The transition in Russia is often considered as part of global trends in which dictatorships have found it increasingly difficult to isolate themselves from the global trend of intensifying communication and economic integration, and democratic upsurge. The constitution, which was adopted in 1993, enshrines democratic principles even while it creates a strong executive. The sweeping power of the president (the executive) over other organs and machinery of the state is by no means democratic in nature. On the other hand, the existence of electoral system, the certain amount of freedom of media and the enjoyment of certain individual and collective rights, such as freedom of speech and religion are in the true spirit of democracy. Thus, a distinct type of polity has emerged in Russia, authoritarian in its instinct and certain practices, but providing space for the development of democratic norms and convention. After more than a decade of democratisation, some would contend that Russia has a functioning democratic system, while many observers feel such a claim is an exaggeration.

The ratification of Russia’s first post Soviet constitution in December 1993 marked a major shift in its transition from communist rule to liberal democracy. By spelling out the rules of the game, the new arrangement averted the recurrence of extra constitutional crisis, such as 1993 tragedy known as October Revolution and the relation between the three organs of the state viz. president, legislature, and the judiciary was normalised to some extend. However, this has been achieved by making the presidency stronger over and above the other two organs of the state.

The reason for creating strong presidency was the belief among Yeltsin supporters that only strong presidential system could institute radical economic reform. The president also crafted a constitution with the view to control the parliament and any other dissent that could hamper the economic reform. Hence, the constitution that was drafted by giving precedence to liberalisation over democratisation undermined the ‘principle of separation of powers’.

After a decade of reforms under Boris Yeltsin, Russian democracy faces difficulty and an uncertain future. Yeltsin’s styles of authoritarianism never quite developed into full-blown dictatorship. Equally, it never submitted itself to popular
accountability, constitutional and legal constraint. Nevertheless, the achievements of Yeltsin can also not be ignored. Despite the imperfections and mistakes, Yeltsin can be credited with pursuance of policies, which prevented communist restoration, social anarchy, fascist reaction, and territorial disintegration of Russian federation. He also founded a new political and economic order based on liberalism, nationalism, civil liberties, electoral system and some form of capitalism.

Putin on the other hand pursued the task of modernising and making Russia a strong state by ensuring ‘rule of law’. Putin carried out his agenda of reforms within the parameter of the legality and constitutionality, without heading off completely into a new direction that Yeltsin had initiated. He introduced many new reforms strengthening the institution of presidency. He addressed the issues that were left unresolved by Yeltsin, such as state administrative capacity, the legal integrity of the country, which are all of great importance to democracy. On the other hand, his strong hand on curbing mass media freedom, stringent laws on NGOs, recentralisation of power, ending regional governor’s elections, stringent election laws were major democratic rollback.

The Russian constitution of 1993 sanctioned extraordinary powers to the president to sustain and continue rapid economic transformation. Yet, the circumstance under which Russia started its journey towards liberalisation and democratisation demanded a strong authority with a will to continue with the process. This transferring of power from parliament to presidency had far reaching effects on the democratisation in Russia. Many political analysts describe the Russian political system as superpresidential, delegative democracy or guided democracy: a political order premised on the assumption that the president once elected, governs as he/she likes, constrained only by constitutionally limited term of office. In such a system, parties and legislature are treated as nuisance while the president and his advisors are all in all in the governance of the state. This resulted in extensive and sometimes abusive use of these special powers by the president and has undermined consensus building, which is delaying the development of core representative institutions that are crucial for building vibrant civil society and liberal democracy.

The Soviet legacy has impeded the development of the rule of law in Russia. The Soviet communist regime did not accord any autonomy to the courts, whatsoever. In 1991, the idea of independent judiciary was supported in theory virtually by every
major political forces in Russia. It has been more than a decade yet, the supremacy of law has not been secured in Russia. One of the reasons stems from that the constitution itself that provides the president with an extraordinary power to appoint judges of the federal courts. The court has become an instrument in the hands of the president. Therefore, it is not surprising that cases taken up against the president in the constitutional court has always been ruled in favour of the president. Hence, independent judiciary, judicial culture and functioning of the system under the rule of law are yet to be established. This influence and control over the courts by the president has serious implications for democratisation in Russia.

In Russia, the roots of electoral politics has taken a firm hold and democratic institutions are appearing but it may take many more years for democratic culture to develop in Russia. Today, most of the Russians agree that in comparison to hundreds of years of authoritarian tradition, the creation of electoral democracy represents a major milestone. Free and fair elections provide opportunity of access to the power for mass based organisations and individual citizens, no matter how powerful political incumbents and economic elites might look. Though the institution of election can provide conditions for the development of other components of liberal democracy, election alone does not make democracy. In Russia, party system is still in embryonic stage and elections have been less than fair. Therefore, in Russia, it is still early to talk of the type of democracy that is prevalent in the western democratic countries.

The Russian constitution enshrines federal structure giving both the centre and the unit's extensive and exclusive powers in their respective jurisdiction. The name and boundaries of Russia's regions cannot be changed or altered by the centre without the consent of the regions involved. However, Putin unlike Yeltsin never made any secret of his desire to re-centralise the power. Since then Putin had energetically pursued four measures in his drive to rebuild central authority. Firstly, he created seven new super regions. Secondly, he restructured the Federation Council, the upper house of the Russian parliament. Thirdly, president has been empowered to ask the Supreme Court to remove governors who have violated two or more federal laws or the constitution. Fourthly, ending regional governor's elections and replacing with the direct appointment by the president. In the same manner, the president has been empowered to ask the State Duma to dissolve the legislature of a federation member on the same grounds.
The institution of presidency was strengthened to compensate for the absence of more organic form of social solidarity. The choice that was available during the early transition stage was between anarchy and authoritarianism, as civil society was weak and there were few deep-rooted democratic traditions. Yeltsin himself insisted that strong presidential power could compensate for the weakness of democracy in a country accustomed to tsars and leaders, in which defined group interests were not yet clearly established. However in present Russia, the gap is growing between the state and society, which constitutes a real threat to the emergence of a stable and liberal democracy. A strong presidential system has been firmly established in Russia, which further hinders the growth of civil society. Unlike elsewhere, despite its weakness, civil society in Russia is not likely to give way to a dictatorship or authoritarian rule. Russian society, which has been freed from 74 years of dictatorship, will not easily give way to another. Today, the idea of dictatorship remains deeply unpopular among Russians, and an anti-totalitarian spirit dominates the country that would probably be enough to thwart any such attempt.

During Soviet era, censorship of press was always most important means in controlling Soviet society. One of the greatest democratic achievements of Yeltsin presidency was ensuring an independent, critical and pluralistic press that emerged out from the complete state control. During Yeltsin’s presidency, Russian free press did not lack freedom because of government’s censorship but because of oligarch’s control of the meaningful media outlets that only sought to serve their interests. President Putin departing from Yeltsin’s administration, made conscious effort to limit the freedom of press by endorsing the doctrine on information security on 12 September 2000 drafted by Security Council. The doctrine has strengthened the state owned mass media, curtailed the dissemination of information about government policies and institutions, and it has limited the unsanctioned access to information. These threats to the press cannot be considered in any way positive for democratic consolidation in Russia.

The democratic consensus that was arrived at, among the political elite in the early post-Soviet period has given way to complex interaction between democratisation and authoritarianism. There is an obvious tension between democracy and existing political order in post-communist Russia. The struggle by the parliament for more power will continue, so also by the regions for more autonomy. Thus, the
very institution of presidency designed to overcome the enervating effects of polarisation and deadlock has become a source of political infirmity and hindrance to democratisation. Therefore, the question of a balanced separation of powers between the executive and legislative branches of the government, as well as between central and regional governments will confront Russia in the years to come.

The Russian president not only enjoys powers derived from the constitution but also lords over sprawling, multi layer and multifaceted bureaucratic apparatus, determining almost every aspect of internal and external policy of Russia. Taking into account his central role in the government, it would not be an exaggeration to say that the president is the pivot around which Russian politics and democracy revolve. Hence, a study of this institution and its implication on Russian democracy will have considerable importance and relevance.

This particular academic venture focuses on the institution of presidency and its implication for the Russian democracy. Effort has been made to analyse constraints and challenges posed by the presidency to the democratisation process in Russia. While analysing the institution of presidency vis-à-vis the other two organs of state, it will also focus on democratic institutions, civil society, federalism, electoral politics, and other aspects of Russian political system, which are in the process of developing and are essential components for a vibrant democracy. The study covers the period from the beginning of Soviet disintegration to 2005.

The first chapter, "Understanding Presidentialism: A Comparison of American and French Presidency" dwells on the theoretical aspect and regime types defined within the parameter of democracy. Further, debate on merits and demerits of both presidential and parliamentary system is discussed which will help in better understanding of advantages and disadvantages of presidential system. As the title of the chapter suggests, efforts are made to understand the two important and different existing presidential systems viz. American and French Presidential systems, which will help understand Russian Presidential system more clearly in the following chapters.

The second chapter analyses the circumstances and the conditions under which presidential system in Russia emerged, which is quiet different from American and French experience as we have seen in the first chapter. It dwells on the great debate in Russia over the relative merit of presidential system and parliamentary system.