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SDO and Relief Works—A Study of Madhya Pradesh

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IN MADHYA PRADESH, primary responsibility for administering relief of any kind rests with the Revenue Department.¹ In addition, the Commissioner at the divisional level, and the Collector, at the district level, are responsible for correct preparation and maintenance of scarcity programme and for control over and implementation of the scarcity programmes.² The responsibility extends to relief works executed through the public works, forest and agriculture departments.³ Being the seniormost officer of revenue department in the sub-division, the Sub-Divisional Officer (SDO) has to shoulder responsibility in the matter. He is, normally called upon to face different types of situations caused by: (a) fire, (b) flood, (c) famine, (d) hailstorm, and (e) major accidents.

Flood and famine are somewhat different from the remaining because some sort of planning can be done in advance. In the case of fire, hailstorm and major accidents, very little can be done by way of advance planning. However, the basic thrust of administration in all the situations is the same. Firstly, promptness is most desirable. Relief delayed is relief denied. In case of fire and major accidents, it can endanger human life. In case of flood and famine, delay in grant of relief can lead to migration of population. Secondly, relief should be granted to all the needy persons without being influenced by extraneous considerations. In other words, relief has to be granted on a selective basis to only the eligible persons. Once any discrimination is there, then, the political parties, groups and lobbies try to take political advantage. Consequently, the morale of personnel engaged in relief operations is adversely affected. Therefore, it is very important to objectively identify the victims and to correctly assess the damage. Thirdly, it is advisable to grant and disburse the relief on the spot so that no hardship is caused to the victims in running from one office to another. Moreover, the professional touts do not get a chance to appear on the scene. Touts not only defame the administration but also water down the impact of relief measures. Fourthly, mere grant of cash relief is not enough.

¹See Circular No. 4, Section VI, *Revenue Book Circulars*, Government of Madhya Pradesh.

²Government of Madhya Pradesh, *Scarcity Manual*, 1973, para 20 of 'Introduction'.

³*Ibid*, para 22.

Wherever necessary, relief should be provided in the form of drinking water, fodder, bamboos, poles and cheap foodgrains. Particularly in a drought year, there is either a shortage of foodgrains or its availability is difficult. In such situations, the administration is required to open a large number of fair price shops close to the work sites. In cases where migration of population is noticeable, camps have to be established to provide shelter. The administration has also to take care of public health. In case of fire and accidents, prompt medical care, alone, becomes the most important single factor. Fifthly, close coordination between various government departments, agencies and voluntary organisations is an objective which must be achieved. The SDO is required to play the role of coordinator and leader of the team at the sub-divisional level. The voluntary organisations can be particularly helpful in channelising private charity and for administering gratuitous relief. Voluntary organisations can also be useful for providing relief to those who may not come within the purview of the norms laid down by the government.

However, while doing all this, it is equally necessary to avoid administrative over-reaction which manifests itself in grant of relief to ineligible persons and grant of relief without proper formalities. It so happens that whenever a calamity occurs, VIPs make a beeline for the affected areas. Therefore, to impress them and to avoid complaints, lower level government functionaries are quite willing to make compromises with procedures, rules and regulations which may later on turn out to be financial irregularities. Proper accounting is an essential attribute of any efficient relief agency. Over-reaction can be avoided if the activities and actions are planned properly. For example, in a drought relief programme, the sequence of works should be clearly laid down. In other words, the programme should contain a list of feasible works so that works can be taken up one after the other in order to ensure continuous gainful employment for the affected population. However, where there is no programme or it has become out of date, a situation may arise when all the works are taken up simultaneously or works of lesser utility are taken up first. Therefore, it is very necessary to be clear in mind regarding objectives so as to plan the operations in a systematic and rational manner.

The Scarcity Manual specifically bestows the following powers and duties on the SDO vide para 85 of the Manual:

1. Personally conduct crop-cutting experiments within his sub-division during the period of enquiry into the agricultural position and out-turn estimates.
2. Generally supervise the operations of Tehsildars, Circle Officers, Village Officers, and all subordinate officers and persons concerned with administration of relief except that on public works.
3. Be constantly on tour and visit all affected villages as often as

possible and in particular satisfy himself that:

- (a) relief is being efficiently and economically administered;
- (b) selection for admission to works and gratuitous relief is being properly made;
- (c) Provision for medical inspection and relief is adequate;
- (d) Special precautions are taken to guard the drinking water supply from pollution, in villages in which epidemic disease has broken out;
- (e) Relief accounts are being correctly kept and reports and returns properly submitted; and
- (f) Influential and private persons of the neighbourhood are fully and effectively taking part in the administration of relief and giving such employment and assistance to their tenants and dependants as the circumstances may require; and

4. Regularly inspect relief works and, if called upon to do so, submit an inspection report.

In addition, Para 151 (ii) further lays down that the SDO is competent to sanction village works, such as bunding of nullahs to conserve water during summer, construction of new wells and deepening of old tanks upto an estimated cost of three thousand rupees. Para 255 empowers the state government to authorise the SDOs to perform in respect of their subdivisions all the duties of check and audit that are imposed on Collector by the Manual. However, the basic role of SDO lies in the selection of work sites and timely submission of returns apart from keeping the Collector informed about the exact state of affairs. He must also help the Collector in coordinating the activities of various departments particularly in the matter of pooling of tools and plants, technical assistants and vehicles. The Collectors generally also like to delegate the powers of appointment of disbursing officers. The SDOs are also expected to negotiate surrender or acquisition of private lands for the purpose of executing relief works.

The Revenue Book Circular Six-4 was amended *vide* Government of Madhya Pradesh Memorandum No. 2869/7073/Seven/9-3, dated 3.10.73 to empower the SDOs to grant financial assistance to needy persons up to Rs. 250. The circular was amended to ensure prompt grant of relief to the families in distress. The provision has been extensively used by the SDOs.

The SDOs are also expected to prepare cases for grant of relief under the provisions of MP Harijan-Adivasi Distress Relief Rules, 1979. These rules provide for relief to only Harijans and tribals in distress. However, where relief is deemed necessary, but it cannot be granted under any specific provision, then, the case is submitted to the General Administration Depart-

ment of the government for grant of relief out of the Chief Minister's Relief Fund.

These are some of the duties of SDOs when faced with a situation of a disaster or natural calamity. However, there is always scope for use of imagination as is illustrated by the following case.

SONBARSA SOCIAL FORESTRY PROJECT

This is the story of a canal-fed prosperous sub-division of Madhya Pradesh which suffered from acute paucity of rainfall from August 1974 to May 1975. This area had suffered from paucity of rainfall at least twice earlier but this time the situation became alarming. In 1965 and 1966, the rainfall fell short of normal in the months of September and October thereby adversely affecting the paddy crop output particularly in unirrigated and canal tail villages. However, in 1974 there was no rainfall after 10 August. As a result, there was insufficient water in the reservoir to feed the canal system in September and October. The agricultural operations were slowed down before these came to a premature halt. From September onwards, the agricultural labourers came out of villages in search of employment.

The state government took notice of the situation and ordered the immediate starting of all development works. Normally, the execution of such works remains suspended from June to November. Employment was initially generated by starting repair, metal collection and consolidation of road works. In October and November, as the situation became a little alarming, small village works were undertaken. These included repair of village tanks and digging of wells and construction of bunds for water storage purposes. In the month of December, the labourers were again partially employed in harvesting whatever was left of paddy crop. Nonetheless, by the middle of January, 1975, alarming situation arose in a group of twenty one villages. The crop output in these villages was less than twenty per cent and it became difficult to procure water for road works. The small village works could no longer sustain the pressure of labour. The local leaders suggested that an irrigation work alone could provide work to about two thousand persons per day. The official dilemma was that no new irrigation work could be taken up in a canal-fed area as no new potential would have been created.

It was in this background that the Sub-Divisional Officer undertook an extensive tour of the villages accompanied by staff of revenue, irrigation and public works department. The SDO went from village to village looking for projects that could be undertaken. The objective was to conceive a project that would become an economic asset in the course of time. Discussions were held with Sarpanchas and also with the block-level Panchayat President. It so happened that when the party was returning back, the SDO

came across a barren patch of land. On local enquiry, it was learnt that it was an isolated protected forest area lying neglected and unattended since the Zamindari abolition days. The neglect was understandable because the nearest forest area was more than twenty kms. away. With some effort, the working plan and the compartment history were located in the office of Divisional Forest Officer at the district headquarters. On a perusal of records, another such patch of forest area was located five kms. away. The idea soon caught the imagination of SDO that the real solution to his problem lay in the sanctioning of a social forestry project for these two patches of forest land. He informally mentioned it to the Collector who instructed the DFO to submit an estimate if the project was feasible.

The SDO, who belonged to the Indian Administrative Service and had soon after joining properly planned his courtesy calls on district and divisional officers, had no problem in personally approaching the DFO and the Conservator of Forests to pay their personal attention to the project. Since very little was known about these forest areas, the Conservator of Forests and the DFO undertook a joint inspection of the area at the instance of the SDO while studying the feasibility, the officers had two problems in their mind which they mentioned to the SDO as follows:

- (a) The problem of protecting the forest growth from the inroads of neighbouring villagers; and
- (b) The inability of local labour to undertake some of the forestry operations.

The SDO hurriedly undertook a tour of all the villages along with the subordinate staff of the forest department. The problem was explained to the Sarpanchas and local leaders as also to village chowkidars. It was explained to them that the forest department would agree to undertake the work only if they assured that the cattle and encroachers would be kept away. They were also told that some labour would have to be brought from forest villages and that they would not be allowed to raise hue and cry about it. The villagers readily promised full cooperation and also came forward to join the 'Van Premi Sangh' (forest lovers union)—an idea which the department was having difficulty in seeing. The SDO personally conveyed the resolve of villagers to the Conservator of Forests and the DFO and also promised full cooperation of the revenue and police staff in curbing any evil tendency. Consequently, a project was drawn up to encompass the following operations:

- (a) digging of trenches all around the blocks ;
- (b) cutting of all malformed standing trees and Coppice-shoots;
- (c) cutting of shrub growth;

- (d) preparation of soil for plantation purposes; and
- (e) establishment of a nursery.

The idea was to undertake teak plantation in the inner areas and to raise fruit-bearing trees in the outer areas. All the operations were designed to be labour intensive. The collector quickly gave administrative approval while the Conservator of Forests accorded technical sanction. On February 3, 1975 the work was started without any fanfare. By the middle of February, professional forest labour was also brought from forest villages to the sites.

The SDO also moved swiftly to make other arrangements. Two drinking water wells near the work sites were deepened and bored at the cost of relief work. A fair price shop was opened exclusively for the labour employed at this work. Two water tankers were also stationed there to transport drinking water. A vaccinator was posted to inoculate all persons who came forward to work within three days of their joining for work. The medical officer incharge of the Primary Health Centre was also directed to make regular visits to the work sites. Three officers were appointed to disburse wages to the labour regularly. These officers were drawn from departments other than the forest department. This enabled the forest department officials to pay full attention to the management of the work. The appointment of three disbursing officers also ensured that at least one officer was always available to make payments even if the other two went away on leave or duty.

Simultaneously, a 'Van Premi Sangh' was organised at the sub-divisional level with public representatives and other enlightened opinion leaders, including representatives of the local bar. The objective of the Sangh was to educate the villagers regarding the utility of the forests and to motivate them to protect the same. Branches of the Sangh were organised at each panchayat level and meetings were also organised in bigger villages. The members of the Sangh were also requested to supervise distribution of wages and rations. They also assisted the forest department staff to moderate the pressure of work-seekers whenever it was not possible to employ every person seeking work.

The labour-intensive operations continued up to the middle of June when the rains came and the labourers got back to agricultural operations. Work was provided for total number of 77,349 man-days. It was the only relief work of its type in the region and it received extensive coverage in the regional press and the local All India Radio Station also broadcast a feature in May 1975. About seventyfive thousand teak sapplings were planted out of which forty thousand survived at the end of the first year. A large number of sapplings of mixed specie, *e.g.*, ber, imli, kaju, jamun, munga and karang were also planted and about seventyfive per cent of them survived. The plantation was maintained by the forest department and, again, in the year 1977,

seventyfive thousand sapplings of mixed species were planted.

The 'Van Premi Sangh' proved quite effective and the residents of neighbouring villages also kept their word. By January 1985, it had become a lush green area from a degraded shrub forest. The trees had already attained a height of fifteen feet. □