

An 'NREGS' in olden times

BOTH LOCAL rulers and British had the scheme running to guarantee employment during droughts



Pankaj Jaiswal
pjaiswal@hindustantimes.com

JHANSI/MAHOBA: Most of us may not know that Bundelkhand had rural employment guarantee schemes in ancient times, run by rulers in times of drought.

The schemes not only provided livelihood but also engaged people in building ponds, dams and wells.

"Bundelkhand had 'NREGS' since ancient times. History has evidences of it," says Prof Shiv

Pujan Pathak, a Bundelkhand historian and retired head of the department of history of Jhansi College.

Chandel and Bundela rulers used to run public welfare schemes during times of droughts and famines to provide livelihood and food to people as well as further drought-proof the region by making them build rainwater harvesting structures.

The British government too followed it up and they used the term 'famine relief' for the schemes and called the people employed as 'famine labour'. British time gazetteers have some records of them.

Diwan Kesri Singh, 95, a descendant from the Bundela dynasty, says: "in 1905 famine, the ruler Malkhan Singh built

WELFARE MEASURES

■ Chandel and Bundela rulers used to run public welfare schemes during times of droughts and famines to provide livelihood and food to people as well as further drought-proof the region by making them build rainwater harvesting structures.

■ The British government too followed it up and they used the term 'famine relief' for the schemes

huge ponds in Charkhari as famine relief employment." Malkhan Sagar is one such structure that still exists and is functional. Kesri Singh, who was a cousin and aide of Raja Arimardan Singh, says both the



■ A weir in Jhansi built by British on Pahuj river. It supplies drinking water to Jhansi and was built by famine labour. PANKAJ JAISWAL/HT

Chandel and the Bundela rulers implemented such schemes in times of drought.

A Jhansi gazetteer mentions: "The British government adopted certain measures to afford relief to the famine-stricken peo-

ple. In September 1868, a local committee consisting of principal Civil and Military Officers was convened to review the situation. In October 1868 the State of Gwalior agreed to donate Rs 400 and thereafter a subscrip-

tion of Rs 150 per mensem for the relief of famine affected people. The British also established several poor-houses at Jhansi, Mau Ranipur, Barwa Sagar and Babina. For the employment of able-bodied labourers 13 works were undertaken, of which the most important were cuttings and bridges on the Saugor road; irrigation embankments at Pachwara and Maragarwara in Mau pargana. An aggregate of 9,42,465 people were employed at a cost of Rs 71,881. The collection of land revenue amounting to Rs 90,000 was also suspended. Moreover, Rs 1,11,536 were distributed as Taccavi or loans for the construction of wells, purchase of seeds, plough and cattle."

The gazetteer further men-

tions that 'poor-houses' were opened at Talbehat, Bansi, Banpur, Mehrouni and Jakhlon. With a view to providing clothes to the paupers in the poor-houses, a dhoti factory was started at Banpur. In district Lalitpur, Commissioner J Davidson managed the relief with the cooperation of the village headmen.

Prof Pathak says: "But there was a difference in the ancient schemes and British famine relief employment. British also applied the scheme to build schools and churches apart from water harvesting systems."

Both Chandels-Bundelas and the British gave foodgrains along with famine wages to the workers.

Next: Making water-intensive crops flourish in semi-arid zone