

Social Change in Rural Thailand

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I. Social Structure in the Feudal Period

Before coming into real contact with the West in mid 19th century Thailand was a slightly populated country with an agrarian, self-sufficient economy. The less than 5 million population were thinly distributed all over the country, mostly engaged in rice growing for their own consumption with a small surplus left which was paid to the government as tax in kind. Rice was considered by the government to be the most important commodity guaranteeing national well being and security and no significant amount was allowed for export. As a result of this policy foreign trade before mid 19th century was insignificant. The economy was static and more or less self-sufficient while the polity was under the control of a centralized, authoritarian government represented by a small officialdom with the king at the apex. The small officialdom and the mass of peasants were the only two important status groups in the country, the former monopolizing power and wealth and having a life style different from that of the latter. Their claim to authority was based on the ideology of benevolent paternalism. The common bond between the two groups was, and is still today, a belief in Buddhism which in Thai society emphasized the virtues of merit-making, compassion, tolerance and moderation of one's own behavior. The government was despotic in form but more or less benevolent in practice owing to the influence of Buddhist teachings.

There was a sharp cleavage, of course, between the power and wealth of the officialdom on the one hand and those of the peasant mass on the other. Thai Marxist scholars are apt to emphasize this point as the worst feature of exploitation in Thai feudalism. However, to be objective in appraising the nature of Thai feudal society one must also take into account the existence of moral principles which the ruling class was also expected to adhere to

as justification of their high status. Besides, the fact that this ruling class was very small and the country was rich in land and other natural resources in relation to the population meant the burden borne by the peasant mass in supporting them in most cases could never be too onerous. Being illiterate and helpless in protecting their interest and security, the peasants looked to the government officials for leadership, guidance and protection. There was no wide gap existing between the two groups. The capital city of Bangkok, not to mention other towns, had only a small population serving mostly as administrative and cultural center rather than as trade center. Most of the population were thinly distributed all over the country. Under the circumstances of static and self-sufficient economy there could not be a sharp difference in the way of life nor a conflict of interest between the tiny urban population consisting mostly of government officials, artisans and merchants on the one hand and the rural population consisting of the peasant mass on the other.

II. Change from Self-sufficient Economy to Cash Economy

This equilibrium was upset when the country was drawn into economic involvement with the outside world beginning in mid 19th century. Western powers were interested in world trade and demanded Thailand to open the country for foreign trade and other exchanges. Unequal treaties were forced on Thailand establishing extraterritorial rights for foreigners under the protection of Western powers and limiting Thai government's power to levy custom duties on imports to the maximum of 3 per cent ad valorem. Foreign trade, formerly only on a small scale and mostly monopolized by the government, from then on was made free. This was particularly true of rice which formerly was not allowed for export in any significant amount for strategic reasons. Now, since the opening up of the country rice has become number one export of Thailand. There was a great demand for Thai rice in the world market owing to capitalistic development taking place in many countries in Asia under Western domination. Thai peasants were ready to exploit this new economic opportunity. There were plenty of land that could be utilized for rice growing with only a small amount of investment. The peasants already possessed the skill and with the desire to earn extra cash to buy new material things now available in the market, it was not difficult for them to expand their rice pro-

duction in order to have more surplus left for sale in the market. This process began first in the central plains-the so-called rice bowl of Thailand-and since then has penetrated into most rural areas of Thailand, except in the arid Northeast where rain-fed agriculture is still the practice and rice growing is mostly intended for home consumption.

For the peasants the change of their household economy from a self-sufficient one, in which household members themselves produced most of the things needed for subsistence, into a cash economy in which sales of rice have been the most important source of income from which to buy other necessities of daily life, has had many implications. The peasants, of course, welcomed the change, as can be expected of most peasants under the same circumstances every where in the world. They naturally would like to see their material standard of living improved. Possession of cash means they could buy or do many things formerly beyond their ability such as buying new clothes, gold ornaments or going to town for entertainment. Commercialization of rice growing thus can be said to lead to certain improvement in the material standard of living of most peasants.

However, the change into cash, market-oriented economy also meant the loss of traditional security of most peasants. Now, they have been subject to many outside forces beyond their control. Rice prices mostly have never been on a high level compared with those of other commodities such as rubber, tin and oil which are much in demand in the world market. Besides, they have fluctuated from year to year, reflecting the unstable world supply and demand and causing the peasants' cash income to be always at a low level barely enough to make ends meet. Their plight has become worsened in years of unfavorable natural conditions when drought or flooding severely damaged rice harvest, the situation that could be expected once in every few years, particularly before the end of World War II when no large scale irrigation projects were undertaken. Commercialization of rice growing also resulted in the virtual disappearance of various kinds of home industry such as cotton spinning, cloth weaving, making of agricultural tools and pottery, etc. traditionally carried on in most rural households. They were not worth the effort any more in the face of cheap, imported factory-made goods readily available in the market. The peasants have been thus forced to obtain cash to

buy various necessities of daily life.

III. Social Injustice Brought About by Commercialization of Rice Growing

In contrast to the poverty of most peasants, the rice middlemen and millers had benefited greatly from the fluctuation of rice prices. They constituted a new group in Thai society, consisting mostly of Chinese traders who migrated in a large number to Thailand during the 19th century, driven off by the political and economic chaos in their homeland and attracted by economic opportunities in the new country. They were much more sophisticated than the illiterate Thai peasants and were solely oriented on profit-making. Possessing capitals and knowledge of price conditions, they had much higher bargaining power than that of the peasants. They could reap a high rate of profit through dictating prices and shifting all losses to the peasants in years of low prices. Thai peasants were thus at the mercy of these middlemen who were rather unscrupulous in their business practices which in many cases involved cheating on scale and price cutting on the false pretext of the low quality of padi brought for sale by the peasants.

It was thus not surprising that many peasants in the commercialized rice growing areas found it necessary to borrow to make ends meet, both to get capitals for growing next crops of rice and to get credits for living expenses while awaiting the new harvest. Indebtedness has since become one of the serious problems in the commercialized rice growing areas of Thailand. In many cases money lenders and middlemen were combined in the same persons who sooner or later would upgrade their status to become also landlords, exploiting their economic advantages to the maximum by forcing directly or indirectly the indebted peasants to sell their land to them. Once in debt it was very difficult for most peasants to get out of it. Their low income from sales of rice crops was barely enough to pay the highly exorbitant interest rates charged by the money lenders-in many cases amounting to more than 100 per cent per year. The debt just accumulated, with the unpaid interest added to the capitals making it many times more than the original sum borrowed. Sooner or later the impoverished peasants had no alternative but to transfer the ownership of their land to the money lenders and find themselves

tenants on the land once they owned or driven to join the increasing corps of rural landless laborers.

Commercialization of rice growing thus went hand in hand with the increasing rate of tenancy. At present, it is highest in the central plains where in the provinces near Bangkok the rate is usually over 50 percent of the farming households. In the intermontane valleys of the North where arable land is scarce, and land productivity is high due to reliable water control, the tenancy rate is also very high. Tenancy rates seem to be related with the degree of commercialization of rice growing, the productivity of the land and the nearness of land to urban centers, particularly Bangkok in the central plains and Chiangmai in the North. Thus the rate is lowest in the Northeast-less than 5 per cent-owing to the predominance of subsistence farming and low market value of the land due to lack of effective irrigation and low degree of urbanization of the region.

In any objective analysis it can be said that tenancy is among the most important causes of rural poverty and social injustice. Outside of the Northeast, the poorest region of Thailand where rural poverty is mainly the result of unfavorable natural conditions for agriculture, the poorest rural families are to be found among the small tenants and landless laborers. At one time land rents could be as high as more than 50 per cent of crop yields. The customary practice of charging rent was that the higher the yield, the higher the rate either in kind or in cash, leaving only a small flat amount to the tenants no matter how much effort they put in to extract the most from the rented land. Landlords usually are absentee ones, residing in Bangkok or other urban centers not far from the land they own. Some of them may perform a functional role as suppliers of credit to their tenants and small owner-farmers who otherwise would find it almost impossible to eke out a living. But on the whole, insofar as these absentee landlords are interested only in maximizing their income from rents without making any investment in improving their land, they can be described as a parasitic group whose existence is a real stumbling block to the government's effort at raising the income of poor families in the rural areas.

Social injustice inherent in landlordism is too obvious. It is only a small, privileged minority who prosper at the expense of the impoverished peasants.

The situation could no longer be left as a supposedly free bargain between landlords and tenants. The government thus since about 20 years ago has stepped in to control the maximum amount of rent that can be charged. In the central plains where landlord-tenant relationship is more on an impersonal basis and tenants have more choice owing to the easy availability of land for rent, this rent control law can be said to be partially successful to the extent that rents now are usually reduced to around 20 per cent of rice yields-a considerable achievement compared with the old rate of almost 50 per cent in the case of fertile paddy field. On the other hand in the North this law has remained more or less ineffective. Owing to the very limited supply of land most tenants have no choice but to submit to the demand of the landlords who usually are small land owners and with whom the tenants have established a long term personal relationship.

The government has enacted a land reform law empowering it to buy the portion of land over a specified limit owned by absentee landlords for redistribution to the tenants and landless. In buying land the government must get the agreement of landlords who usually demand a full market price for their land. Land reform law remains thus only a paper legislation. The government just does not have enough fund to buy up all the rented land except in a few cases for demonstration purpose. Land reform as actually implemented in most cases in Thailand should rather be called land development or land reallocation as they usually involve legal recognition of ownership and improvement of land already occupied by the landless peasants who have intruded into the national reserve forests to plant upland crops. Anyway, though impractical at the present moment, the existence of land reform law signifies the government and public recognition of the problem of tenancy and this has had the effect of inhibiting the desire of landlords to further expand their possession.

IV. Population Increase and Migration

The poverty in the rural areas has been worsened by the increasing pressure of population on land resources. Until recently the rate of population increase in Thailand had been very high, i.e. more than 3 per cent a year. It took some time for the peasants to realize the necessity of having a small

number of children in the face of the limited supply of land and the high cost of raising children. Thailand's population now has reached about 50 million with an annual increase of about 1 million. However, the age of rapid population increase seems to be somewhat under control now, with the success of the government effort in reducing birth rate by spreading the idea and practice of family planning. The rate of population increase now is less than 2 per cent a year and further reduction can be reasonably expected.

One can be optimistic about future population increase but the harsh fact is that the present number of population is already too big for an economy based primarily on agricultural production in an increasingly limited land resources. For many peasant families it is no longer possible to earn a living in their native villages. Only two choices seem to be open to them, i. e. moving to clear the land in national reserve forests, the practice their forefathers usually did but now made illegal by the government or migrating to urban centers, particularly to Bangkok, the largest city of the country. Bangkok has a special attraction for the rural migrants because of its rapid growth and the consequent need for laborers of all kinds.

Bangkok has all the characteristics of the so-called primate city. Its population now is over 5 million and is more than 40 times larger than the second largest city of Thailand, i.e. Chiangmai. The country's population is about 25 per cent urban and of this total almost a half live in Bangkok metropolitan area. The rapid growth of Bangkok reflects the unbalanced development of the country since mid 19th century. It has been accentuated after the end of World War II when the rate of population increase was at its height and rural poverty became worsened. To the impoverished peasants from all parts of Thailand, life in Bangkok is much more bearable than life in their native villages, even though they can expect to get only menial, unskilled jobs at a very low wage.

V. A wide Gap Existing Between the Rural and Urban Population

In Thailand, as in most developing countries, a wide gap exists between urban centers and rural areas. Social development that has taken place since the beginning of the modern period has benefited the urban population more than the rural population or at its worst favored the former at the expense of

the latter. The average income of Bangkok people is much higher than that of the rural population. While Bangkok residents can enjoy modern amenities of life such as education opportunities, health facilities, various kinds of public utilities, etc. the majority of rural population until recently have to endure with a minimum of modern civilization, living always in a state of poverty and ignorance and, for many of them, ill health.

In the past urbanization in Thailand did not start from modern industrial expansion. Bangkok as well as other towns were merely administrative and commercial centers. Creation of a unified modern nation-state meant the extension of governmental function and power into all provinces of the country, which in turn required an expansion of government bureaucracy and its personnel who mostly lived in Bangkok and other towns. At the same time a new group came into existence in urban centers, consisting of middlemen, shop keepers, processors of agricultural produce, importers and exporters whose functions were vital in the new commercial-oriented economy. The income of these two groups-the bureaucracy and the middlemen-merchant class-derived in the last analysis from the fruits of the labor of the peasants. In other words, they lived off the surplus from the rural areas. The growing size of these two groups, coupled with the increasing emphasis placed on acquiring wealth, had resulted in the increasing exploitation and poverty of the rural masses. Between them these two groups monopolized political power and wealth of the country but the sad fact is that until recently they were either not really interested in or failed in launching the industrialization of the country. The country's resources, in the last analysis meaning the surplus taken off from the rural areas, were mostly wastefully spent for consumption in the urban areas while the country was left economically underdeveloped. Agricultural productivity remained stagnant even though some investment was made in rural areas to provide infrastructure such as irrigation and roads. Increased agricultural production seemed to benefit the urban-based middlemen more than the toiling peasants owing to the lack of bargaining power of the latter. Moreover, an increase in rural income, if there was any, was also likely to be offsetted by the rapid increase of population as mentioned earlier.

VI. Government's Past Failures

The government was rather slow in recognizing the plight of the rural population. One reason was that the change was gradual and at least before World War II the government was more concerned with the problem of nation-building and maintaining national independence more than economic development. Peasants were left to rely on themselves to solve their problems, thereby becoming easy preys to the manipulation of those who in various ways derived their income from the peasants' labor. Recognition was given first to the problem of rural indebtedness the solution of which the government relied on the setting up of agricultural credit cooperatives on a small scale. However, with a limited government support, only a few peasants benefited from this effort.

Traditionally rice growing peasants have always been considered the backbone of the nation and their suffering made the main concern of the government. Until recently this remained more or less an empty ideology while the government attention was drawn to other problems regarded as more pressing, particularly political problems affecting its survival. Uneducated, inarticulate, unorganized and unrepresented in national politics, the peasants had no means to bring effective pressure on the government to pay real attention to their problems in contrast to urban Bangkok population who were close to the government and whose opinion the government must give heed to in order to prevent political instability. The urban population's concern has always been low rice prices and this many governments in the past dutifully and naively made their important policy, closing their eye to the adverse effects it had on the peasants' income and social conditions in the rural areas. After the end of World War II domestic rice prices had always been significantly lower than world prices until recently. This was achieved by means of premium and export taxes levied on exported rice. The rates varied with world prices, i.e. the higher the prices, the higher the rates, in order to keep down the rise in domestic prices for the benefit of urban consumers. In years of good world prices the rates could amount to more than half of these. The government succeeded very well in keeping domestic prices at a low level and thereby pacifying urban consumers as well as earning itself a large amount of income to the national treasury.

Premium and export taxes might be defensible in years of extremely

high world prices and in case the rates were not so high as to keep the peasants poor forever. The adverse effects of this tax became obvious with decline of world prices. In certain years local price of padi became so low that many peasants were forced to mortgage or sell their land to get out of the miserable conditions. For many years world prices for rice have declined or remained at a low level, making the unreasonableness and unfairness of the assessment of premium tax very obvious. In recent years, the premium rates have been considerably reduced and last year (1983) a new era for Thai rice growing peasants began when the government decided to further reduce them to almost a nominal level.

With the world rice prices remaining at a low level, it has proved very difficult for the government to push up domestic prices for padi, even without any tax on exported rice. Various kinds of price support program have been tried by the government with only a limited success. Most peasants have not benefited from them just because the government has not got enough fund nor machinery to buy up all the padi itself. In the last analysis world prices dictate how much the local middlemen will pay to the peasants in buying their rice crop. This year (1984) the target price set up by the government is 3,300 Baht (about ¥33,000) per 1000kg. of first grade padi but the actual price in the market the middlemen are willing to pay is only 3,000 Baht (about ¥30,000). Under the present economic conditions of the world, the future does not seem to hold any bright hope for rice growing peasants in such developing countries as Thailand.*

VII. Spread of Communist Insurgency

The negligence of the past governments in dealing squarely with the problem of rural poverty and social injustice was one of the reasons that contributed to the spread of Communist insurgency in rural Thailand starting in the mid 60's. The Communist Party of Thailand was once very confident of its strategy of building up mass support among the rural peasants. They were given moral support by the urban-based Marxist intellectuals who sympathized with their cause and shared their hatred against the so-called evils of capitalism. Recent history has proved the Communists have failed dismally to indoctrinate and mobilize the peasants to join their cause. The government

has succeeded in containing the insurgency and winning the cooperation of the peasants in eliminating it. The Communist message of class hatred, violence, denunciation against capitalistic, imperialistic countries and adoration of socialist bloc countries has very little appeal to the peasants who think more in terms of their immediate well-being and whose loyalty to the country's three basic institutions-the Thai Nation, Buddhism and the Monarchy is a strong bulwark against any Communist propaganda to indoctrinate them.

In the Marxist analysis of social change in Thailand, the root cause of rural poverty and contradictions in Thai society as in other developing countries is the world expansion of capitalism and imperialism. A "Dependency" theory is very much in vogue now among Marxist intellectuals who are firmly convinced that economic underdevelopment and social injustice in developing countries have been caused by imperialistic, exploiting policies of the industrialized, capitalist countries in collusion with the nascent native bourgeoisie and the remnant feudalistic elements. In all fairness one must admit that there has been an exploitation going on in such developing countries as Thailand and this has been an important cause of rural poverty. However, Marxist explanation is only a partial truth and to this extent it is a biased and dangerous idea because it does not take into account other equally important causes of economic poverty such as low productivity, antiquated value system, emphasis on present enjoyment of living more than saving for investment, lack of good work ethics and cooperative group effort, indulgence in vices and in many cases extremely poor land and water conditions for agriculture, etc. These factors are interrelated with exploitation and make the development of rural areas a very difficult, complicated, long term and sometimes very frustrating task. Marxist thinking also blinds one from seeing positive changes and trends that are going on in the existing social structure toward better social justice and to this extent it causes one to be too unduly pessimistic in looking at the future.

It can be argued as well that exploitation as existing in most developing countries is due to lack of capitalism rather than because of it, capitalism in the sense understood and actually operating in the modern industrialized countries. In developing countries, it is rather "feudalistic capitalism" and "primitive" capitalism that are rampant and are the real causes of social in-

justice. Exploitation certainly takes place when persons born of or occupying high status forget their "noble obligess" and are solely concerned with acquiring wealth. This type is represented by corrupted government leaders and big landlords who get prosperous from inherited wealth and accumulating land. Primitive capitalism means seeking quick and as high profit as possible regardless of the means used and spend it in conspicuous consumption for one's own family. Cheating, lying, forgery, frauds, seeking special privileges, paying bribes, blackmail and even outright use of force to intimidate and eliminate one's opponents are among the usual methods resorted to by this type of capitalists among whom can be found many middlemen, money lenders and land grabbers who formerly were the real scourges to the helpless and unsophisticated peasants.

VIII. Present Government Efforts

Rural poverty and the wide gap existing between the small urban population and the rural masses have been increasingly recognized as a serious national problem by many governments in succession. Recent economic and social development plans all have made it a central point to reduce this gap by concentrating national effort at rural development. Rural poverty is regarded as the most important bottleneck in economic development and posing a serious threat to national security. The existence of Communist insurgency has reminded the government of the urgency of the problem and has contributed to the increasing public awareness of the problem of social injustice done to the rural population. Among the Thai leaders, the present prime minister, General Prem Tinnasulanon, probably is most conscious of this problem. His effort at awakening public interest in the plight of the rural population, mobilizing both government and private sector's resources and streamlining government bureaucracy to deal squarely with the problem of rural development has earned him wide acclaims, as indicated in the title "champion of the rural people" given to him by the press. Undoubtedly the future will see more national resources devoted to development of the rural areas, particularly in the impoverished provinces of the Northeast which so far have not benefited much from the country's economic development in the past decades.

Government efforts have brought about improvement in the standard of

living of rural population almost everywhere in Thailand. Now one finds an elementary school in almost every village and very often a secondary school at the next higher administrative unit. Health and mid-wife stations staffed with trained paramedical personnel are found scattered all over the countryside. In communication with the outside world most villages are no longer isolated now that roads, mostly lacterite, have been built to connect them with nearby towns and from there a modern highway system connecting them with the rest of the country. Communist insurgency has given first priority to road building in the rural areas to combat communist influence and to strengthen villagers' tie with government authorities through bringing more government service to the villages. Better road network means better communication with the outside world and the entry into the villages of new ideas and material things. Japanese made pick-up trucks and motorcycles are now seen everywhere in rural Thailand. The latter are particularly popular with the villagers owing to their relatively cheap prices, low operating cost and the ability to go every where even though road conditions are very poor. They should be given credit for revolutionizing the physical mobility of the village people.

Electricity has now reached more than half of the villages in Thailand and in the near future it is planned to cover almost all rural areas. With electricity come electric appliances. Many villagers now own electric fans, other items still relatively too expensive except for the few well-to-do families. For the latter possession of television sets is now quite common. Other villagers can always join in the watching. In the quiet, monotonous atmosphere of village life, watching television is the best means to get entertainment and to get news of the outside world if one wants to. Battery-operated transistor radio sets have made their way into Thai villages since many years ago to the extent that now one can hardly find any rural home without it. Now television is making its appearance and one can only guess that its effects must be much greater than radio. For one thing urban life is no longer a strange thing to ordinary villagers, exposed as they were to television programs featuring modern styles of life in an urban setting. They will feel more at home when going to urban centers and dealing with urban people. In this sense we can say that the psychological gap once existing between the urban and rural people has been considerably reduced.

After World War II the government with the assistance of World Bank and other sources of foreign aids has made a considerable investment to improve irrigation wherever it is technically possible. The delta of the central plains and the intermontane valleys of the North are now mostly well provided with networks of efficient irrigation facilities, particularly in the areas where land consolidation projects have been launched. Effective irrigation, introduction of rice seeds of the new high yielding variety, intensive use of fertilizers, insecticide, weedicide and mechanized land preparation have made possible a dramatic increase in rice yields per unit area as well as double cropping in many parts of the country. Formerly one rai[#] of good paddy field in the central plains could yield only 400 kg. of padi on the average. Now, it is not difficult to get a yield double this amount. With double cropping it means now the peasants can obtain their harvest four times as much as they formerly could get in the same plot of land. Of, course, not all peasants have benefited from this improvement but its dramatic effect can be seen in Thailand's ability to maintain its leading position as world rice exporter. Last year Thailand exported about 3.7million tons, almost double the amount exported 20 years ago, despite the increase of population from around 30 to 50 million at present.

The government has also taken several measures to stop the trend of peasants losing their land to greedy money lenders and landlords. A large amount of credit has been provided to redeem mortgaged land and to lessen the peasants' dependence on private money lenders. Anyway, with the peasants becoming more sophisticated these days, it is no longer easy for landlords to intimidate them to sell their land. The business of land speculation is also now less tempting because most of the farm land near urban centers has already been bought up by land speculators. There remains for buying only far away land and usually not productive one. It is thus better to invest one's money in other businesses. This has led to a decline of interest among urban capitalists to appropriate land from the peasants.

X. Positive Effects of Industrialization and Urbanization

Hand in hand with change in the rural areas is the spread of urbanization and change in the role of Bangkok, the capital city, in its relationship with the

rest of the country. Industrialization taking place in Bangkok area makes it no longer appropriate to call it a parasitic city living off the surplus from the rural areas. Industrialization has produced a new source wealth as well as a new source of employment for surplus laborers from the rural areas. Unlike the old class of middlemen, money lenders and landlords who think more in terms of their immediate self interest and who usually get rich at the expense of the peasants, the new class of industrialists and modern businessmen can be said to perform a positive function for the Thai economy just because of the very nature of their undertakings. They prosper, of course, but the important fact is that the country as a whole also benefits from their activities. Of particular importance to the rural population is the agro-industry which makes use of local agricultural produce as raw materials or cooperates directly with the peasants in launching modern agricultural ventures by providing the latter with credits, technology, guaranteed prices and ready market. On the whole success in launching modern agricultural ventures by providing the latter with credit will be able to earn more taxes for spending in rural development projects while the peasants will have more opportunities for off-farm employment. Not least important is the fact that industrialization and other modern businesses in urban centers have opened up a new field to those who otherwise would prey on the helpless peasants to make money for themselves.

To relieve the heavy concentration of urban population in Bangkok area, the country's development plans have called for strengthening the economic base of several key towns in different parts of the country, turning them into centers for the development of the surrounding small towns and rural areas. The past decade has seen some of the provincial towns such as Chiangmai in the North and Konkan in the Northeast growing very fast with the population in many places now reaching over the 100,000 mark. The rates of growth of population of these key towns are much higher than that in the rural areas. Their growth has had a beneficial and positive effect on the surrounding areas. It means more opportunities for the rural families to supplement their income from agriculture by sending some family members to work for wages in town. For example, in many villages around the town of Konkan in the Northeast every morning pick-up trucks from construction companies in town can be seen making rounds in the villages to pick up young men

and women for work in construction projects that are experiencing a boom in the town of Konkhan. At the same time village-owned small buses are packed with villagers, mostly women and young girls who are going to town bringing with them their families' farm produce such as vegetable, fish, eggs and fruits for sale in the town markets. Some of them commute to work in factories. The scene will be repeated in the evening when they return to the villages. These activities, together with remittances sent by family members who have gone for a long term or seasonal employment in far away places such as Bangkok and very increasingly popular now to the oil rich countries of the Middle East, must have brought a sizable income to the families and help reduce their total dependence on agricultural income.

As a matter of fact, a significant number of families in the rural areas now do not earn any income or only a small portion of their income from agricultural pursuits. They either commute daily to town for regular employment or pursue non agricultural occupations in their own villages. Commercialization of village economy and extension of government service into rural areas mean the creation of new business and job opportunities within the existing villages. For many villagers with an enterprising spirit or with an ambition for upward social mobility, occupations such as small shop keepers, truck and bus operators, cattle traders, small rice mill operators, village school teachers and other low level government employees, etc. offer much more opportunities than remaining primarily as rice farmers. That it is possible now for quite a few villagers to aspire to these new occupations signifies a very important change in the village society and Thai social structure.

In recent years the nation-wide project of rural job creation in the dry season has been launched. This project has been allocated an annual appropriation involving several thousand million bahts per year and has succeeded in increasing cash income for a large number of villagers who otherwise would remain idle. It also has the side effects of reducing migration to Bangkok during the dry season as well as encouraging villagers' participation in the development of their own villages through their ability to decide on the projects in which the government money is going to be spent. With increased income from agriculture as well as other new sources of income, the level of rural households' income in recent years has certainly improved. This can be seen

in the better conditions of houses now in most villages and in them can be found many kinds of new material things formerly beyond the reach of their owners. Compared with the situation 20 years ago, the income and material standard of living of the rural population in most parts of Thailand have certainly improved, may be at the rate not as high as that enjoyed by certain elite groups in the urban population. It is a favorable change in absolute terms, nevertheless.

Since the beginning of the modern period the rural population have undergone many changes in their traditional way of life and in their relationship with the outside world. They have been caught up in the upheavals caused by the expansion of world economy and the conflict of political ideology among the great world powers. They have been able to weather through this difficult experience, mostly on their own effort. Now with greater attention paid to them from the outside world and with new trends set in motion by recent social change, it is not unrealistic to entertain an optimistic hope that the future will be better for them.

* The low price of rice in Thailand will be very obvious if compared with the extremely high price in Japan. In 1984, in Japan the retail price of standard rice after 4.2% increase will be ¥3,628 per 10 kg. or 4.9 times the price in Thailand (¥740)

One rai, a Thai unit of areal measurement = 1,600m²; 6.25 rai equal 1 hectare.