



Hindustan-Soviet Union Relations Before independence

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Abstract

The economic and cultural relations of India and the Soviet Union are there since ancient times.¹ But the diplomatic relations are new.² Expenses of arid land and the almost impenetrable mountain ranges of Central Asia impose a formidable physical barrier between European Russia and the Indian subcontinent.³ A few traders and travellers made their way between the two regions as early as the twelfth century, but contacts over the years were extremely limited.⁴ There is ample evidence of this in the historical records of two countries.⁵ The relations between both the countries represented goodwill.⁶ The Russian writers obtained the first documents about the Indian information in the 11th and 12th centuries as translated in the Russian language from the Latin stories.⁷ They include the relations with India, comments on the prosperous country, stories, etc.⁸

Key words: Freedom , Revolutionary Russia, Conference, Economic, Possibility, Diplomatic, Prosperous

In the 15th Century in (1469-72) the main writing of Afanasi Nikitan while on the Voyage three oceans away was found detailed account of India.⁹ A Russian merchant named Afanasi Nikitin an enterprising merchant from Tver, arrived in India to explore possibilities of an Hindustan-Russian trade who visited quite a number of kingdoms in south India.¹⁰ After spending four years on the subcontinent, he returned home completely disenchanted in his enterprise. “Brethren, Russian Christians.” Nikitin exhorted his compatriots, “if any of you want to go to the Indian Land leave your faith behind and say Mohammed and then you can go... The infidel dogs have lied to me for there is nothing to be found in India for us: pepper and colours, these are cheap but bringing them by sea costs taxes and there are many pirates on the sea.” which helped arouse keen interest among the Russians in the life and culture of the Indian people. In the detailed Soviet dictionary there is a detailed account of the trader Gresham Laibay Dev who said to be the first Russian Indian specialist.¹¹ Trade between Moghul India and Russia was minimal. In the eighteenth century there were at any given time no more than a few dozen Indian merchants in Russia, most of whom were in Astrakhan. A few went beyond Astrakhan to Novgorod, Moscow and Saint Peterburg.¹² Soviet interest in the Indian subcontinent can be traced as far back as the seventeenth century when trade links with the Mogul Empire were established and Peter the Great (1682-1725) began the intermittent Tsarist dream of expansion in that direction.¹³ The interest of Russia in the events taking place in India went on growing throughout the nineteenth century. In the year 1851, Moscow University opened a chair of oriental languages, comprising primarily the languages of India. Later a chair of Sanskrit was set up in St. Petersburg University in 1955.

In 1797, I.F. Kreje Henshertan and Y.F. Lijanski both the boatsmen while traveling to India on a voyage on the British ships made available the information regarding increase in the trade



between both the countries.¹⁴ From the Indian side also many traders in the 17th Century visited this region and Astar Khan lying along the Volga river.

N.A. Dobro-lyubov in his *A Glance at History and Present Conditions in East India* (1857), for instance, mentioned that British rulers of those days always evoked the danger of a Russian invasion of India and kept it as a bogey – this despite the fact that such an invasion and occupation across the Himalayas presented so many logistical and other obstacles as to make it absurd.¹⁵ The British used this to prevent any coming together of Indians and Russians. Some Russians, like I.P. Minaev for instance, saw one thread running through British policy of those days whether it be in Khartoum, Armenia or Sofia, “everywhere you can see British interest born out of Britain’s sway over India and the consequent feat of losing that away.”¹⁶ Minavya himself had visited India twice times to the study of Bodh religion between 1874 and 1886 and attended the first session of the Indian national Congress held in Bombay in 1885 and was personally acquainted with leaders like W.C. Banerjee and K.C. Telang.¹⁷

From 1880 to 1884 the Russian Empire for the first time had extended its area of effective control as far as the Mery oasis on the northern frontier of Afghanistan. Since neither the British up a border commission to demarcate the Russo-Afghan border. A settlement was finally reached in 1887 and the boundary was formally agreed upon. The British agreed in the Durand Line was drawn to demarcate the Hindustan-Afghan border.¹⁸

While speaking at the third annual session Indian National Congress Party, held in Madras towards the end of December 1887, B.C. Pal emphatically said, “I am not a Russophobic ... I do not believe that Russia’s advance has been actuated by a policy, which has the invasion and conquest of India as its ultimate aim.”²⁰ Speaking in support of a Congress resolution on this question at its session in 1891, Dinshaw Wacha said, “Russia only responds to the British move. Outpost answers outpost and gun answers gun.”²¹

The proceedings of the various annual sessions of the Indian National Congress held between 1899 and 1900, bear testimony to the fact that the ‘Russia’ of the British Government did not find favour with the Indian National Congress. Great nationalist leaders like G.K. Gokhale maintained that there was no justification for holding such policy.²⁴

The congress also opposed Curzon’s policy of forestalling possible Russian moves by establishing Britain’s dominant influence in the small countries bordering India and described that policy as disastrous to India’s interests. The sentiments expressed in these resolutions and speeches were shared by all sections of Indian nationalists.²⁵

In 1908, Bal Gangadhar Tilak asserted that if the British resorted to oppressive Russian methods (of administration), then the Indian subjects, too, would be compelled to imitate, partially at least, the methods of the Russian people.³²

Gandhi’s closest bonds with Russia developed through the famous Russian writer and savant, Leo Tolstoy. As is well known, Gandhi looked upon the latter as a teacher and named his headquarters in South Africa as Tolstoy Farm. He also carried on an interesting correspondence with Tolstoy, informing him of the movement of Indians in South Africa and seeking his blessings. In his preface to Tolstoy’s *Letter to a Hindu* (1908), Gandhi wrote, “To me, as a humble follower of that great teacher whom I have long looked upon as one of my guides, it is a matter of honour to be



connected with the publication of his letter...”³³ Tolstoy fully reciprocated such sentiments. Replying to Gandhi’s first letter on October 7, 1909 he felt no doubt about his feeling of close kinship with Gandhi and other workers in South Africa and described them as “dear brothers and co-workers.”³⁴ After reading Gandhi’s Indian Home Rule (1909) Tolstoy wrote to him on May 8, 1910, I read your book with great interest because I think that the question you treat in the passive resistance is a question of the greatest importance not only for India but for the whole humanity.³⁵

Another great Russian writer, Maxim Gorky, showed equally keen interest in the Indian struggle for freedom. Inviting Shyamji Krishnavarma to contribute an article on the Indian struggle to the Russian Review Gorky wrote on 12 October 1912³⁶: “We must let know one people to the other, that every body who thirsts for justice, who desires to live in accordance with the intellect, should understand their unity, the unity of their aims, their spirit, and would be united in one and invincible strength which will conquer finally all the evil of the world.”³⁷

There are evidence to prove that early Indian revolutionaries like Bhupendra Nath Dutt, Sister Nivedita, G.D. Savarkar, V.D. Savarkar, Har Dayal, Madam Cama, Shyamji Krishnavarma, Virendranath Chattopadhyaya, S.R. Rana, Tarak Nath Das and several others took much of their inspiration from the Russian revolutionaries and anarchists.

Extremist Indian organizations like Abhinav Bharat of Maharashtra, Maniktola Garden group and Anushilan Samiti of Bengal, Ghadr Party led by Har Dayal with Branches in London, San Francisco and New York and revolutionary journals like Yugantar, Bande Matram, Free Hindustan and the Indian Sociologist were considerably influenced by the events taking place in revolutionary Russia.

Lenin, Head of the Soviet government, sent an Appeal to the Muslim Toilers of Russia and the East on 3 December 1917, and called upon the Persians, Turks, Arabs and Hindus to cast off the yoke of slavery and shape their own destinies. Lenin drew attention to the cruel exploitation of the Indian people by the so-called robbers of Europe and exhorted them to fight incessantly for their national emancipation.⁴²

In June 1918, the Soviet Republic’s National Commissariat for Foreign Affairs published a Blue Book on India. K.M. Troyanovski, remarked in his introduction, “India is the centre of Western activity in the East: India will, therefore, be the first fortress of the Revolution on the Eastern continent... We Russian Revolutionaries and International Socialists feel it our duty not only to rejoice at the announcement of a revolution in India but to support this Revolution by direct or indirect means and with all our power.”⁴³

Thus on November 23, 1918, he received the two brothers from Delhi, Abdul Jabbar Khairy and Abdul Sattar Khairy.⁴⁴ On May 7, 1919, he received a group of leaders headed by Raja Mahendra Pratap, justly described in a recent study as the first representative delegation of Indian revolutionaries to contact the head of the Soviet Government.⁴⁵ In his message to the Indian Revolutionary Association of Kabul sent in May 1920 Lenin said, “the toiling masses of Russia follow the awakening of the Indian worker and peasant with unbolting attention.”⁴⁶ Again the keen interest Lenin took in India was illustrated by his treatment of young Bengali revolutionary M.N. Roy, who arrived in Moscow via Mexico in the summer of 1920, just before the Second Congress of the Communist International held in July that year.



After the passing away of Lenin in 1924 the tone of Soviet writings on Gandhi gradually changed largely because of their failure to understand the background of the various shifts and turns in the movement led by him. This resulted in a one-sided and erroneous appraisal of that movement, a fact now openly acknowledged by Soviet scholars themselves.⁵²

In 1927, Pt. Jawahar Lal Nehru visited Moscow to attend the 10th anniversary celebration of Soviet Union revolution.⁵³ He was head of foreign Department of the Congress. India leadership was quite appreciative of the Soviet support to the cause of India's freedom. Hindustan-Soviet relationship had its roots, on the one hand in the struggle against Western imperialism and colonialism, and on the other hand in India's national interest. This growing friendship between India and the USSR was strongly resented by the United States which saw, in the emerging relationship, the Soviet attempt to spread communist ideology in South Asia. The pro-Soviet and anti-West attitude can be summed up in Nehru's words. He had given a detailed account in the book entitled, 'Soviet Russia',

Nehru's enthusiasm for the Soviet Union had also some effect on Gandhi who, in August 1928, published in three successive issues of his paper, *Young India*.

In 1930 Ravindra Nath Tagore was also impressed very much from his visit there. The great poet and savant, Rabindranath Tagore, added his powerful voice to those of Gandhi and Nehru in praise of the Soviet experiment.⁵⁸

This is clearly reflected in the 1936 speeches of Jawahar Lal Nehru while addressing the Congress.

Freier, published early in 1937, hailed the success of the Indian National Congress in the first elections under the Act of 1935, describing it as 'a mass anti-imperialist organization.'⁶¹ Again, two weeks after the outbreak of World War II the authoritative Soviet journal *World economy and World Politics* referred to the Congress as "the mass anti-imperialist organization of the Indian people...leading all organs in the anti-imperialist struggle."⁶² After the invasion of their land by Nazi Germany in 1941 the Soviet People were completely engrossed in a grim struggle for survival. It is not, therefore, surprising that they could not pay much attention to the political situation in India. They were, however, not completely silent. Towards the end of 1942, for instance, *World economy and World Politics* published an article by Melman, surveying the recent political developments in India, including the 'Quit India' movement and making a plea for ending the political deadlock in India.⁶³

Soviet Foreign Minister took the opportunity presented by the San Francisco Conference of the United Nations held in April 1945 to state the Soviet position on India in clear and unambiguous terms. He said, "we have at this conference, an Indian delegation, but India is not an independent state. We all know that the time will come when the voice of an independent India will be heard, too."⁶⁴

The Indian and the Soviet delegates held friendly and fruitful consultations with each other at the Paris Peace Conference.⁶⁵ India drew the attention of the Leading Soviet academicians. The Indian National Congress was frequently praised as 'the most influential' political party and a 'progressive organization' fighting for the emancipation of the country from the British yoke.⁶⁶ while criticizing Gandhi's Philosophy for having contained 'strong imprint of backwardness',



Dyakov observed that he was still ‘the most influential and popular leader’ in India.⁶⁷ In another article, he praised Nehru’s assessment of the international situation and projected his image as a ‘progressive democrat’⁶⁸ Pravda criticized the divide and rule policy of the Cabinet Mission Plan⁶⁸ and later praised Nehru.⁷⁰

December, 1946 where he wrote, “only the granting of full independence to India can guarantee the settlement of her internal antagonism.”⁷¹

In a broadcast to the nation, made on 7 September 1946, as Vice-President of the Interim Government

“To that other great nation of the modern world, the Soviet Union, which also carries a vast responsibility for shaping world events, we send our greetings. They are our neighbours in Asia and inevitably we shall have to undertake many common tasks and have much to do with each other”⁷³

After meeting Molotov in New York on 28 September 1946. V.K. Krishna Menon observed that he did not see any reason as to why the strongest feelings of friendship between India and the USSR should not form the permanent basis of closer Hindustan-Soviet relations.⁷⁶ Menon delivered Nehru’s personal message to Molotove asking for assistance to meet the famine situation in India.

In a meeting of the Constituent Assembly held on 14 March 1947, he showed his interest in the Russian Five-Year Plan.

It was significant, therefore, that when the first Asian Relation Conference was convened in Delhi from 23 March to 2 April 1947, delegates from seven Caucasian and Central Asian Republics of the Soviet Union attended.⁸² While welcoming other fellow Asians, Nehru also bade welcome to those “from the Soviet Republics of Asia which have advanced so rapidly in our generation and which have so many lessons to teach us.”⁸³ That members of this group were represented in the Provisional Council that was formed was of added significance.

India’s keenness to befriend the Soviet Union was seen when at the earliest opportunity available agreement was reached to establish diplomatic relations between the two countries⁸⁷. On 25 June 1947 (i.e. even a few weeks before independence) Vijaylakshmi Pandit was appointed India’s first Ambassador to the Soviet Union.⁸⁸ She presented her credentials on 13 August, two days before India and Pakistan were formally and finally severed to become fully independent states, while her Soviet counterpart presented his, on 1 January 1948.⁸⁹

Conclusion

The main reason was the pro-regional doubtful and the diffident outlook of Stalin. But Nehru favoured strong relations with the Soviet Union from the beginning.⁹⁰ The relations between India and the Soviet Union could not develop along the lines envisaged by Nehru in his mentioned views. The situation was completely altered after the Second World War, Britain, as a victorious ally, was indeed recognized as one of the Big Powers, but the real power had passed into the hands of the two super powers. Since, both Britain and USSR were allies in the Second World War their pre-war rivalry had disappeared. But, as mentioned earlier, the new rivalry between USA and USSR had come to dominate international relations. It is in this atmosphere of Cold War rivalry that India tried to develop friendly relations with both the power blocs.

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