

Harijan

Explanatory Notes For those projecting the film

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An Oxfam film

BIHAR DROUGHT

As a result of the failure of the monsoon rains in 1965 and 1966 Bihar suffered one of the worst droughts in its history. At the height of the disaster it was estimated that thirty million people of the total 52 million were threatened with famine. During 1967 Oxfam took part in one of the largest feeding and well boring programmes of its history.

CAUSES

The principal causes of the drought were the shortage of wells reaching down beneath the rock strata lying fifteen to twenty feet below the surface to the permanent water table beneath, and of dams and reservoirs to capture the river waters which flow in a torrent during the monsoon season, leaving the river beds dry and barren during the remainder of the year.

Clearly, given sufficient means and expert advice it was possible to prevent a recurrence of a disaster of this magnitude, and Oxfam's Field Director in India, Jim Howard, started discussing the possibilities of a development programme with other organisations.

GRAMDAN ORGANISATION

One of the organisations with whom Oxfam had worked in the feeding programme was the Sarva Seva Sangh, an Indian organisation founded by followers of Gandhi with its main objective being to encourage the adoption of the "Gramdan" system. This involves the voluntary redistribution of land from the landowners to the landless labourers followed by a form of village co-operative which gives all the villagers a say in their future plans. Oxfam decided to undertake a complete agricultural programme with the Sarva Seva Sangh, the working arm of Gramdan, in what came to be called the Oxfam Gramdan Action Programme (OGAP). This took the shape of four projects, each at a different community centre (or Ashram) in South Bihar. Sokhodeora, Bodh Gaya, Khadigram and Simultala. Oxfam undertook to provide funds for the programme and specialist volunteers to work alongside the Sarva Seva Sangh fieldworkers. The United Nations Association was to administer the volunteers, with Oxfam paying for their costs and allowances, about £3.10 a week, and helping in their selection.

HISTORICAL AND HUMAN PROBLEMS

In a community where the borderline between subsistence and starvation is slight, and which has for centuries been downtrodden both by the climate and by the social system, there are four main barriers to the acceptance of any changes in the traditional and proven farming methods: conservatism, poverty, ignorance and apathy. People are understandably reluctant to risk their livelihoods for new and untried farming methods. Poverty makes it impossible for them, even if they wish it, to afford a well or irrigation system, or to buy the improved seeds and fertilizers and pesticides which would give an increased crop. Ignorance prevents them from making the best use of the old methods, or able easily to comprehend the new unless it can be adequately demonstrated. And lastly the apathy that comes by constant defeat, from natural causes and from man's injustice and oppression, and removes the initiative to do better. To this can be added the lack of energy which results from sustained malnutrition over the years and the temperatures which in the hot weather reach 110° to 112° in the shade. All these factors were and are present in Bihar. In addition the Gramdan movement gave land for the first time to many who never farmed before, the tribals and the outcasts, the "untouchables", whom Gandhi called Harijans ... children of God.

OGAP PRIORITIES AND PROGRAMME : WATER CONSERVATION

To start with OGAP concentrated on releasing people from dependence on the annual monsoon rains, by providing an adequate all year round water supply ... and this aspect of the development project is the main subject of the film. In particular it shows the deepening of wells to the permanent water table, and the strengthening

of their walls by a simple system of pre-cast concrete rings. In other areas rivers were dammed to prevent the race of precious monsoon water to the sea, or tanks, reservoirs or ahars (three sided rainwater catchment tanks set against a hill) were constructed depending on the nature of the land. To these were then added irrigation canals, piping, and in some instances pumps to get the water to where it is needed.

LABOUR AND PAYMENT

All of this irrigation and water conservation work was done by the people themselves, and supported by a food for work scheme of food grains supplied by the Catholic Relief Services. But from the beginning every effort was made to bring home the fact that these were collective opportunities for permanent improvement. Funds loaned for materials have to be repaid from the extra crops obtained over the next few years and are not free handouts.

AGRICULTURAL TRAINING

Once the supply of water is assured the next stage is agricultural improvement. Demonstration has proved the most effective method of overcoming conservatism and suspicion.

DEMONSTRATION AND EDUCATION

Demonstration farms have been set up at two of the ashrams or centres. On these farmers can actually see the results obtained from new varieties of seed when used with fertilizers, pesticides and sufficient water supplies. Training courses are held for young farmers who are nominated by the village elders to receive this education. They consist not only of theoretical teaching but practical experience in cultivating their own plots. Here they can be convinced that the new methods can work under actual village conditions ... even though it is not always possible for them quickly to transmit this conviction to the elders who sent them for training. However it is very often the enthusiasm and belief of the son, who is allowed to go on practising what he has learnt on a small corner of the community land, which finally wins over the most reluctant and conservative of fathers.

LOANS AND REPAYMENT

Interest free loans are provided so that even the poorest peasant can afford to buy what he needs. A full range of seeds is available (on credit) at all centres, in addition to fertilizers and pesticides, and tools for hire. Seeds for new cash crops such as potatoes, vegetables and sugar cane are offered as well as improved forms of the traditional varieties of rice and wheat. The loans are repayable in stages out of the increased profits from successful crops.

RESULTS

The results of this work have varied, and are not unfailingly successful. Sometimes the farmers have realised a substantial profit, and sometimes they have scarcely broken even, but there are signs of increasing confidence and social change. People travel great distances to visit the demonstration fields. They are sharing the new sources of water. They are accepting the responsibility of repaying what they have been lent. In a recent lesser drought in 1970 the patches of green around the OGAP wells and tanks stood out in an otherwise brown and barren countryside.

DURATION AND COST OF OGAP TO DATE

The four projects, now stretching into their fourth year have received £132,091 from Oxfam and the food for work has been worth a further £125,000.

LOCATION OF FILM

The film was shot mainly at Khadigram at the time when most of the work was on irrigation.

FOOTNOTE : The philosophy of Gramdan is perhaps not acceptable to all, nor applicable to all parts of India. Its achievements are not as great as originally hoped for. Yet some 17,000 people have benefitted in one way or another from the OGAP scheme.