

Mikhail Gorbachev: The reformer in a hurry

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Mikhail Gorbachev. (Photo | AFP)

By Anuradha Chenoy.

Mikhail Gorbachev, reviled by some, celebrated by others, stepped into the pages of a history which is cited, written and rewritten but cannot be forgotten.

Remembered primarily as the leader of the now-disintegrated Soviet State that desperately tried to modernise and catch up with the West, Gorbachev was overtaken by events and characters within Moscow that created the basis for the collapse of the Soviet Union. A moment that surprised and created a watershed moment in contemporary history.

Gorbachev was a most unusual Soviet leader who rose to the top of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) hierarchy as a member of the Central Committee and then politburo in the 1980s. An ageing leadership that supported reform but witnessed the death of two leaders in quick succession after the death of Leonid Brezhnev helped vault the young Gorbachev to the general secretary position in 1985.

Gorbachev was a quintessential reformer. He saw the strengths and weaknesses of the Soviet state. The deep bureaucratisation was strangling economic, industrial, scientific and social development. The alienation of young people, the burden on women, the alcoholism amongst men. The out-of-control military-industrial complex, the futility of the arms race where one miscalculation meant mutually assured destruction. After all, the Chernobyl nuclear disaster happened in the first year of his office.

Gorbachev was a holistic reformer—perhaps ahead of his time. He wanted to reform the entire Soviet Union in one go—from the economy to the political system to social attitudes and foreign policy. Could that be possible?

Gorbachev's foreign policy measures were radical and made huge changes to European architecture. He withdrew from the unpopular Soviet-Afghan War. He initiated talks with US President Ronald Reagan to limit nuclear weapons and end the Cold War. This resulted in the significant Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF Treaty). Gorbachev, unlike past Soviet leaders, refused to militarily curb protests and upsurges in the East European countries that had been under Soviet control as a fallout of World War Two. Between 1989–1990, East and West Germany were reunited and Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Bulgaria had all overthrown their Soviet-installed leaders and moved to liberation. He remained a special friend to India and the Global South.

Domestically, his policy of glasnost (openness) removed the strict censoring of Soviet times. Open publishing revived, and many gems of Soviet literature came out. Gorbachev remarked once—the whole nation cannot just read one textbook. But when severe criticism started, he placed some curbs.

Perestroika (restructuring) was meant to be a whole series of reforms seeking to change the economic and political system since he saw the deep links between the two. Gorbachev proposed a shift from the centralised planned economy to a market-based one. He ordered autonomy for the large enterprises that characterised the Soviet industrial system. But a market cannot come up to replace a command and control economy based on a few government orders. He banned alcohol, costing the Soviet exchequer US\$ 100 billion, prompting bootlegging. The campaign was abandoned. He kept shifting economic advisors who, for example, promised market development in a '500-Day Plan'. None of these worked.

Simultaneously, to democratise the political system, Gorbachev introduced elections for the highest legislative body—the Congress of People's Deputies. He introduced changes to CPSU functioning and Soviet federal structures and legislative system. This openness gave rise to sub-nationalisms within the Soviet Republics, starting in Russia with the rise of Boris Yeltsin as a purely populist Russian leader. Similarly, Ukraine, Belarus, and Central Asia leaders represented only their Republics. Gorbachev was now the only Soviet leader.

Five Republics—The Baltics (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania), Georgia, and Moldova demanded total independence. Several inter-ethnic conflicts broke out. Within an increasingly hostile and conservative CPSU leadership, Gorbachev, the liberal social democrat, organised a referendum in 1989 asking if people wanted to be part of the Soviet Federation. The majority—76%—answered yes. Later, referendums were organised in Russia, Ukraine and other Soviet republics. Several voted for independence.

A new constitution was planned, and while on holiday in Crimea, conservatives in the CPSU organised a coup to overthrow Gorbachev. It was Boris Yeltsin who seized this opportune moment. He resisted the coup, and the Soviet army refused orders to fire on its

own citizens. The coup was defeated. Yeltsin was hungry for power, but he could never be the leader of the Soviet Union. However, he could be the leader and President of Russia. So with Ukraine and Belarus, a unilateral decision was taken. The Soviet Union was declared over. Fifteen independent republics emerged. Central Asian Republics, for example, were shocked at the independence handed to them without their asking. Yeltsin became President of new Russia. Gorbachev receded into history and maybe regret.

Gorbachev had overseen a systemic collapse of the Soviet Union. But it was not a collapse because of external forces or a failed economy. It was engineered from within its own centre under Yeltsin and a growing rapacious elite that had already started transferring resources to the West. Gorbachev was a reformer who did not have an agency—a structure for the reform agenda. Further, the CPSU, the state legislature, and the federal system had all got integrated after years of centralisation. It needed years of patient reform—a time not given to Gorbachev.

Gorbachev spent his last years alone as his wife and partner predeceased him due to leukaemia. There will be many judgements of Gorbachev in history, as many narratives place the facts and contexts of his life and times. But none will deny his role as a patriot and reformer who wanted a better Soviet Union.

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