in the war. The new Soviet government declared its determination to immediately sign a peace without annexations and indemnities.

Other decrees were on elimination of illiteracy, for universal primary education, provision of free medical health care and creation of the new Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR).

Tsarist Russia was a ‘prison house for nations’. The Russian Revolution liberated the various non-Russian nationalities from the colonial yoke and gave them an autonomous set-up as socialist republics within the Union.

Before the new Soviet State could embark on the building of socialism, the revolution was faced with the onslaught of the counter revolutionary forces. A bitter civil war erupted and the Red Army had to fight against the white guards and the counter revolutionary forces. Ten capitalist countries, including Britain, Germany and France, supported the counter revolutionary forces and provided them with aid and weapons.

After four years of fighting in the civil war, the Red Army finally prevailed and crushed the reactionary forces. In this process, a heavy price was paid with tens of thousands of class conscious workers and peasants in the red army having to sacrifice their lives.

Why is it called the world's first socialist revolution?

The October Revolution was different from the revolutions which took place before that in the world. Starting with the French Revolution of 1789, there were various revolutions which marked the taking over of State power by the bourgeoisie from the old feudal classes and aristocracy.

Revolutions have occurred at various stages of history in the past when a new rising class of exploiters overthrew the rule of the old exploiting classes. This is what happened when the bourgeois-led revolutions overthrew the old feudal exploiting classes.

The October Revolution was different. It was the first time that the working class and its allies like the poor peasantry, who were the exploited class, led a revolution to overthrow the ruling bourgeoisie and the exploiting classes.

It is because of the working class leadership of the revolution in Russia that the October Revolution came to be characterized as the world's first socialist revolution. Lenin had stated that a revolution is successful only when the old State power is smashed and a new form of State power established. This is what happened in the Russian Revolution which dismantled the old State power and put in place a new State in the form of the Soviets which represented the interests of the workers and the poor peasants.

Socialism requires the socialization of the means of production. This was accomplished after the formation of the new State power with industry, land and agriculture and other means of production being taken over by the State and collectively owned.

This was the first time that a new socialist mode of production was established in the world.

Achievements of the Revolution

Remarkable economic growth was accomplished by the Soviet Union till the 1960s. A fact which had to be acknowledged by even its worst critics. The respected British economic historian Angus Maddison had noted: “Soviet economic growth per capita between 1913 and 1965 was the fastest in the world, of all the major or developed countries – faster, that is than in Japan. Japanese output grew by 400 percent, Soviet output by 440 percent.”

- Elimination of illiteracy in a decade after the end of the civil war.
- Provision of universal primary education followed by seven year universal education and universal secondary (ten year) education, which no other European country had achieved by that time.
- Abolition of landlordism and giving poor peasants and agricultural workers a stake in the collectivised farms and cooperatives.
- Free medical care for all citizens was introduced immediately after the revolution.
- Employment for all and eradication of unemployment. By 1936, all employment exchanges were closed as full employment was achieved.
- One of the first decisions of the new government was to ensure equal rights for women, equal wages, right to maternity benefits and right to divorce. Women were given the right to vote by the revolution. This right was granted to women in Britain only in 1928.
- There was a huge expansion in the cultural resources available to the people. The State-funded publication of books to cultural productions of film, music and art.

Historical Impact of October Revolution

The world before 1917 was vastly different from what it is today after a century. The beginning of the 20th century was still the age of empires – the height of imperialism. The British, German, French, the Austro-Hungarian, the Russian and Japanese empires dominated and divided the world. There were lesser empires too, of the Italians, the Portuguese and so on. The bulk of the world’s population lived in colonies or semi-colonies subject to these empires.

The Russian Revolution heralded the end of this old style colonialism – its death throes began with the first world war, which preceded the October Revolution. Within fifty years of the overthrow of the Tsarist empire, there was hardly any empire left on the face of the earth.

The October Revolution sparked off the chain of national liberation struggles which overthrew colonial rule. A struggle against imperialism reached a higher plane with the success of the first socialist revolution. The national liberation movements in Asia, Africa and Latin America drew their inspiration from the Russian Revolution and the Soviet Union lent its support to the national liberation struggles.

The October Revolution was based on the revolutionary strategy of the worker-peasant alliance. It is the strategy of the worker-peasant alliance which was used subsequently to mobilize the vast mass of the peasantry in the colonial and semi-colonial countries. Following the footsteps of the October Revolution, three decades later, the epoch-making Chinese Revolution took place under the leadership of the Communist Party of China. This was followed by the revolutions in Vietnam and Korea. All these revolutions were direct descendents of the worldwide anti-imperialist and anti-fascist struggles which developed in the 1930s. It culminated in the post-Second World War period in the formation of a socialist bloc of nations.

The defeat of the greatest evil faced by the 20th century fascism was mainly due to the existence and the struggle waged by the Soviet Union. In the people's war against fascism, more than 20 million (two crore) soldiers and people of the Soviet Union laid down their lives. It was the Red Army which spearheaded the smashing of the Nazi war machine.

The emancipatory content of the October Revolution had a universal impact. The success of the Russian Revolution spurred on the revolutionary working class movements. The impact of the socialist measures in the Soviet Union forced the capitalist governments in Western Europe after the Second World War to adopt a welfare State model. The struggles by the working class in these countries led to the introduction of universal education and health care.

Impact on India

The news of the October Revolution had a galvanizing impact on the freedom fighters both within the Indian National Congress and the revolutionary groups outside.

- 1) In the Congress, the radical wing who were dissatisfied with the moderates like Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Bipin Chandra Pal, Lala Lajpat Rai, C. R. Das and others welcomed the revolutionary success in Russia and were in favour of organizing the working class.
- 2) The impact of the Russian Revolution saw the beginnings of organized working class movement in India. Before 1918, there was no serious effort to organize the industrial workers, strikes were occasional. The working class movement, which began in 1918, saw a wave of working class organizations and between 1919 and 1921, a number of strikes swept the country.
- 3) Muhajir groups set out for Russia via Afghanistan to become acquainted with the Russian Revolution. They were freedom fighters who were dissatisfied with the outcome of the Khilafat movement. Some of them became the first Communists from India.
- 4) Prominent writers and poets like Subramania Bharathi, Kazi Nazrul Islam and Rabindranath Tagore greeted the news of the revolution from Russia. Bharathi wrote a song '*New Russia*', a few weeks after the October Revolution. Rabindranath Tagore visited Russia in 1930. Impressed by the new society being built there, he wrote in his '*Letters from Russia*' that:

“If I hadn't seen it with my own eyes, I could have never believed that in just ten years they have not only led hundreds of thousands of people out of the darkness of ignorance and degradation and taught them to read and write, but also fostered in them a sense of human dignity. We need to come here specifically to study the organization of education.”

From Jawaharlal Nehru to Periyar Ramasamy, those who visited the Soviet Union in the 1930s were profoundly impressed by the achievements of the socialist Soviet Union.

Bhagat Singh and his comrades were inspired by the Russian Revolution and Lenin to embrace socialism. On January 21, 1930, Bhagat Singh and his comrades sent from the court room, while they were facing trial, the following telegram to Moscow:

“On Lenin Day, we send hearty greetings to those who are doing something for carrying forward the ideas of the great Lenin. We wish

success to the great experiment Russia is carrying out. We join our voice to that of the international working class movement.”

Thus, the struggle for independence and social emancipation in India was profoundly influenced by the Russian Revolution.

How did the Soviet Union end?

The Soviet Union was founded after the Russian Revolution amidst capitalist encirclement and a bloody civil war. The new socialist State had to constantly face threats from imperialist and became the target of fascist aggression. Overcoming all these odds, the Soviet Union blazed a new trail and in the post-war period emerged as a strong power next only to the United States of America. The rapid economic strides, the elimination of unemployment, the provision of universal education, health care and housing and the raising of the material and cultural standards of the people showed the potential inherent in the socialist social system.

However, over the years, especially in the last two decades, certain defects and shortcomings developed. The economic structure was not reformed to harness the new scientific and technological revolution; there was the failure to re-fashion the management of the economy; lack of socialist democracy expanding to keep pace with the material advance of the people leading to bureaucratisation. Along with these, the ideological failings of the Communist Party in developing socialist consciousness among the people contributed to the eventual dismantling of the Soviet Union.

It was not socialism, but the distortions in building socialism and the ideological deviations which led to the failure of the Soviet Union. Reviewing historically the experience of building socialism in the Soviet Union, it can be said that the end of the Soviet Union does not put an end to the relevance of socialism in the present day world.

Relevance of the October Revolution

The October Revolution showed humanity that capitalism can be ended and socialism established.

The example of the October Revolution which was a powerful influence in the 20th century continues to illuminate the alternative path to capitalism in the 21st century.

The end of the Soviet Union has led to the dominance of world capitalism and imperialism. In the 21st century, neo-liberal capitalism has led to a world sharply divided between a narrow stratum of the rich and vast masses of the people who are affected by poverty, unemployment and hunger.

There has been a sharp rise in inequalities. The wealth of the one per cent richest people in the world amounts to \$ 110 trillion (110,00,000 crores), i.e., 65 times the total wealth of the bottom half of the world's population. More than 1.3 billion (130 crore) people in the world live in extreme poverty.

Imperialism led by the United States has continued its aggressive pursuit for global hegemony and through military interventions unleashed destructive conflicts which are still raging in countries like Iraq, Syria, Libya, Yemen and Afghanistan.

The working class and other sections of the working people all around the world are conducting struggles against the neo-liberal offensive, austerity measures and imperialist subjugation. For them, the 1917 socialist revolution is the guiding light.

For all the revolutionary and progressive forces, the October Revolution stands out as a beacon of inspiration. For all those who strive for a classless and exploitation-free society, the October Revolution conveys the message that the future is socialism.