

Can a traditional village decide not to enter the market economy?

For thousands of years, all over the world, most people lived in small agricultural villages. These villages were largely self-sufficient, producing the food, clothing and shelter inhabitants needed for survival. People bartered goods and services with each other and with neighboring villages for things that they could not produce themselves. Most villages were self-governing, though this does not mean they were democratic. Generally village residents were part of an extended family or clan and there were established reciprocal obligations between people.

This was not an idyllic world. There were often people who were oppressed because of gender-related practices, caste, or religion. Often village land was owned by outside nobles and village residents were obligated to turn over goods or to provide labor. Villagers were also vulnerable to invaders who wanted whatever they produced or coveted their location by a river or in a productive valley. In addition, many villages existed on the economic margins with a constant threat of ecological disaster, including epidemics, floods, and droughts.

Starting approximately 1200 AD in Europe, and later in other parts of the world, an emerging capitalist market economy began to disrupt this world. Landlords and nobles who owned land wanted to increase their wealth. In order to do this they had to replace small scale subsistence agricultural with large scale production for the market place. They pressured people to change crops, ignored traditional obligations, and sometimes forced villagers off their lands.

Other forces also pressured villages to adapt to the market place. Sometimes landlords demanded cash payment for rent and governments or colonial powers wanted money for taxes. This forced villagers to enter the market economy. Local leaders were undermined if they did not support the changes and other, more cooperative leaders, were selected to replace them.

People were not always coerced. At the beginning of a change over, villages that entered the market economy might be better off because of schools, doctors, jobs, and resources. Sometimes people accepted small changes unaware of the long term consequences. Young people and people from oppressed groups also voluntarily left villages, seeking better lives in urban areas or other parts of the world.

However, as more villages entered the market economy, as cities grew over crowded, and as the environment was increasingly exploited, conditions worsened. Air and water pollution affects everyone, even if they do not contribute to creating it. Even a village that tried to resist change could be devastated by new diseases or ecological disasters. As forests were cut down in India, floods grew worse and downstream villages in Bangladesh were destroyed. Forest fires used to clear land in Indonesia choke people living in Malaysia. Factory waste can poison fish and deform the people who eat the fish.