

Activity 6. Can a traditional village refuse to enter the market economy?

Instructions: Read the essay and answer the questions based on the information in the passage and your own knowledge of history.

Questions

1. How did most people on Earth live prior to 1200 AD?
2. What forces radically transformed how people lived?
3. Why were these forces so powerful?
4. Change can be positive, negative, or both. How do you evaluate the changes described in this passage? Why?

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 a perfect 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 agriculture 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 changeover, 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 overcrowded, and as the environment was increasingly exploited, conditions worsened. Air and water pollution affected everyone, even if they did not contribute to creating it. New diseases or ecological disasters could devastate even a village that tried to resist change. 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 choked people living in Malaysia. Factory waste poisoned fish and deformed the people who eat the fish.

