

'Class Struggle in Russia' : How did Collectivization of Agriculture begins in Soviet Union?

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Since 1917 revolution, when the landlords' estates were distributed to the rural poor, until 1929 the peasants were cultivating their own lands. During the revolution, lands belonging to the rich and middle peasants were not taken over. As a consequence, even after the revolution, rich peasants and middle peasants continued to exist. (To begin with, if everyone's land is brought under collective farming, the peasantry would work on 'collective farms' and begin to earn wages according to their work. Ensuring that the wage differential is kept low, gradually wage itself is eliminated and the Communist principle of 'from each according to one's ability and to each according to one's need' can be introduced. A Communist party that desires to introduce collectivization will have such a future programme).

It is the middle and poor peasants who would be more favourably inclined towards collective farming than the rich peasants. This is possible only if they understand the importance of collectivization.. Otherwise, even the poor peasants will oppose it. Collectivization must begin based on the readiness of the peasants for collectivization and their understanding of the need for collectivization. Initially 20 to 30 peasant families may combine their lands and begin cultivating together. Over a period of time, all villages may become large collective farms. Collectivization will rapidly develop, increasing the land under it, only if the peasants understand that this change clearly demonstrates benefits that were hitherto not seen by them.

Existence of Peasants cultivating certain pieces of land individually would mean that they exist in isolation. In such cases they have to grapple with their own problems. If a peasant's land does not yield anything or yields very little, the family has to starve. Neither other peasants nor the society at large will have the capacity to help out the suffering family. Even if they have the capacity, they are not obliged to help them. (indulging in a bit of charity will absolve them of their responsibility). Under the material conditions wherein peasants cultivate their own individual farmlands, the well-being of the peasants' family is not guaranteed. The peasant's life will be driven by uncertainties each year. Only when farming is done collectively, every family and every individual among the agricultural population will initially secure economic protection. It is this that encourages the peasants to join collectivization. But, this is merely an economic perspective. More importantly, it is the perspective that 'through collectivization collective living will begin', that needs to take shape first. Facing problems collectively begins through collectivization. By using the power of their labour collectively many constructive programs that cannot be taken up by individual peasants can be taken up. (Extensive irrigation facilities, prevention of floods, large scale storage of food, planning as to where and which crop can be cultivated

and how much land needs to be allocated for which crop, increasing agricultural productivity by means of new experiments—thus through collective programmes, peasants will be able to change fundamentally their former isolated lives. As the peasants carry out these programmes properly, their collective consciousness will increase). As the collectivization settles in, it will gradually eliminate the system of ‘private property’ in agricultural sector and will initiate the building of socialist society. It is necessary to initiate the process of collectivization in order to lead the peasantry to effect the changes that are required to properly solve the problems of a class society. Agricultural collectivization is a class struggle to hit at the domination of the rich peasants in the agricultural sector and to overcome the capitalist path that seeks to retain the system of ‘private property’ for ever. It is not enough to say ‘you will get more money if you join collectivization’. Imparting knowledge about the class struggle is essential. Entire process of collectivization must proceed with the initiative and readiness of the peasantry. The Party must make people understand relevant things at least to a minimum extent.

The proposal to start collectivization in Russia came up in April 1929. But this proposal did not have the perspective that collectivization is needed to improve the living conditions and consciousness of the peasantry. Instead, the kind of notions that lead to the proposal for collectivization were: that it was necessary to increase agricultural production and use it for industrial development, that the use of machinery in agriculture is possible only when large tracts of land were cultivated as a single unit and so on.

The Party meeting held in April decided to achieve collectivization unhurriedly in stages. From then on the collectivization efforts began. These programmes were taken up from June to October 1929 as the first phase and November to March 1930 as the second phase. There was no mass effort to explain the purpose of collectivization to the peasants. In the first phase, the wishes of the peasants were taken into consideration to some extent. Collective farms were established only with those peasants who agreed to join the collectivization. But, the number of such peasants was very small. Only 5% of land came under collectivization. Though pressure and threats were used at one stage, the first phase went on in an amicable manner. In September 1929, the Party leadership began passing- orders to bring whole lot of regions under collectivization. To achieve collectivization on such a large scale was not compatible with the then existing conditions and with the level of consciousness of the peasants. Since the Party ordered it, there began a coercive approach towards the peasants. From then on the local cadres and authorities began to pass orders like, ‘we will not give seeds, fertilizers or implements to those who wish to cultivate their land individually without joining the collectivization, hence join the collectives immediately’. This pressure increased further from November onwards. The reason is, on November 7, Stalin wrote an essay titled *A. Year of Great Changes*. He eulogized the collectivization effort in the essay saying that not just individually but peasants from all districts are joining the collectives en masse. This is one of the major victories achieved by the Soviet government. In fact, the information in the essay is not true. Till then, just a handful of peasants joined the collectives. (Talking to agriculture experts in December Stalin said that Collectivization was going on with greater ease.) In April, the party gave a certain target of how much land should be under

collectivization by 1932-33. But in the November essay Stalin gave a new and even higher figure for a greater extent of land to be brought under collectivization. This meant that the decision of the party to implement collectivization gradually in phases was abandoned. As soon as the November essay appeared, the state machinery set targets with regard to the extent of land that had to be brought under collectivization. This implied abandonment of party decisions made in April. Immediately after the publication of November essay, the cabinet fixed the targets with regard to extent of land and the regions and sent commands to the local cadres that these targets must be achieved. From then on, terrible pressure mounted on the peasantry. Beginning with simple threats like 'we are giving you a week's time, think about it', repressive measures — like imposing huge fines, withdrawal of voting rights, ostracizing such families, state-run shops refusing to sell groceries to them, removing their children from schools, making it impossible for them to do their own cultivation by entering their homes and taking away seeds and agricultural implements — were resorted against those who were unwilling to join the collectives.. This was not all. Lands of the peasants were forcibly taken over and merged with the collective land and the peasants were given useless land far away from the village and were asked to go there. The assets and homes of the peasants were taken over for free or buying them by fixing awfully low prices. For instance, a home may be taken for a rouble (one rupee you could say), a cow for 15 kopeks (15 paise) and so on. Peasants who refused to join collectivization were labelled as "kulaks" (rich peasants), arrested and their lands confiscated. All these methods were used on a large scale in the name of elimination of 'kulaks'. (It was the poor peasants who had to eliminate the 'class' of kulaks. Here, there was no programme for organizing the poor peasants from a class perspective. On the contrary, all these activities were carried out by party cadres. Moreover, they did all this against poor peasants.)

The higher authorities and urban cadres of the party used to visit the villages and suggest ways of collectivization without really finding out the conditions in the villages. They used to decide who was a kulak and who was not.

Those who refused to join in collectivization were sorted into three categories and punished. First kind was arrested and imprisoned (52,000 of them were punished in this way). The second category was banished from their villages and sent away to places like Siberia (1 lakh 50 thousand were subjected to this). The third category were allowed to live there, assigned poor quality land far away from the villages, given less goods and imposed more taxes (There are no details with regard to the number of people in this category). Voting rights were withdrawn from six lakh 50 thousand people. On some occasions men were imprisoned and women and children were banished. In some instances, if all the elders were imprisoned, children were left as orphans.

Trains used to be crammed with banished peasantry. Hundreds and thousands of people would die of cold, hunger and disease on the way. Peasants used to call these trains 'death wagons'. Anna Louise Strong wrote in her book *Soviets Conquer the Wheat*, "I have seen several such trains. Those were heart-wrenching scenes". [In Mikhail Sholokov's novel *Virgin Soil Upturned*, there is an episode of a landlord and his family with children being banished from a village. To banish even landlords and rich peasants in this way is incorrect. Part

of the land possessed by the landlord should be left to him and the rest taken over. That would be appropriate. Whether these landlords and peasants were given lands in Siberia, and how they lived there, is not detailed anywhere. Not even in Bettelheim's book.]

The target-setting for collectivization took such strange forms that, for instance, the authorities of Sosnovsky province ordered the lower cadres to 'finish collectivization in five days'. They also warned, 'By 9 a.m on 20 February you should submit your reports. You will not be pardoned if you do not achieve your targets. An enquiry against you will be launched within 24 hours'.

Though the local cadres who knew village life felt that use of this kind of force for collectivization was not right, they did not have the courage to convey their feeling to the higher authorities. Those who had the courage to stand up to the pressure were punished with fines, and other punishments. Some who were chairmen of village Soviets were removed from their positions. Fearing authorities, fearing punishments, and anxious that they were the only ones left behind in performance, the cadres competed with each other to fulfil their targets and had run the collectivization process in an extremely dictatorial fashion (There was hardly any instance of the party authorities discussing the conditions in the villages with the local cadres).

Suppressing the truth, newspapers were publishing cooked up stories stating that 'collectivization is progressing at a magnificent pace', 'Middle class peasants are also joining the collectivization on a large scale'. What was progressing magnificently was not collectivization, but banishment of peasants. It took such horrific proportion that Stalin wrote another essay to call for its halt. The essay titled *Dizzy with Victory* was published on 2nd March 1930 in *Pravda*. The essay suggested to fight against cadres who distorted the party line on collectivization. It observed that some cadres had dangerous tendencies. They apparently violated the principle of not using coercion against the peasants. They did not take into consideration the different conditions prevalent in different places. They acted in an authoritarian manner without doing any mass work. Mentioning the Turkistan events where local cadres threatened to use the army and cut water and resources for the fields for those who opposed collectivization in his essay, Stalin said that he opposed such dangerous trends. In another article (of April 3, 1930), he also mentioned a reason for the events taking such a turn. Stalin observed that "the victories of early days of collectivization have gone to the heads of some of 'our comrades'. That is why they have forgotten the directives of Lenin and the Central Committee. This is the basic reason for that mistake! The Party leader had simply concluded that the reason for the mistakes that have thrown the entire nation into chaos was mere forgetfulness of the cadres intoxicated with success. Stalin talked of the 'forgetfulness of the comrades', at least nine times in that essay.

'Forgetfulness'—this was the only one point which the essay wanted to say.

If some cadres were committing atrocities, having forgotten their principles, what was the Party leadership doing? On whose approval were arrests of the peasants, banishment, land acquisition etc. done? Why did the leadership allow such a terror across the nation to continue for several months?

Should one assume that the Party leadership was unaware of all this confusion? In which royal palaces was the leadership, without finding out the details of collectivization for so many months?

Why did cadres make the mistakes that they did? Was it not because of the targets given to them and the threat of punishment if they failed to achieve them?

All these mistakes have arisen out of the particular political line and the leadership style. The mistakes were the consequences of that line and the style. These were hundred percent bourgeois practices. A party with such practices does not really care about the hardships of the peasants. Since it took up collectivization with a plan to use the agricultural productivity for industrial development, the party had allowed this collectivization to continue for so many months in this way. (If what this Party practiced was socialism, would people not develop terrible aversion to socialism? Won't their faith in 'communism' as preached by the Party be shaken? It is not the bourgeois who are the main enemies of communism but communists who follow the bourgeois path). The Central Committee opened its mouth against forcible collectivization only after its targets have already been achieved. At that juncture, as eyewash for the peasants, it shifted the entire blame on to the cadres, mouthing words of peace, 'We must not resort to coercion in collectivization'. It was confident that the peasants who joined the collectives would not withdraw.

Stalin's essay created a great deal of confusion among the cadres. 'These warnings were not there all these months!'; 'There was never a word about the need to do mass work!'; 'Was the essay really written by Stalin?', were the kind of doubts that arose on a large scale. They thought it was a forged essay. They stopped reprinting it in the regional press. They raided the homes of peasants and confiscated copies of *Pravda* containing the essay. The coercion against the peasants did not stop immediately. After the publication of the essay some people wrote to Stalin (without revealing their addresses) questioning why peasants were subjected to such coercion. Even to those letters, Stalin gave the same old answer. He replied that the peasants come into collectivization voluntarily; that collectivization cannot happen on the same scale everywhere, that mass line which Lenin proposed must not be neglected, and that some of the cadres have forgotten all this. If it is merely 'forgetfulness', then it is not just some cadres, but everyone. The Party leaders themselves had 'forgotten'. The peasants could breathe easy after the publication of the essay written by Stalin on behalf of the Central Committee and his replies to the questions. The peasants began to get out of collectives by arguing, 'we have been forced into the collectives'. 'The Party said that coercion must not be used'. The percentage of collectivization which touched 59% dropped to 21.7%. In Moscow region the land that was 73% under collectives in March 1930 dropped to 7% by June. Even in the land that was still under collectives, peasants began to work without enthusiasm. Many incidents such as theft and destruction of collective assets and killing of cattle occurred. Productivity also declined. Even peasants who were a part of the collectives were given permission to cultivate some land privately. The system of private plots continues to this day in Russia. (Not much is known about the details with regard to the extent of land under collectivization or as private plots).

What was the reason for such defeat of the early collectivization of Soviet agriculture? It was the use of coercive military means. [To show how wrong coercion is, Lenin comments on one occasion, 'we don't want to drive people into heaven with batons' (*Is Compulsory Official language Necessary?*). But, if it is the intention of those who were driving to really lead people to heaven, at least that coercion would have some value. But this coercion did not have even that value. The aim of this collectivization was never really to improve the living conditions of the peasantry. The Party authorities tried to achieve through their orders, what the peasantry was to achieve in phases on their own initiative, enthusiasm and class consciousness. The peasantry bowed to arrests and banishments but did not succumb to collectivization. Bettelheim's critique suggests that the Chinese revisionists too have adopted a similar approach towards the problems of the peasantry. □□□

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