
Review of ‘Rural Community: “A Novel Embedded in History” by Leonid Alayev

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Review of Leonid Alayev, *Rural Community: “A Novel Embedded in History”*: Critical Analysis of the Theory of Community, Historical Evidence of its Development and Role in the Stratified Society. Moscow: LENAND/URSS, 2016. 480 pp. ISBN 978-5-9710-3745-3. In Russian (Алаев Л. Б. *Сельская община. «Роман, вставленный в историю»*. Критический анализ теорий общины, исторических свидетельств ее развития и роли в стратифицированном обществе. Москва: Ленанд).

Social evolution has always remained a puzzle for researchers in various fields of scientific knowledge. Despite the current convention concerning the multilinear evolutionary perspective, the ordinary knowledge as well as basic scientific theories view history as developing through common stages, from primitive to postmodern, from hunter-gatherers to blue and white collars and artificial intelligence. The role and place of village community in human history has been much debated since the nineteenth century. The village community is sometimes regarded as having ‘passed through different stages: primitive, medieval and modern’.¹ Such an approach seems to approach a much-debated idea of a sustainable state throughout human written history.

Leonid Alayev, Russian Indologist, has worked in the field studying Indian and Russian village communities for half a century. Needless to say, he perceives the village community through a strict framework of Marxist theory and still he surpasses the limitations of the Soviet Marxist historical materialism and does offer a highly provocative approach to the evolution of village communities.

Alayev states that there is no connection between primitive and village/rural communities. Thus, one can distinguish at least two

different types of communities instead of the two developmental stages of a single institution. Certainly, the communities imply various groups of people but these groups may be connected and united by very different ties. Alayev believes the primitive communities remain insufficiently studied due to the scarcity of relevant sources: one may know the main economic activity of a primitive community but there is no key to its 'landowning' practice. Thus, Alayev primarily concentrates on the medieval and modern village communities.

Alayev examines the cases of German, Russian (*obshchina*), Indian, Sub-Saharan Africa, Ancient Greek and Roman, Middle East, Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Vietnamese, Thai, Javanese and Balinese communities. Moreover, he carefully scrutinizes various Indian communities in various states of India, including Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Andhra, Kerala, Bengal, Bihar, Hindustan, Punjab, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Kashmir, Assam, Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Orissa, Gujarat, Maharashtra and Goa during ancient, medieval and modern times.

Alayev shows that there existed peasant village communities as well as village communities of small landowners who leased their lands to tenants; the latter was the case of many Indian rural communities. He argues that there were village communities whose members had private property on their lands whereas the community functioned to defend these landowning rights. But the scholar also gives examples of village communities where the collectivity had the right of disposal of property. After the emancipation of serfs in 1861, the Russian village community (*obshchina*) obtained fiscal functions as well as the rights of land disposal from its members.

Alayev emphasizes that there were village communities, whose members were equal in their rights, even if those 'rights' were in fact ephemeral, like those of the Russian peasants in the late nineteenth century. He also points out that there existed communities whose members possessed unequal rights. The best case here is the Indian village community which unites representatives of various castes, one of them being the landowning while others were tenants or village artisans or servants.

One should note that there are communities of free farmers and/or landowners, and serfdom communities; the latter depended

on their lords and/or kingdom. From the seventeenth to the mid-nineteenth century, the Russian village communities depended on the Russian government or Russian landlords, so they could hardly have any 'landowning rights' and, therefore, there was no 'communal land ownership' in that time; this fact was overlooked by all the Slavophiles, August von Haxthausen, Marx, Bakunin, and all Soviet theorists.

The village communities as the collectivities of agriculturalists sometimes emerged due to the population growth and/or the shortage of arable lands. However, village communities were often created by the government or landlords seeking for the increase of income and for a simultaneous decrease of costs of taxation. All known cases of village communities in Muscovite Russia show that these communities were organized by the landowners and/or Muscovite government in the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries. One should also notice that the Slavophiles and Marxists treated the re-allotment of land as an attribute proving the very ancient nature of the village community, while in fact it is a later practice. The re-allotment of land in village communities was a seldom practice which usually started when the state taxation pressure became too strong. Thus, for example, in the late nineteenth century the Russian village communities practiced re-allotment due to the population growth and increased taxation when the communities had no other way to increase their land supply. The re-allotments may be of three kinds: by share, by equalizing, and by taxation.

The members of village communities may possess joint tenancy. Such joint possession were found in the communities of the Vologda and Arkhangelsk Provinces of the Russian Empire and in the Ganga – Yamuna River Basin and in the Kaveri River Delta in India. Interestingly, the joint tenancy in Russia and in India were related to different types of lands: the Russian joint tenants possessed plots of lands on the hilltops where there was no danger of flooding, whereas in Tamil Nadu and Bengal the peasants needed the irrigated lands in the low areas. This means that similar types of community may exist in various landscapes as well as the similar landscape does not imply similar types of village community.

Alayev stresses that there is no single line in the evolution of village community since this category covers very different institu-

tions of the stratified or class societies and can change due to many factors. For example, low productiveness in village communities may depend on the household tools and agricultural patterns that is on technological factors. The two-field rotation may alternate with, or be supplanted by the three-field system. Geographical factors, or landscape, including free lands, character of soils and irrigation, also influence the evolutionary development of village communities. The village communities could face conquests and almost always faced commoditization of economy. In some cases, village communities tried even to block the monetization of their lives and commoditization of their crops and/or other goods.

Social environment also adds to the history of village communities which is manifested in the manifold and complex ties among families, kindred, castes and estates. The Muscovite and Imperial Russian social category *odnovortsy* or peasant-landowners, who possessed and farmed their individual land plots, had a unique position between, on the one hand, the Russian landlords (since *odnovortsy* also had landowners' rights) and, on the other hand, the Russian state and private serfs-peasants (since *odnovortsy* personally farmed land). Many village communities did not know the caste system while in India any village community includes representatives of different castes.

The interactions between village communities and the government and landlords considerably influenced the development of such communities. The ruling class made use of the village communities to strengthen exploitation of the community members. In Russia, the landowners would found village communities and establish the rules and volumes of taxation. Alayev emphasizes that there was no specific 'peasant republics,' no *Sobornost* or '[s]piritual community of many jointly living people', a concept praised by the early Slavophiles Ivan Kireyevsky and Alexey Khomyakov; meanwhile, in the Russian village communities their members were subdued to landlords or their stewards and had no real rights.

Current Indian political trends have praised the traditional Indian village communities as remnants of glorious past and examples of primordial democratic constitutions in India. Alayev clearly shows that the Indian communities have not been and are not democratic: they consisted of members of many casts, with the domi-

nant and dependent castes united into a single community. The Indian village communities have no relation to the primordial states: they are always connected with markets and show a great deal of labour division. These communities never farmed land collectively.

I would say, Alayev's monograph is an indispensable tool for the analysis of social evolution and for the unmasking of current and stable political myths in Russia and India. It gives a profound perspective on one of the most intriguing social organizations – village community, and warns against the application of unilinear social theories.

NOTES

¹ URL: <http://www.sociologydiscussion.com/village-community/definition/village-community-definition-evolution-and-growth/2621>. Accessed on May 16, 2017.