

Russia's Soviet Past: Understanding the Policy of Nationality

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ABSTRACT

Although the common historical development and joint struggle against foreign invaders strengthened the bonds of unity in Russia, the ethno-cultural and religious diversity gave rise to incipient nationalist movements and the emergence of the national question as an outstanding issue in the former Soviet Union. Before 1917 both Lenin and Stalin were staunch opponents of federalism and favored the establishment of a highly centralized unitary state structure in Russia. However, towards the beginning of 1918 when they were confronted with the task of building the new multi-national Soviet state structure, their former hostility to federalism underwent a radical change. They recognized that the adoption of a federal constitution was “a step forward” in the objective of merging the workers of different nationalities and in unifying their economic resources for building socialism. Thus, soon after the establishment of the Soviet state, Bolsheviks were equipped with both a policy framework and administrative machinery for carrying out the momentous task of building a supra-national state and implementation of the Leninist formulations on the nationality question. But during the 1980s Gorbachev boldly began to unfold his ideas of overhauling the Soviet system. He thus called into question the legitimatising principle of the Soviet state and thereby undermined the ideological hegemony of the Marxist-Leninist theory. The article, therefore, outlines ‘nationality debate’ between Lenin and other Socialists which evolved the Soviet nationalities policy besides analyzing the changes thereafter occurred in this policy under various Soviet leaders until the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Key Words : Marxist-Leninist theory, Nationality Policy, Glasnost, Perestroika, Soviet Collapse

INTRODUCTION

Russia in its past represented a complex mixture of various ethnic groups dating back to antiquity, with a large number of races and ethnic groups diverse in language, religion, culture and customs. The first All Russian Census taken in 1897 estimated that nearly 104 distinct nationalities inhabited the territory of the Tsarist Empire.¹ During the Soviet period the people were inter-related through old ethnic ties, which accounted for a number of common features in their culture, economy and way of life. Their common historical development and joint struggle against foreign invaders strengthened these bonds of unity. Yet the ethno-cultural and religious diversity gave rise to incipient nationalist movements and the emergence of the national question as an outstanding issue in the former

Soviet Union.

In spite of the growing importance of the national question, few political parties gave serious consideration to it. However, the Russian Social Democratic Workers Party (RSDRP) endeavored to break away completely from the influence of Great Russian nationalism. Its growing awareness about the national question was indicated by the manifesto it issued in its founding Congress in 1898 and at its Second Congress in 1903. The RSDRP adopted a resolution calling for the right of nations to self-determination.² The controversy on the right of nations to self-determination in the Social Democratic circles did not end there. The Polish Social Democrat, Rosa Luxemburg, charged that the recognition accorded by RSDRP to the right of nations to self-determination was tantamount to supporting the bourgeois

nationalism of the oppressed nation.

In the writings of Marx and Engel the treatment of the question of national liberation and self-determination was peripheral. Their views on various issues pertaining to national question have mainly been found in relation to its bearing on the concept and practice of proletarian revolution. The writings of Marx and Engel on the Irish problem marked an important stage in evolution of their thought on the national question. However, they never thought that colonial conditions in various countries of Asia and Africa would give rise to powerful anti-imperialist struggle. Marx and Engel regarded colonialism primarily as an economic issue. Neither Marx nor Engel offered a precise definition of the concepts Nation and Nationalism. Nationalism was virtually neglected or its significance underplayed in Marxist theory and was described as a part of an illusory communal interest. However, at the level of political activism, both Marx and Engel acknowledged nationalism as “real force.” The duo, in the opinion of Walker Conner, was influenced more substantively by national concept than they were probably aware. Walker Conner while referring to the theoretical and practical strains of Marxism states that “this most famous credo of nationalism was drafted by history’s most famous internationalist.”³ Thus with the rise of nationalism as an important socio-political phenomenon, the Marxists were forced to operate on two relatively different planes, discussing nationalism in theory and yet acknowledging it as a real force in practice.

Marx viewed nation as a historical phenomenon of the capitalist social system. According to Marx, the bourgeoisie, the dominant class within the capitalist system fosters nationalism in three ways:

- Conflicting economic interests between the imperial countries give rise to national hostility.
- Exploitation of the colonial country by the imperial country engenders national consciousness in the former.
- The bourgeoisie employs the tool of nationalism to maintain its domination over the working class.⁴

Evolution of Soviet Nationalities Policy under Lenin and Stalin:

Lenin’s Soviet nationality policy is essentially rooted in Marxist thought. Lenin recognized the revolutionary significance of the national question in the colonial countries and he worked to harness its revolutionary

potential to further the cause of the proletarian revolution in Russia. Lenin encountered theoretical opposition from Rosa Luxemburg and Left-Bolsheviks on this issue. The chief tenets of Leninist formulations on the national question evolved in the process of a long drawn polemical debate in the first place between Lenin and Austro-Marxists and later between Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg and finally between Lenin and the Left-Bolsheviks.⁵ In his theoretical diatribe against his socialist colleagues, Lenin was helped by Stalin whose writing *Marxism and National Question* together with Leninist writings on the issue provided the framework for the formulation of the ‘Soviet Nationality Policy’. It would be appropriate, therefore, to briefly outline ‘nationality debate’ between Lenin and other Socialists.

In an article entitled ‘On Cultural National Autonomy’, Lenin denounced the Austrian Socialist formulations on the national question.⁷ He based his criticism on the following suppositions, which were latter applied to the Russian situation.

- Lenin rejected the constitutional means of solving the national question. He was conscious of the fact that the nationalist fermentations among the non-Russians nationalities constituted a very potent revolution, which the socialists should try to harness.
- The doctrine of national cultural autonomy was abhorrent to Lenin because it implied the federalist and decentralized reorganization of the Socialist Party. This doctrine had repercussions within the Russian Social Democratic Party.⁸

Both Lenin and Stalin denounced the ‘cultural national autonomy’ concept of the Austro-Marxists. According to Stalin, a nation comprised of four fundamental elements (i) Community of territory, (ii) Community of language, (iii) Community of economic life and (iv) Community of psychological makeup. He defined nation as a “historically evolved, stable community of language, territory, economic life and Psychological makeup, manifested in a community of culture.”⁹ He then proceeded to criticize Otto Bauer for his historical definition of the nation. A nation for Bauer is the “aggregate of people bound into a community of character by a community of state”¹⁰. Stalin accused Bauer of creating a mystical concept of the nation and of ignoring the objective character of nationhood and changing historical and economic conditions which produced it. Stalin was of the opinion that the nation was not a

permanent unit but simply a symptom of a certain phase of historical evolution, namely the phase of rising Capitalism. Stalin's work, *Marxism and the national question*, established Stalin's reputation as a Marxist theoretician of note on the national question. He expressed concern at the growing tide of nationalism all over Russia. To protect the workers from the general 'epidemic', Stalin called upon the Social Democrats to unfurl their banner of internationalism and to stress the unity and indivisibility of the class struggle.¹¹ Both Lenin and Stalin did not approve the national cultural autonomy concept of the Austro-Marxist, as it would make the workers look to their national bourgeoisie for guidance rather than to their proletarian class brothers.

The other theoretical opponent of Lenin on the national question was Rosa Luxemburg who was seconded by extreme left wing within the Bolshevik group, Bukharin, Pyatakov and Radek. Rosa Luxemburg in her famous book, *The Accumulation of Capital*, stated that the right to self-determination of nations implies in reality the support for bourgeois nationalism. She expressed the undesirability of the Communists engaging themselves in bourgeois democratic affairs such as the national problem also for the reasons that the right of self-determination of nations is an abstract and not a physical right and that the independence of small nation is utopian from the economic point of view. She was of the opinion that the Socialists should prepare for an immediate proletarian revolution.¹²

While refuting the theoretical assumptions of the Austrian Marxists, Rosa Luxemburg and the Left-Bolsheviks, Lenin formulated his own theory on the national question. The sharpening of national conflicts in Eastern Europe especially in Balkans and in Russia too convinced Lenin that the national question could not be evaded. On the undesirability of the Socialists engaging themselves in bourgeois democratic affairs such as the national question, Lenin admitted that "Marxism is irreconcilable with nationalism even if it is the fairest, purest, most refined and civilized nationalism. Marxism advocates internationalism in place of nationalism of any kind."¹³ However, he accused Rosa Luxemburg of being blind to historical realities. Both he and Stalin pointed out that nation was historical category belonging to the epoch of rising capitalism. The development of capitalism was everywhere accompanied by the growth of national movements seeking to establish national states. These national movements were being spearheaded by

bourgeoisie.¹⁴

Lenin believed that the cause of the proletarian revolution could only be furthered by resolving the national question. Departing from Marx's formulation, Lenin called for active collaboration between the progressive nationalism of Eastern Europe and that of the colonies with the working class movement to jointly fight imperialism by voicing the demand of the latter of political self-determination. The emphasis of Lenin on resolving the national question on a priority basis is evident from his outburst against Karl Radek, one of the members of the extreme Bolshevik group.¹⁵ Lenin and his associates were preoccupied with advocating the right of nation to self-determination. However, the basic Marxist hostility to nationalism did not prevent Lenin from recognizing the historical legitimacy of national movements. He asked the critics of the nationalities policy of the RSDRP to ponder over the national question in Russia, as it had existed at the beginning of the twentieth century. He drew attention to the fact that except for the Great Russian nationality, other nationalities were languishing under the oppressive Tsarist regime, which denied them their legitimate national claims. Reasserting the Marxist dictum that no nation could be free if it oppressed other nations, Lenin declared that the only way of showing disapproval of Tsarist policy of national oppression was by recognizing the right of oppressed nations to complete political self-determination.¹⁶

In Lenin's opinion, such an advocacy of the right of nations to self-determination becomes obligatory. He thought it was impossible to break away from the occurred history of Tzarism in the national sphere without ensuring complete equality of all nations and making the recognition of the right of self-determination the cornerstone of the nationalities policy of the future socialist government of Russia. Lenin made it clear that the demand for self-determination did not contradict his basic centralist views. He wrote, "We demand the freedom of self-determination, *i.e.* independence, *i.e.* the freedom of secession for the oppressed nations, not because we dream of economic disintegration or because we cherish the idea of small states, but on the contrary, because we are in favour of large states and the closer unity and even the fusion of nations but on a truly democratic, truly international basis which is inconceivable without the freedom of secession".¹⁷

Most of the Bolsheviks, including Stalin, Pyatakov, Bukharin and others, treated the right of self-determination

as a doctrine valid only for capitalist conditions and considered that it had no place under Socialism. However, countering the thesis of Stalin, Pyatakov and others that the right of self-determination of nations had no meaning under socialism, Lenin stated that the right was as valid under capitalism as during the initial stages of socialism. He categorically asserted, “the necessity of proclaiming and granting of freedom to all oppressed nations will be as urgent in the socialist revolution as it was urgent for the victory of the bourgeois democratic revolution.”¹⁸ Lenin in his reply to the critics defended the right of nations to self-determination both under imperialism as well as under the initial stage of socialism. Lenin developed a working formula for the application of the right to self-determination by the future socialist government of Russia. Lenin strongly condemned the view that Social Democrats should cease their advocacy of the right of self-determination. Lenin rejected Rosa Luxemburg’s thesis that the objective conditions were ripe for an immediate proletarian revolution and that the socialists should not engage in bourgeois matters of national question. He argued, that it had become essential to formulate the right of self-determination and other democratic rights and advocate them in order to draw a wider stratum of population both within the East European states and in the colonies into the revolutionary struggle.¹⁹

But, this did not mean that Lenin thought that socialism would perpetuate nationalism for all time. On the contrary, he firmly believed that socialism would not only abolish the present division of mankind into small national states but would ultimately merge them. Though Lenin was dedicated to the right of self-determination of nations and were more committed to the socialist revolution and the unity of the working class movement, he was hostile to any suggestion or measure which would bring about division in the working class which would harm the cause of socialist revolution. Adopting the relativist approach of Marx and Engel towards the national movement, Lenin often argued that the revolutionary potential of the national movements should be harnessed to fight imperialism and consequently promote the cause of socialism. Thus, the right of self-determination of nations did not prevent the Bolsheviks from proclaiming the primacy of the claims of socialism over national state to achieve a socialist order. Leninist formulation on the nationality question was informed by several abiding concerns. First, sharp distinction was made between the nationalism of the oppressed (the non-

Russians of Russia), which were to be treated with empathy as an expression of true grievances and the wholly objectionable nationalism of the oppressors (the Tsarist government dominated by the Russians), which was to be fought tooth and nail. Secondly, non-Russians in the empire had the right to set up their own nation states, by exercising the right to self-determination. This clearly reflected Lenin’s awareness of the revolutionary potential of ethnically defined liberation struggles and his wish to use them, which he did with considerable effect in the October Revolution of 1917. Thirdly, however, the supreme task was to spread the socialist revolution and ethnic demands were secondary to this and to be subsumed under it.

Thus one of the first acts of the Bolsheviks after they seized power in Petrograd in October 1917 was to release a document entitled, Rights of the Peoples of Russia.²⁰

The rights comprised the following guarantees:

- The equality and sovereignty of the people of Russia.
- The rights of the people of Russia to free self-determination even to the point of separation and formation of independent states.
- The abolition of all kinds of national and national-religious privileges and limitations.
- The free development of national minorities and ethnic groups inhabiting Russia.

These four principles later were to form the basis of the Soviet nationality policy.

Even before Stalin assumed the reins of the government, his point of view on the nationality question had begun showing deviation from the Leninist formulation. In the Seventh Congress of the Party held in April 1917, the drafting commission under the influence of Stalin and Piatakov virtually rejected the Leninist interpretation of the right of self-determination. Under the conditions of socialism, Stalin and his followers argued that the solution of splitting of great state formations into small national states lost its meaning and gave the slogan of “away with the frontiers.” Stalin and Piatakov’s stance angered Lenin who remarked, “We have been arguing so much about this question ever since 1903 that it is difficult to say much about it now. Go where you please. He who does not accept this point of view is an annexionist, a chauvinist.”²¹ Lenin denounced the resolution as being an expression of chauvinism. Defending the right of nations to self-determination once

again, Lenin declared that there was nothing if Finland, Poland and the Ukraine broke away from Russia and branded those who opposed their right to such a separation as chauvinists. As a result of this personal intervention of Lenin, this draft was rejected and the Congress by a substantial majority adopted a resolution on the national question which declared that all nations composing Russia must have full right to separate and to form independent states. Denial of such a right, and failure to take measures that guarantee its practical realization, are tantamount to supporting the policy of seizures and annexations. For nations not desiring to separate from Russia, *i.e.* not desiring to exercise their right to self-determination, the Congress recommended, regional autonomy, abolition of control from above, abolition of compulsory state language, drawing of boundary lines of the self-governing and autonomous regions on the basis of consideration by the local population itself of economic and ethnic conditions, of the national composition of the population etc.

Stalin repudiating the right to secession stated that “the demand for the secession of the border regions from Russia as the form that should be given to the relations between the center and the border regions must be rejected.”²² Stalin and his supporter, the Red Army commander Ordznikidze outrightly annexed Georgia in 1921. Local Bolsheviks were also curbed and their quest for autonomy dismissed as “National Communism.” Lenin on his death bed wrote: “I have been very remiss for not having intervened energetically and decisively enough in the notorious question of autonomisation”²³, thereby reasserting his belief in the need for positive discrimination towards the nationalism of the oppressed. Stalin’s ascendance witnessed the absolute confrontation of power through the virtual domination of party organization, the army and the political police which made any right to self-determination only a formality.²⁴ Police systematically destroyed any support for and any expression of local autonomy regardless of its roots. The early years of Stalin’s regime saw purges of “bourgeois nationalists” who were eliminated or removed from party positions for voicing nationalist demands. The forcible deportation of whole nationalities – Crimean Tatars, Meshkhetians, Germans, Chechens, etc., from their homelands on charges of treason was reflective of the dictatorial power of Stalin and his insensitiveness to ethnic feelings. Stalin declared at the Tenth Party Congress in 1921, “the essence of the national question in the Soviet

Union is to liquidate the economic, political and cultural backwardness of the nationalities”.²⁵

Stalin was playing the role of what Lenin would have described, the Great Russian chauvinist. A rewriting of history began where Russian Princes and Tsars were glorified. Stalin’s pronouncement during the victory celebrations in 1945, described the Russians as “the leading people of the Soviet Union”. However, he did not tamper with the federal format of the constitution and gave adequate impetus to the development and preservation of cultural and linguistic expression of the ethnic groups. Successors of Stalin except for certain modifications continued to follow a policy with regard to the nationalities as formulated by Lenin and Stalin. This was the form into which the Soviet nationalities policy crystallized after its evolution from the platform of the RSDRP.

Recognition of Federal Scheme:

Before 1917 both Lenin and Stalin were staunch opponents of federalism and favored the establishment of a highly centralized unitary state structure in Russia. Marx had severely rebuked Proudhon for advocating federalism as a solution to national problem. Lenin and Stalin too criticized the Austro-Marxists for proposing federalism as a solution to the nationality problem in the Habsburg empire.²⁶ Lenin had written that Marxists are “opposed to federation and decentralization” and that “while and in so far as, different nations constitute a single state, Marxists will never under any circumstances advocate either the federal principle or decentralization.” However, towards the beginning of 1918 when they were confronted with the task of building the new multi-national Soviet state structure, their former hostility to federalism underwent a radical change. They recognized that the adoption of a federal constitution was “a step forward” in the objective of merging the workers of different nationalities and in unifying their economic resources for building socialism. In the declaration of the “Rights of the Toiling and Exploited Peoples” adopted by the Third All Russian Congress of Soviets on 25 January, 1918, it was stated that “the Soviet Russian Republic is established on the basis of a free union of free nations as a federation of Soviet national republics.”²⁷

In April 1918, a constitutional commission was established to prepare a draft of a new document to describe the relations between the regions and the centre. The commission recommended the creation of federal

units based on national-territorial principle. The principle gave formal status and political recognition to the leading nationalities and recognized their claim to homeland. The new territorial-nationalities were also invested with administrative apparatus to look after the affairs of the federal units. The national-territorial principle thus gave a sense of self determination, a promise of autonomy and a feeling of natural representation to the national minorities. For implementing its nationalities policy the Soviet government created a special organ, the Peoples Commissariat for Nationality Affairs (Narkomnats) with Stalin as the first chairman for overseeing the implementation of the Soviet nationality policy. Towards the end of 1918 the organs of the Narkomnats were also established within various autonomous territories.²⁸

Thus, soon after the establishment of the Soviet state, Bolsheviks were equipped with both a policy framework and an administrative machinery for carrying out the momentous task of building a supra-national state and implementation of the Leninist formulations on the nationality question. In place of the policy of the national state pursued by the Tsarist regime in the multi-national Russian empire, the Soviet government put into practice a policy which aimed at building a number of republics which in proportion to the size of their territory, population and economic resources, were given an appropriate degree of internal autonomy. The expression “national in form but socialist in content” describes the reconciliation effected by the Bolsheviks in their nationalities policy between the rival claims of nationalism and socialism.

Soviet Nationality Policy under Khrushchev and Brezhnev:

Khrushchev's nationality policy was in many ways, a departure from Stalin's. He sought to undo the harsh measures perpetrated by Stalin. In 1956, Khrushchev condemned his predecessor's crimes and acknowledged that “under Stalin there had been ‘monstrous’ and gross violations of the basic Leninist principles of the nationalities policy of the Soviet state. The entire nations had been deported on spurious ground. Khrushchev sought to undo the harsh measures perpetrated by Stalin. Charges of treason against many of these nationalities were withdrawn and they were rehabilitated.²⁹ The harsh face of Stalin's regime was watered down by putting an end to the mass terror tactics and the “thaw” brought much greater freedom of expression and the rehabilitation of national cultures. However a strict watch on the

manifestations of nationalist tendencies was kept and any such appearances were brutally curbed.

Khrushchev came to realize that in order to gain control of the ministerial apparatus, decentralization of the decision making process was imperative. He sought to devolve power by shifting away from the branch principle of organization and invested the decision making authority to the local bodies. A reflection of the growing confidence of the central authority in the local nationalities was seen in the indigenisation of the party and government machineries unlike the Stalinist regime. The central authority was now willing to allow decisions to be made by the local elites.³⁰ However, Khrushchev's de-Stalinisation process was reversed after 1958 in order to promote the assimilationist policy.

In theoretical pronouncements, Khrushchev expressed optimistic exuberance when in the Twenty Second Party Congress in 1961, he remarked, “The party has solved one of the most complex problem which has plagued mankind for ages and remains acute in the world of capitalism to this day, the problem of relations between nations.” Khrushchev spoke of *Sliianie* (Fusion) of nations.³¹ This gave currency to a debate that since the national question was now solved, the rationale for the existence of the federal republics had evaporated. P.G. Semenov initiated this debate among scholars who suggested that the federal division had outlived its usefulness and might be dispensed with in the near future. In fact the idea of “defederalization” had gained such wide currency that Twenty Second Party Congress, in October 1961 proposed, “the borders between the Union Republics are increasingly losing their former significance since life is organized on a single socialist foundation and they are all united into one family by common vital interest and are advancing together towards a single goal, Communism.” However, surprisingly nothing came out of the party proclamation.

Brezhnev, who did not announce a formal nationality policy until 1972, contradicted the theoretical formulation of Khrushchev. On the occasion of the celebrations of the fiftieth anniversary of USSR, He propagated the formula which became the hallmark of the Brezhnev period. He adopted a dialectical solution to the national question. Brezhnev adopted a compromise formula that gave due importance to national distinctiveness. He pronounced that the Soviet nationality policy, in sharp contrast to Khrushchev, advocated the *rastvet* (development) of the nations and *sblizhenie*

(rapprochement) of nations. Proclaiming himself to be against the forcible increase in the pace of *sblizhenie* process, Brezhnev maintained that the best national traditions, values and tendencies would be promoted in the Soviet multinational state. Brezhnev policies led to a revival of national cultures. The atheistic propaganda in the Central Asian region lost much of its punch and drive.³²

Brezhnev's handling of the federal republics had an important bearing on the nationality relations. He continued the policy of recruitment of natives in the higher levels of party organization. The national elites were given considerable leverage in administering their own republics so long as republic's economic performance was satisfactory and nationalism was kept in check. However, Brezhnev's patronage led to nepotistic style of functioning at the republican level, which was more glaringly evident in Central Asia.

A Shift in Nationality Policy under Gorbachev:

Soon after assuming the leadership, Gorbachev boldly began to unfold his ideas of overhauling the Soviet system. He began by arguing that socialism essentially meant a humane and democratic society and that the Soviet Union must create such a political system which could function under unrestricted democratic control and guidance of the Soviet people as a whole. To achieve this objective he pleaded for frank debates and discussions and for participation of the people in the affairs of the country. He called for an end to censorship and free flow of information. These ideas soon crystallized into what came to be known as *glasnost*. Close on the heels of *glasnost*, Gorbachev embarked on a comprehensive restructuring of the Soviet society. *Perestroika* as the new programme was christened, which meant, at the political level, introduction of democratic norm and conduct in the functioning of the government. However, the major thrust of *perestroika* was to introduce basic changes in the planning, management and functioning of the Soviet command economy which had been for the last few decades marked by stagnation, low productivity, shortages, inferior quality consumer goods, rampant official corruption and a flourishing black market. *Perestroika* and *glasnost* though not linked in any way to the objective of bringing about changes in the 'nationality relations' virtually transformed the "nationality question" in the USSR and brought it to the fore of the national agenda.³³

In the pre-Gorbachevian period all powerful central authority used its overwhelming political and coercive clout to impose its authority and decisions on the republics. However, with the inauguration of the era of *glasnost* and *Perestroika* things began to change and the sphere of nationality relations did not remain untouched by these far-reaching changes. Promotion of *glasnost* and pluralism and loosening of the coercive control mechanisms oversaw devolution of certain kind of "political resources" to the periphery resulting in widespread ethnic activism. Gorbachev sponsored *glasnost* fostered a climate of open discussion and debate on virtually all issues including the nationality question. The new practice of deliberating on and inviting criticisms of the past and present served to accentuate ethnic consciousness and national differences. For instance an open review of Stalin's policy during the Second World War which was referred as the finest example of the Soviet unity, now served to intensify ethnic antagonism towards the central authority. During the Second World War, Stalin's mass deportation of certain nationalities (Meshkhetians, Crimean Tatars, Volga Germans, Chechens etc.) and the dissolution of the homeland of many of these ethnic groups and the Stalin- Hitler pact costing the Baltic republics their independence came in for scathing criticism, especially from the concerned ethnic groups. Secondly, critical examination of the state policies, particularly with reference to the language, culture, religion and history of the various ethnic groups gave rise to a widespread perception that these policies were discriminatory promoting Russification and threatening the ethno- national identity of the groups concerned. Thirdly, the discussions also pertained to the inequalities inherent in the federal structure.

The new writings emphasized upon the necessity of restructuring the politico-economic framework of the Soviet state and of establishing a genuine federal arrangement. The Soviet press was organized along ethno-linguistic and ethno-territorial lines rather than functional ones. With the result, the press tended to provide a "national perspective" of the policies of the government, and the happenings and events. In this way the republican press provided stimulus to national activism.³⁴ The local intelligentsia played a leading role in the debate and discussion on nationality issues. Spurred by a sense of ethnic discrimination and the need to promote their language and culture, they found the climate of *glasnost* opportune to organize themselves into clubs or people's

fronts to articulate the aspirations and demands of their ethnic groups. They began mobilizing public opinion and even launched agitations on the need to promote greater democratization in the republics, to foster the growth of national language and culture and finally to protect environment and advance the economic interests of the republic. In course of time these fronts including the *Birlik and Erk*, especially the former emerged as the champions of the ethnic cause in Central Asia.

Various organs of the police state were systematically dismantled or considerably eroded. The loosening of the coercive control apparatus “contributed to an explosion in public activism throughout the Soviet Union.”³⁵ In the pre-*glasnost* period, demonstrations and public protests were few because there was every likelihood of the participants being persecuted or punished. However, since Gorbachev assumed the realms of power, both the number of demonstrations and the participants increased dramatically. The central authority as well as the republican leadership showed willingness to negotiate with these groups. However, more importantly most of these demonstrations were ethno-nationalist in nature.

Gorbachev changed the matrix of Soviet politics. There was a sea change in the Soviet politics with the arrival of Gorbachev. Public opinion now emerged as an important factor in Soviet politics. In a desperate bid to legitimate its rule and authority, both in the eyes of the central authority and the population over which it ruled, the local authority sought rapprochement with the dominant nationality of the republic heeding public views and voicing their concerns. Gorbachev, in an attempt to overcome the stagnation in the Soviet economy especially, in the context of Central Asia has cut subsidies and reduced amounts of turnover tax redistribution. Massive irrigation projects were abandoned and the republics were made to rely on their own resource mobilization. The economic measures alienated the republics further and consequently infused an economic content to Uzbek ethno-nationalism.

Glasnost and *perestroika* had another important bearing on the nationalities question. The twin policies resulted in a gradual but steady erosion of the “traditional normative framework” of the USSR and also gave increasing impetus to the ideologies of democracy and distributive justice with the perception and projection of the ruling communist regime as being autocratic, discriminatory and oppressive. There was a sea change with the introduction of *Glasnost and Perestroika*, in

the position and power of the CPSU. Gorbachev, perceiving reluctant support from the party apparatus and bureaucracy to his reform endeavors sought to mobilize public opinion in an attempt to garner support for his reform programmes. The CPSU General Secretary sought to mobilize public opinion in favor of restructuring. In his enthusiastic fervor, he went overboard displaying considerable lack of political astuteness and skill and supported all forms of popular activism. This encouraged more and more groups to take up issues concerning people at large and most of these issues were ethno-nationally inspired. Hundreds of informal organizations mushroomed up overnight in the Baltic Republics, Central Asian Republics and the Trans-Caucasian Republics demanding protection and promotion of their language and culture and raised vital issues of economic and political relationship between the Republics and Moscow. The CPSU and the government came under severe flak from these informal groups. Moreover, Gorbachev denounced various aspects of Soviet history. He thus called into question the legitimatising principle of the Soviet state and thereby undermined the ideological hegemony of the Marxist-Leninist theory. The gaps between socialist theory and practice were revealed. With the quick delegitimation of the communist party and ideology, nationalist causes occupied the political spaces which were created by Gorbachev’s policies.

Gorbachev showed little interest in either tackling specific situations or formulating a nationality policy designed to solve the ethnic question. His non-performance in this sphere of Soviet life is noteworthy. The statements of Gorbachev in the initial years of his reign on the nationality question seem to assume that there was nothing more to Soviet national relations than “boundless harmony,” “friendship and brotherhood.” He never tired of repeating the platitudes of his predecessors that the nationality question had been “solved”. On May 8, 1985, in a speech on the Fortieth anniversary of the victory in World War Second, Gorbachev echoing Brezhnev remarked, “The blossoming of nations and nationalities is organically connected to their all round drawing together.”³⁶

Conclusion:

Quite contrary to his predecessors Gorbachev’s policies saw the first inklings of his reforms in the nationality policy at the nineteenth party conference in the summer of 1988. Gorbachev outlined his first tentative

ideas to restructure the Soviet nationality policy which were chiefly related to the working of the Soviet federation. In the face of rapidly deteriorating ethnic relations with major inter-ethnic conflicts erupting in Georgia, Nagorno-Karabakh and Uzbekistan, Gorbachev suggested bringing far-reaching reforms in the federal setup of the Soviet Union in the first serious discussion on the nationality question. However, it became clear by the early 1990s with the demands for greater sovereignty acquiring intensity that only a reconsideration of the very basis of Soviet statehood would satisfy the aspirations of the various republics and nationalities. Gorbachev after being elected as President called for the conclusion of a "New Union Treaty". The draft advocated the formation of a "Sovereign federal democratic republic" based upon the voluntary union of republics with equal rights each of which would have the option of choosing its own form of government. The Union Treaty was to serve as the basis of a new constitution and the framework of a new government was also outlined.³⁷

The characteristics of the new Union Treaty were in many respects of far-reaching consequences. The republics were allowed to choose their own forms of property rights and government, which constituted a major attack on the existing state structure. Negating the massive mandate of the acceptance of the New Union Treaty Gorbachev abjectly surrendered to certain other amendments in the treaty, which virtually amounted to the dissolution of the Soviet state paradoxically under the plea of saving the state. Even this diluted treaty was rejected by five of the fourteen republics of the former Soviet Union. A series of declaration of republican independence thereafter signed the death-warrant of the first communist state in the world, thus bringing drastic changes in the nationality policy of contemporary Russia.

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