

Domestic Reforms of Peter the Great

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Introduction

The accession of Peter the Great on the Czarist throne of Russia in 1682 heralded the dawn of a new era in Russian history. The process of modernisation and westernisation received a great impetus. Russia in the 17th century presented a picture of backwardness. Though not completely estranged from Europe, the Russians were happy to maintain a distance from Europe.

The Russian maintained a long association with some barbarous peoples of Asia. After a couple of centuries of expansion, from 1450 to 1650, starting from MOSCOW, The Russians had not quite reached the BALTIC and the BLACK SEA. The Russian society was secluded, too. Women of the upper classes were secluded and even wore veils. Men wore dresses which showed influence of Central Asia rather than of Europe. Old customs still prevailed. Superstition remained intact among all classes of society, particularly in the church and state. The Russian church did not sponsor or promote educational or charitable institutions as was done by the Catholic and Protestant churches of Europe. Churchmen were afraid of the intrusion of the western culture. Magic and miracle held sway over Russians church and society. Of course, Russia in the 17th century was not totally un-European. Some European social and political institutions existed in Russia, too. It possessed a variant of the manorial and feudal systems. It also possessed parliamentary institutions called DUMA or the COUNCIL OF RETAINERS and ADVISORS to the CZAR, and national assembly, resembling the estates in western Europe. Moreover, the Russian peasantry was turning into an abyss of helpless serfdom in the 17th century as in other parts of Eastern Europe in the same period. In short. Russia was slowly developing contact with the west in spite of her reluctance to do so.



The Reforms

The appearance of Peter in the political firmament of Europe in 1682 hastened the process, so much so as to be called a social revolution. Peter got acquaintance with the west right in Moscow itself; a section of the city called GERMAN QUARTER contained people of various European nationalities and Peter in his boyhood frequented the place. Moreover, Peter loved sea and this took him to ARCHANGEL, the only seaport of Russia at that time, where he had his preliminary lessons in navigation from the foreign ship captains. As a young man, he stayed for a year in western Europe, particularly in England and Holland. He could experience the great social and political progress made by these countries, and his own country's backwardness shocked him. He had skills as a mechanic and talent of an organiser. A self-made man, he worked as a ship's carpenter in Amsterdam and discussed with political and business leaders on means of introducing western organisation and technology into Russia. Known as a 'barbarian genius', he stood head and shoulder above others. Though he lacked the refinement of contemporary western monarchs, he possessed tremendous physical vitality and mixed freely with workers and technical people.

Peter visited Europe in 1697-98 and recruited almost a thousand experts for service in Russia and more came later.

Peter did not care much for the civilization of Europe. He saw it in terms of a means to an end. This end was to create a strong army and a strong state which could stand against those of the west. His aim was partly defensive, that was, to ward off Poland, Sweden and Turkey who had for long troubled Russia and partly expansionist, to obtain sea-ports or "windows on the west", warm-water ports on the Baltic and Black seas, which was free from the shortcomings of Archangel.

For all but two years of his long reign, Peter was at war. The Swedes were the most potential enemy of the Russians. They had the best army in Europe and held sway over a good portion of Eastern Europe. The Swedish King CHARLES XII was able to inflict a crushing defeat on Peter's army at the BATTLE OF NAVARA in 1700. The Czar was thus convinced of westernizing his army and state for confronting the Swedish might. When Charles invaded Russia again with his formidable force, Peter applied the strategy to be used later by the Russians against NAPOLEON and HITLER. He drew the Swedes into the vast open plains exposing to the disastrous Russian winter and in 1709 at POLTAVA in southern Russia, he

routed the demoralised and tormented Swedish force. He followed it up with the conquest of LIVONIA and eastern FINLAND. He landed troops near STOCKHOLM and campaigned in POMERANIA.

The significant point is that never before had Russian influence reached so deeply into Europe. The imperial glory of Sweden was in eclipse and Russia would appear as the new star in the European horizon. Peter won for Russia the Baltic shore and with it warm-water outlets. These remarkable developments ending the great NORTHERN WAR (1709-21) were confirmed in the TREATY OF NYSTADT in 1721. Interestingly enough, these wars did a lot to build up the imperial Russia. The outstanding achievement was the transformation of the army from an Asiatic horde into a professional force of the kind maintained by Sweden, France or Prussia. In this process, he got rid of the STRELTSI, composed of nobles forming a sort of the elite of the old army. He had to face a mutiny organised by the Streltsi, which he crushed with a strong hand. The Streltsi was totally ended two years before the Navra battle. Peter then built up the arm from the grassroot level. He recruited European officers of several nationalities with the purpose of commanding the troops as well as training the Russian soldiers. He created regiments with soldiers supplied by districts on a territorial basis, as was done in Prussia. Military uniforms on western model were introduced. He armed them with muskets and artillery of the kind used in Europe. With this reorganised and strong army, he not only drove out the Swedes, but also dominated Russia itself. He had already crushed a rebellion of Streltsi in 1698, killing five of the rebels with his own hands. Again, during the period of the Swedish invasion, some parts of the country saw outbreak of rebellions. The entire middle and lower Volga, together with the Cossacks of the Don and Dnieper, rose against the Czar with slogans of class war and hatred of the Czar's foreign experts. Peter crushed these rebellions with his usual ruthlessness. It certainly proves that it was this military power which brought unity and integrity in the loose and heterogeneous Russian empire.

The constructive genius of Peter was reflected again in city-building. Even before the decisive battle of Poltava, Peter laid the foundation of an entirely new city in territory conquered from the Swedes and inhabited not only by the Russians but various Baltic peoples. This city is now called LENINGRAD. Peter had named it St. PETERSBURGH after his patron saint and himself. This city was Peter's chief window on the west. Here he set up the government offices, persuaded the nobles to build town houses and offered facilities to attract foreign merchants and craftsmen. It symbolised new Russia, a new city facing toward

Europe and drawing the minds of Russians westward. It thus replaced the old capital Moscow which faced toward Russia and was the bastion of opposition to his programme of westernization. Within a short time, St. Petersburg became a leading city of northern Europe and remained the capital of Russia till the Revolution of 1917.

Such a vast empire, the powerful army, the expanding administration and the new city, all needed money for maintenance. But finance was scarce in Russia. Peter resorted to large scale taxation, in fact, incredibly large. Taxes were imposed on all sorts of things on individuals, the poll taxes, on lands, mills, inns, hats, leather, collars and coffins; taxes were also imposed for marriage, selling meat and even for growing beard. The peasantry was the severest victim of this tax burden. To make sure the payment of taxes, the mobility of peasants was further restricted. Serfdom became more torturous and almost universal. Serfdom, which till now was only connected with agriculture, began to be involved with industry, too. The fact that serf-owners obtained the right to sell serfs without land or to move them from landed estates into mines or towns, made it easier for industry in Russia to develop on the basis of bonded labour.

For raising government revenues and stimulating production, Peter adopted the mercantilist policies exemplified by COLBERT in France. He encouraged exports, raised a fleet on the Baltic, and developed mining metallurgy and textiles which were indispensable to the army. He organised commercial companies with government capital, as private capital was not available. Organised serfdom provided a regular supply of labour. Of course, the employers of serfs, in these governmental enterprises, were not free but subjected to government control. Thus, the economic system was based on government control and monopoly, not on private profit or wages, as was becoming the custom in the newly emerging capitalist west. Therefore, Peter's efforts to force Russia to a European level of material productivity actually widened the gap between Russia and western Europe.

Another remarkable achievement of Peter was the creation of a new administrative system. His government had multifarious activities, viz., tax-collection, recruitment of employees, economic control, serf-dealing and repression of internal rebellion. This indeed needed a big and efficient administration. Influenced by the French administrative model of LOUIS XIV, his system was based on excessive centralisation and royal absolutism. At the top of the structure was the Czar, the autocrat and the supreme head of all the Russians. He

abolished the rule of hereditary succession to the Czardom, giving each Czar, the right to nominate his successor. No, doubt, Peter made the rule in order to emphasize upon talent and ability, as he had great doubt about the competence of his son. But the rule provided the ground for strife, conspiracy and even assassination on the succession question in the next century. The old organs of the self-government was done away with. The Duma and the National Assembly disappeared. In their place, Peter set up a SENATE, full under his control and ten territorial areas called "governments" or "GUBERNII" - the Latin word which showed western impact. But unlike the French system, the Russian centralised administration was extremely torturous, extorting and without legal regularity. It was imposed on an unwilling population. So, the empire of the ROMANOVs has been called a state without a people.

An interesting aspect of Peter's administration was the STATE SERVICE. All land-owning and serf owning aristocrats were required to serve in the army and administration. In the State service, birth and class counted for nothing. He used men of all classes in various types of jobs. For example, PRINCE MENSHIKOV had to serve as a cook, while a former serf KURBATOV was promoted as tax administrator. The principle of "career open to talent" was enforced. This was indeed a social revolution showing democratic spirit. A Scottish commander in Peter's army commented:

"History scarcely affords an example where so many people of low birth have been raised to such dignities as in Czar Peter's reign, as where so many of the highest birth and fortune have been levelled to the lowest ranks of life."

The new bureaucracy, thus, had a cosmopolitan look and go-ahead attitude. But it must be added that this class of officers themselves turned into hereditary elite that stood as checks against the anti-western reaction. After Peter's death, the State-service was gradually abandoned and the aristocracy of birth and property regained their dominant position in the government and the army.

Peter's silent revolution stemmed from his hatred of the old Regime and hereditary aristocracy in Russia. This compels one to make allusion to situation in France in 1789 and Russia in 1917. He emphasised on education to modernise the society. He requested all gentry to put their sons in schools. He sent many abroad for study. The Russian alphabet was simplified. Peter edited and published the first Russian newspaper. He ordered the writing of the first Russian book of etiquette and manners, and compelled people to learn them. The Gregorian calendar was

introduced. Famous books on science, technology and other relevant disciplines written in foreign languages were translated into Russian. He also proposed to set up an Academy of Science in Russia. In this way he did much to create an environment of knowledge ability and progress in Russia.

As regards religion, Peter was incredibly secular. He enjoyed singing in the church but hated the ecclesiastical dignity. He did not hesitate to mock the priests. He believed that church should be subordinate to the state and serve its interests. In fact the ecclesiastical patriarchs had stood in his way to westernisation and modernisation of Russia. Therefore, he was determined to debilitate the church. In 1721 he abolished the Patriarchate and introduced a college known as HOLY SYNOD. It consisted of twelve members of the higher clergy appointed by the Czar. One among them was called OVER-PROCURATOR, who supervised the work of the Holy Synod on behalf of the state. Thus the Russian Orthodox Church became a department of the government and the clergy became the servant of the state. It was a grand achievement of Peter because it completed the subordination of the church to the state and elevated Russia to the status of a sovereign nation.

In 1682, the accession of Peter marked a new era in the foreign policy of Russia. He brought order out of chaos in domestic affairs and enhanced the prestige of Russia in Europe through his foreign policy.

The image of both Russia and Peter was very poor in the Western Europe. It was supposed to be an extremely backward state still linked to medievalism. Peter himself grew up without benefit of discipline or formal education. But the six-foot nine-inch giant possessed an excellent mind and inexhaustible energy that helped to bring changes of great consequences in Russia. His foreign policy was guided by his country's needs. Having a sound appreciation of what was essential for Russian progress, he pursued three basic policies during his long reign : firstly, to Europeanize his people; secondly, to obtain an outlet, a "window on the sea" ; and lastly, to make his power absolute.

Russia had passed the 17th century in a struggle for survival, first against Poland and then, after 1650, against Sweden and Turkey. There was potential danger of Russian dismemberment and Peter's reforms and his European tour of 1697-90, were motivated in the first place by military needs. The nation must be protected from external dangers and its territorial integrity must be preserved at any cost, this became the keynote of his foreign policy.

Peter first turned his attention to the Turks, who had blocked Russia's way to the Black

Sea. In 1695, Peter, with the aim of gaining an outlet into the Black Sea, tried to seize AZOV, the Turkish Fort at the mouth of DON. He failed dismally through lack of naval support, but with the help of a hastily assembled fleet, he was able to face the Turks.

Yet the Turks appeared to be impregnable. Peter realised that he must learn from the west how to modernize his army and build a navy. He organised a GRAND EMBASSY whose dual object was to secure allies against the Turks and to observe the most advanced European methods of warfare, government, industry and education. Secondly, he undertook a European tour in 1697-98. Travailing incognito as Peter Mikhailov, he visited Holland, England and Germany. The first Russian ruler to travel abroad since the 11 th century,. Peter took a great interest in technical and military things. In Holland, he worked as a common ship carpenter in order to learn the Dutch methods of shipbuilding at first hand. The crudity of Peter's behavior, his travels incognito, the drunkenness of his retinue and the lack of majestic decorum, all made it difficult for the western European courts to take the Czar seriously. It is not surprising that his demand for a crusade against the Turks was ignored in Vienna. But in spite of the diplomatic failure of his mission, he recruited for service in Russia nearly a thousand European experts (chiefly in military, naval and mining engineering) and shipped 200 cases of naval stores and munitions back to Moscow. These experts helped Russia build a western type conscript army which in course of time numbered 1,00,000 men.

The first war against Turkey began in 1698 and continued till 1700; the second broke out in 1710, and ended in disaster for Russia as Peter was forced to restore Azov to the Turks. So Peter's attempt to find an outlet to the Black Sea remained a dream. It was left to CATHERINE THE GREAT, by taking the Crimea and the northern seaboard, to establish Russian firmly on the Black Sea.

Peter now thought of directing his energy away from the Black Sea to the Baltic. His ambition for a "window to the sea" led him in 1699 to make a secret alliance with Poland and Denmark against Sweden, which controlled most of the Baltic Shores. He hoped to take advantage of the inexperience of CHARLES XII of Sweden, then only a youth of 18. But it was Charles who took the initiative by attacking Denmark. Thus began the GREAT NORTHERN WAR. After defeating the Danes, the "Swedish Meteor", as Charles was called, landed at the other end of the Baltic. In the BATTLE OF NARVA (1700), the 10,000 strong Swedish army inflicted a crushing defeat on the 40,000 strong Russian army.

After this the Swedish king turned to deal with Poland. In 1708, Charles again invaded Russia. But this time, Peter settled the score. The reorganised Russian army, aided by a severe Russian winter, was able to inflict a humiliating defeat on the Swedes at the BATTLE OF POLTAVA (1709). The significance of the Russian victory at Poltava lies in the fact that the western European countries could be aware for the first time of Russia's power.

Charles XII returned to Sweden by way of Turkey, where he tried to persuade the Sultan to invade Russia again. But in 1718, Charles himself was killed in a skirmish against the Norwegians. By this time, Peter's armies had conquered LIVONIA and part of eastern FINLAND. The long-drawn *great* Northern war was at last ended when an exhausted Sweden sued for peace with the last of its enemies, Russia. The TREATY OF NYSTADT (1721) confirmed the Russian conquests.

The greatest significance of the great Northern war was that it gave Russia control of the Baltic shore and thus a 'window to the west.' The Baltic shore did not, like Archangel, become ice-bound during winter, which was certainly a remarkable gain for Russia. Secondly, to fully tap this advantage, Peter built with tremendous expenditure and loss of 2,00,000 human lives, the sprawling city of St. Petersburg as a "window opened upon Europe". This lavish city, built by western architects and engineers, became the new capital of Russia replacing Moscow, which symbolized the old way of life. St. Petersburg stood for the zenith of Peter's westernizing policy. Lastly, it gave Russia a position of power and prestige in European politics. It also meant the end of Sweden's days as a great power inaugurated by GUSTAVUS ADOLPHUS through his feats of brilliance at the THIRTY YEARS' WAR (1618-48). Swedish empire lost all its possessions except Finland.

Conclusion

The most remarkable point about the reign of Peter is that he initiated the step to turn Russia into a modern state. It is wrong to say that his reign was marked absolutely with positive points. There were several negative points. In fact, some of the shortcomings of his reign retarded the cause of progress in Russia. This is particularly true of his merciless treatment of the serfs. But at the same time we must note that his accomplishments outnumbered his shortcomings. His reform of the army, recruitment of foreign experts, measures for raising revenue, administrative reforms would be considered as his notable achievements.

Peter passed away in 1725, thus marking the end of a great era of construction as well as turbulence. He was called "the Great" in his own life-time. Few men in history have exerted so strong an influence. His death was followed by a period of turmoil and uncertainty but the changes he introduced helped the ground firmly. His system was based on force, and therefore, aristocracy, selfdom and a repressive bureaucracy fostered on this system. But at the same time, it cannot be denied that he forced a backward looking immobile society to move forward. As for the peasants, they remained outside the system, badly exploited by an unbalanced social order; that reduced them as poor wretches and strangers in their own country. These facts worked themselves out in later times, when the wrath of the oppressed peasantry exploded through a series of revolutions. But everything considered, it must be noted that Prussia and Austria, was to be counted among the Powers of Europe.

Suggested Readings:-

1. Meenakshi Phukan : Rise of Modern West
2. G. Clark : Early Modern Europe
3. Raghubir Dayal : Modern European History
4. Jain and Mathur : World History (1500 – 1950)
5. G.M. Trevelyan : Social History of England
6. Parthsarathi Gupta (ed.) : आधुनिक पश्चिम का उदय
7. लाल बहादुर वर्मा : आधुनिक यूरोप का इतिहास
