UNIT 14 THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION: CAUSES, COURSE, AND SIGNIFICANCE

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14.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this Unit you will be able to:
- assess the importance of the Russian Revolution as a world event,
- explain the causes of the Russian Revolution,
- narrate the course of events during the revolution,
- establish its linkage with the Indian Liberation Struggle, and
- understand what a socialist society means in social, economic and political terms.

14.1 INTRODUCTION

The Russian Revolution was made in October 1917. It is also known as the Bolshevik Revolution. It was a proletarian-socialist revolution, inspired by the ideals of communism. In Unit-12 you have learnt what socialism is, and how a socialist society is more advanced and more just, and more egalitarian than a capitalist society. The Russian Revolution aimed at the creation of such a society in Russia. Leadership to this revolution was provided by the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party, particularly the Bolsheviks. The RSDLP represented the working class which was the leading force of the revolution. The peasantry also played a significant role. In fact, the Russian Revolution was brought about by the working people of Russia, because they were the most oppressed and therefore most interested in a total transformation of the social and political system which exploited them.

14.2 WHY YOU SHOULD STUDY IT

But why are you being taught about it in a course which is essentially a Modern Indian History Course? You may have wondered.

It is important that you know that all events, however earthshaking, take place in a historical context and in turn form a part of the historical context for later advances of mankind. The birth of socialist ideas, particularly Marxism, transformed man’s understanding of reality—of social and political structures and of the history of mankind itself. The Russian Revolution showed in concrete practice the possibilities of destroying exploitative societies, and creating new, free and just societies. In doing so it had a tremendous impact on all
movements of emancipation, hereafter, including the struggles for independence from foreign rule and imperialism. It also provided inspiration to the national liberation movement in India, particularly to the revolutionary struggles of the working people. Therefore, you must study the Russian Revolution.

14.3 CAUSES OF THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION

By 1917 the working people of Russia were no longer prepared to tolerate their dehumanised situation. They were also by then politically organised, and therefore able to overthrow the old social and political order. But why only then?

In the decades preceding 1917, Russian society was undergoing great changes that resulted in a crisis for the old order. The new social and economic forces created by these changes had different interests and aspirations. Therefore, by 1917 there emerged an intense contradiction and polarisation between the old and the new in Russia. The Russian revolutionary movement represented the democratic aspirations of these new forces. The Russian state on the other hand represented the interests of the old ruling classes. In Russia right up to 1917 there existed an autocratic form of government. There were no representative institutions. No right to form political organisations. There was strict censorship and arbitrary arrests. There was no religious toleration, and there was oppression of all nationalists other than Russian. The Russian Empire was a multi-national Empire which used its strength against all democratic movements in Europe. It was known as the 'Policeman' of Europe.
The Russian autocracy remained strong on the support of the landed aristocracy and the bourgeoisie. In turn this autocracy guaranteed to these classes their privileged position in Russian society. There was thus, by 1917, not only a conflict between the old social forces and the new, but also between these new social forces and the Russian state. The Russian revolutionary movement therefore sought to overthrow the Russian autocracy.


14.3.1 The Agrarian Situation and the Peasantry

In spite of being emancipated from serfdom the Russian peasantry continued to be the most oppressed section of Russian society. The dominance of the landed aristocracy remained. Although the peasantry had become free, the peasants had to pay for their freedom and they had to pay so heavily that they remained continually in debt and forced to work for the landed aristocracy very cheaply. The peasantry was also very heavily burdened by taxes to the state. This resulted in the growth of great discontentment within the peasantry, and the early years of the twentieth century saw a tremendous increase in the militancy and number of peasant uprisings. Agriculture continued to remain backward as the peasant had nothing to invest in the betterment of his land. The landed aristocracy had no incentive to introduce new technology because they had ready labour in the poor peasantry.

Since agriculture formed a major sector of the Russian economy and the peasantry constituted the majority of its population, the agrarian and peasant problem became an important factor for revolution in Russia. The peasantry also, therefore, formed an important component of the revolutionary movement.

14.3.2 Workers, Industrialisation and Revolution

The nature of industrialisation in Russia led to the growth of a working class movement
which was much more militant and political than in other countries. At the early stage of industrialisation itself there were large enterprises with a big concentration of workers. This gave scope for common grievances among a large number of workers, and therefore also for a common struggle. Moreover, the state played an important role in the industrialisation process, with the result that the Russian bourgeoisie was not as strong and developed as in other countries of Western Europe where bourgeoisie played an important role in the industrialisation process. The Russian bourgeoisie, therefore, had strong links with the Autocracy. The Russian working class movement was in turn both against the Autocracy and the Russian bourgeoisie i.e. the capitalists.

14.3.3 The Nationalities Question

The Russian Empire was a multinational Empire. The ruling dynasty had emerged around the Russian part of the Empire. It followed a policy of ‘Russification’ i.e. the suppression of the languages and literatures and culture of the other nationalities. Those areas were exploited economically also.

The relationship was in fact almost colonial in nature, with these areas being used simply as sources of raw material for development of industries in Russia proper. These nationalities such as the Caucasians, the Kazaaks, the Krghiz, the Polish etc. were extremely discontented and played an important role in the revolutionary movement for the overthrow of the existing social and political system.

14.3.4 Political Groups: Leadership

But no revolutionary movement can be successful unless it is guided by a correct understanding of the existing situation, a correct programme, and something to offer to the people. In the Russian revolution also many political groups were active. They played a significant role in raising the consciousness of the people—particularly of the workers and peasants—through political education, political propaganda and agitation. They also formed organisations of workers and peasants to give a cohesiveness and direction to the revolutionary movement. The important political tendencies were that of the Populists (in the late nineteenth century) and the Socialist Revolutionaries, the Liberals and the Social Democrats (Marxists), particularly the Bolsheviks. In the decade preceding the revolution Lenin was the most important leader of the Bolshevik Party, and of the Russian Revolution. Other important leaders were Trotsky, Bukharin and Stalin.

14.4 STAGES OF REVOLUTION

The Russian revolutionary movement emerged in the 19th century. At first it consisted of only the members of the middle class intelligentsia. As the workers and peasants became increasingly discontented and also aware of their oppressed situation, they also began to struggle against the Russian Autocracy. By the early 20th Century the Russian revolutionary movement was a mass based movement in which the workers and peasants played the most crucial and decisive role.
The first major assault on the Russian Autocracy took place in 1905. It is known as the 1905 Revolution and also a "dress rehearsal" for the 1917 Revolution. The workers and peasants began to demand a "democratic republic". For the first time there was a mass general strike. Sections of army also revolted. The first Soviet came into being during the 1905 revolution. It was a revolutionary organisation of the working people. This revolution did not succeed in over throwing the Autocracy, but the experience gained by the workers and peasants during this revolution was extremely valuable for them.

The years after this revolution till 1911 were years of great repression when many revolutionaries were arrested and workers' organisations destroyed.

The World War-I which had a considerably adverse effect on the Russian economy and the lives of the Russian people also led to a greater politicisation of the people as well as the alignment of the political forces opposed to the Autocracy.


In this political atmosphere the February Revolution was sparked off by a shortage of bread in Petrograd. After a few days came the demand: ‘Down with the Autocracy’. There were red flags all over the city. Soon it spread to other cities and also to the countryside. Finally, even the army came out on the side of the revolution. The Autocracy had no one on its side. The February Revolution resulted in the overthrow of the Autocracy and the formation of a Provisional Government. The workers and peasants played the major role in this revolution also and the bourgeoisie also supported it. It was a bourgeois-democratic revolution. The Provisional Government which was now formed was dominated by the bourgeoisie and landed aristocracy and represented their interests.

This Provisional Government, therefore did not bring any change in the policies of the Autocracy. But it was forced to grant political freedom, because the February Revolution had also resulted in the formation of the Soviet of Workers Peasants, and Soldiers Deputies as in 1905. This represented the interests of the working people of Russia. So from the beginning there was a conflict between the two, which lasted up to October 1917 revolution when the Provisional Government was overthrown.

8. Caricature ridiculing the Provisional Govt’s approach to land issue. Reads: Landowner: “why are you standing on one leg? Peasant:” There’s nowhere to put the other, it’s your lordship’s land. I may be sued.

Thus it was in the period between February 1917 and October 1917 that conditions were prepared for the proletarian-socialist revolution. The workers, peasants and soldiers became conscious of their own solidarity and common interests, and also of their opposition to the Provisional Government, which now stood exposed before them as an agent of the ruling classes. At this stage many of the revolutionary groups also wavered—for example, the Social Revolutionaries and the Mensheviks. They represented the interests of the people, but they did not realise that the people were far ahead of them. They did not realise that time was ripe for the socialist revolution i.e. the second stage of the revolution. They did not see that the bourgeoisie was already against a further advance of the revolution.
Only the Bolsheviks realised all this. They were the only political group to give voice to the aspirations of the people and to put forward the demand of the time. They demanded an immediate end to war, without any indemnities and annexations; land for peasants; workers' control over industries; the right of nations to self-determinations; and above all, bread. 'Peace! Land! Bread! Democracy!' became the current and widespread slogans. Thus the Bolsheviks were able to provide leadership to the people, to gain a majority in all the mass organisations of the people, to have the workers, peasants and soldiers on their side. The October 1917 revolution was successful, because it had a popular base.
Check Your Progress 1

1 Why should you study the Russian Revolution?

2 When were the conditions prepared for the socialist revolution in Russia?

3 Which sections provided the leadership to the Russian Revolution?

4 Fill in the blanks:
   a) The Russian king was known as ..........
   b) The form of political structure in Russia was ..........
   c) ............ constituted the majority of the oppressed population.
   d) Important political groups in Russia were ..........
   e) The Autocracy was overthrown in ..........
   f) The Autocracy was replaced by ..........
   g) It represented the interests of ..........
   h) The revolutionary organisation of the working people was known as ..........

5 Read the following statements and mark right (✓) or wrong (✗)
   i) The working people of Russia lived comfortable lives before the revolution.
   ii) Pre-revolutionary Russian society was an unjust and unequal society.
   iii) The Working class movement in Russia was more militant and revolutionary than in other countries of Europe.
   iv) The Bolsheviks demanded a continuation of the World War.

14.5 NATURE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF RUSSIAN REVOLUTION

The October Revolution destroyed the bases of capitalism and laid the foundation for socialism in Russia. But what does all this mean in terms of policies?

14.5.1 Economic Aspects

In the economic sphere the Russian Revolution meant the end of private property, and the change to ownership of all property by the state. But you must understand that this did not mean that people’s personal belongings were taken away from them. By abolition of private property was meant that all means of production i.e. sources of profit—income making were converted into state property. These included factories, land, banks etc. No body could now own them privately to exploit the labour of others to make profit.

The Revolution also established workers’ control over industries. This meant that they could keep a check on the production process through their representatives, and also ensure
the rights of workers in their factory. This measure was based on the understanding that those who produce must have some role in decision making through their representatives—right up to the central level.

Thus, an important measure linked to workers’ control was the introduction of centralised economy, keeping in mind the needs of the whole country, particularly the working people.

Through a centralised economy they sought to guarantee a much faster pace of economic development and the fruits of that development to the vast majority of the people. Through it they sought to prevent an anarchy in production, and also avoid wastage. The First Five Year Plan, however, was introduced only later, in 1928. In fact, planning was an important contribution the Russian revolution made to the world.

In India also, a similar model was adopted for planned economic development.

In agriculture, land was nationalised. This means that land was owned by the state and given over to the peasant for hereditary use. But he could not sell it or mortgage it, or use it to exploit the labour of others to earn profit for himself. Through the land Decree of November, 1917 landlordism was abolished and land was handed over to the peasantry. Collective production and a further advance in social relations within agriculture was made in 1928 with the collectivisation of agriculture.

14.5.2 Social Aspects

By destroying private property in the means of production the Revolution also destroyed the roots of social inequality. It laid the foundations for a classless society. Also, each one was paid “according to his work”. The gap between the salary of a worker and manager was not much, or between a worker and artist or teacher. As you know in a capitalist society there is a world of difference in the standard of living of the workers and directors of the same enterprise, or workers and doctors, teachers, engineers etc.

The Soviet State also guaranteed certain social benefits to all citizens, such as free medical care, free and equal education for all, an unemployment allowance, equal access to culture and cultural advancement. These were in fact rights of the people, guaranteed by the constitution.

Not all of this was immediately available to the Soviet people, as production and infrastructure for these provisions were being simultaneously created. But it is important that the state took responsibility for the individual’s good life, provided he worked according to his ability.
Equality for women was not only guaranteed by the constitution but material basis for this equality were created in order to implement it. There was provision for six months maternity leave, creches at places of work, public canteens at places of work where food was cheap and subsidised etc. All this was aimed at making possible fullest participation by women in public life. All this had a great impact on capitalist societies. To meet the challenge of the socialist society, they were also forced to grant certain welfare measure. In fact the concept of a welfare state in the west was a direct response to the Russian Revolution and the benefits that it granted to its people. Otherwise, the working people of the west would have immediately recognised the superiority of a socialist society.

12. “Literacy Paves the way to Communism”— a Poster.

13. “Knowledge will break up the chains of slavery”— a poster.
The separation of religion from politics and state was another important measure of the revolution. Religion was to be a purely private affair. No religions education was to be given in schools, no public utility to be made of religion. When you take note of all that has happened in the name of religions in our country, you will recognise the significance of this measure. Religion itself was not abolished, religious people were not persecuted, as is generally believed.

14.5.3 Political Aspects

Politically, the Russian Revolution resulted in the creation of a state of the working people embodied in the concept of 'dictatorship of the proletariat'. It was recognised that the enemies of the revolution could still sabotage the interests of the people. The Russian Revolution was in fact immediately followed by the intervention of ten other countries on the side of the Russian landed aristocracy and the bourgeoisie against the Revolution and the working people of Russia. Therefore, it was necessary, for sometime, to have a political system dominated by the working class.

But this state was much more democratic than the states of the bourgeois countries because it ensured the rule of the majority of the people (majority in any society consist of the working people) over a minority which held privileges in the pre-revolutionary Russia. Moreover this was seen as a temporary phase, to be done away with, once the political power of the ruling classes was totally destroyed and they were rendered incapable of sabotaging the Revolution. Thus bourgeois democracy was this to be transformed into socialist democracy.

The freedom enjoyed by a Soviet citizen was not only political freedom, but also freedom from hunger. Not only legal and social equality, but also economic equality. Thus the realm of freedom was enlarged in the new order created by the Russian Revolution.

14.5.4 International Aspects

In International relations also the Russian Revolution represented an important landmark. First of all the Bolsheviks abolished all the old secret treaties entered into by the Autocracy and the Provisional Government. It was felt that people have a right to know what their governments are doing, and that the people of any country should have the right to influence the foreign policy of their country through debate and intervention. Secondly, the Bolsheviks, through a decree made the offer of immediate peace without annexations and indemnities. They were the only political group in the world to put into practice such a declaration. They also withdrew their claims over many of the areas in the Near East and the Far East that the previous Russian government had been fighting over.

They declared themselves against Imperialism and lent support to all national liberation struggles against foreign domination. In the areas that had constituted the Tsarist Empire, the Bolsheviks recognised the rights of all nationalities to self-determination including the right of succession. In the areas where the landed aristocracy and the bourgeoisie wanted to separate, but the workers and peasants wanted to be a part of Soviet Russia, the Bolsheviks recognised the will of the masses and fought with them to consolidate the October Revolution. The workers and peasants of most nationalities were with the Bolsheviks because they knew that the defeat of Bolsheviks would mean the return of landlordism and capitalist exploitation.

14.6 IMPACT ON THE NATIONAL LIBERATION MOVEMENT IN INDIA

The Indian National Movement arose as a result of the social conditions created by British Imperialism, its system of exploitation, and the social and economic forces generated by this system of exploitation. But it was also influenced by the significant world currents of that time, of which the most important were the forces of socialism, represented by the Russian Revolution.

The 1905 revolution was a great inspiration for the Indian leaders. The agitation against the Partition of Bengal, reflected in the Swadeshi Movement, belongs to the period immediately afterward. The first political strike by the working class took place in 1912 in Bombay to
The impact of the October Revolution on the Indian National Movement was also not direct, but after the success of the Russian Revolution it began to be increasingly realised by the Indian leaders that nothing could be gained either by constitutional method or through the politics of the bomb. **What was most necessary and decisive was the intervention of the masses in political struggle.** The 1920’s thus saw the formation of Workers’ and Peasants’ Parties, the All India Trade Union Congress, and increasing workers and peasants struggles. The Non-Co-operation Movement was a direct result of this understanding and organisation.

The Russian Revolution also led to the propagation and spread of socialist ideas in India. The first Indian Communists were, in fact, trained in Soviet Russia. In India too, many congressmen under the influence of Marxism and as a result of the participation in people’s struggles broke away from the Congress and laid the foundations of the Communist Movement in India. Two major figures were A.K.Gopalan and E.M.S. Namboodiripad. The growth of the Communist Movement lent an altogether new dimension to the Indian National Movement. Class struggle i.e. workers struggle against the Indian capitalist class hence forth became an inherent part of the Indian struggle for freedom.

As a result of the growth of the left, the national movement as a whole was also radicalised. Within the Indian National Congress itself there emerged a Congress Socialist group. Jawaharlal Nehru particularly was deeply influenced by Soviet Russia, particularly by its anti-imperialist thrust. ‘Socialism’ became a pervasive term in the political vocabulary of the Indian leaders during this time. The 30’s saw the Indian National Movement reach a level where bourgeois hegemony of the national movement was seriously challenged by the left. Left oriented students and writers organisations were also formed.

The Indian National Movement became a part of the world wide struggle against Imperialism led by the Soviet Union, and it began also to be recognised as such by Indian leaders. Without the success of the Russian Revolution which weakened Imperialism at the world level, the Indian people’s fight against British Imperialism would have been much more difficult. It is not a coincidence that it was with the defeat of Fascism and the capitalist crisis after World War II that a process of decolonisation was precipitated.

Indian Independence, along with the Chinese Revolution and the formation of the peoples’ democracies in Europe, was won in the context of an uncompromising fight by the Soviet Union against Imperialism.

In India the R.I.N. Mutiny, the Tebhaga and the Telengana Movements (1946-48) about which you will study later played a major role in the history of political independence by India. These were led by the Indian Communists, who saw themselves as part of the world communist movement led by the Communist International. The Indian Communist Party outlined its strategy and tactics on the basis of an analysis of the Indian situation and the correlation of class forces in India, but in this it was guided by the experience of the successful revolutionary movement against the Russian Autocracy. Russia having been an economically backward country, just as India is, the experience of the Russian Revolution was particularly relevant to India. It is from the Russian experience, and its applicability to the specific Indian conditions, that the Indian Communist Party saw the Indian peoples struggle as a struggle of a two-stage revolution.

The British, on their part, saw in every struggle of the masses in India a “Bolshevik conspiracy” and the work of communists. Within a few months of the Russian Revolution they were forced to issue a declaration known as the Montagu Declaration, in which they promised the gradual development of institutions of self-government. They were totally unnerved by the response that the Bolshevik Decree on Peace evoked among the nations struggling for independence.

In 1921 when Kisan Sabhas were established all over U.P., the Times Correspondent reported that ‘Kisan Soviet’ have been established in India. Most of the time the Communists were forced to work underground and were subjected to extreme repression. The Meerut Conspiracy case trial was one example. Through this they sought to do away with what they called the ‘Bolshevik menace’. Thus, the positive and electrifying effect of the Russian Revolution in India, as well as the radicalisation of the Indian National Movement which followed, was accompanied by an impact also on the British policy in India. The British became increasingly repressive toward any nationalist upsurge. At the same time they sought to win over the reactionary sections of the Indian society to their side. Finding themselves inadequate to deal with the ‘Bolshevik Menace’ on their own, they tried...
They tried to present the Indian Communists as ‘anti-national’ in order to render them isolated from the main stream of the nationalist struggle. The Russian Revolution had contributed to the growth of a strong anti-imperialist perspective, and during the freedom movement the Indian nationalist leadership was very clearly and definitely on the side of the democratic struggles of the world. Most important of all, the success of the Russian Revolution and the achievements of the Soviet people, brought forth new questions in many developing countries—including India—questions such as what kind of development? development for whom?

It projected in concrete reality the idea that any development must have as its criteria the well being and interests of the vast majority of people. It must answer in some form the aspirations of the people. By building a qualitatively-different society—it brought to the forefront the necessity of revolution and socialism as an answer to the problems of development and social justice.

Check Your Progress 2
1 What were the economic changes introduced by the revolutionary regime?

2 What were the social benefits granted to all citizens of the Soviet Union?

3 Mention two aspects of the Bolsheviks’ international policy?

4 Why is the experience of the Russian Revolution so important for India?

14.7 LET US SUM UP

The event of 1917 are important for a variety of reasons. Firstly, they represented a revolutionary transformation in the political, social and economic structure of Russia. Secondly, they set in motion the forces which worked for the creation of a just and equal society. The post-revolutionary Russian society was based on the principle of equal opportunities to everybody for his self development. Thirdly, the Russian Revolution inspired all over the world, the struggles of the subject peoples and nations for liberation and a better order. The Indian liberation struggle in particular gathered momentum and a certain
direction from the Russian Revolution. And lastly, the Russians experience gave to the world a new model for social emancipation, economic development and political transformation.

14. Lenin

14.8 KEY WORDS

**Autocracy:** Absolute monarchy. A rule in which all political powers are concentrated in the hands of the king.

**Bolsheviks:** When the Russian Social-Democratic Party split into two groups in 1903, the group that constituted the majority in the Central Committee were known as Bolsheviks. In Russian, the word Bolshevik means majority. It was the Bolsheviks who were the most significant leaders of the Revolution. They consolidated the Revolution. After them the Russian Revolution is also known as Bolshevik revolution.

**Nationality:** Belonging to a nation i.e. having a common territory, language, culture.

**Planning:** Making an outline of how to run an economy for a with certain priorities, goals, and time period in mind.

**Right of nations to self-determination:** The right of any nation to be independent and to decide its own political future.

**Tsar:** The Russian King

**Workers' Control:** Workers decisive role in the production process and protection of their rights through their representatives.
14.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISE

Check Your Progress 1
1 See Section 14.2
2 Read Section 14.3
3 See Sub-sec. 14.3.4
4 (a) Tsar (b) Autocratic (c) Peasantry (d) Populist, socialist revolutionary and social democrat (e) 1917 (f) Provisional government (g) the bourgeoisie and landed aristocracy (h) Soviet
5 (i) × (ii)✓ (iii)✓ (iv) ×.

Check Your Progress 2
1 See Sub-sec. 14.5.1
2 See Sub-sec. 14.5.2
3 See Sub-sec. 14.5.4
4 See Section 14.6