

Land at War

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An account is given below of the efforts England made to achieve self-sufficiency of food even under shower of bombs in the World War II, to consider why attempts made in this country on the food front have not yielded similar results even though India has not been a war theatre.

“Produce or Perish” was the challenge thrown to the nation and the whole country, realising the gravity of the situation, produced food even in excess of its requirements and won the war.

During the pre-war period in England, out of the total population of 48 millions only one million was engaged in farming and the rest were crowded in cities. Influenced by the availability of cheap food from other countries, home production fell far below the margin of safety and 60 percent of their requirements had to be imported. Prices dropped and many farmers with little encouragement to grow crops except on the best lands, forgot the use of the plough.

Tumbled-down homesteads, idle tools, fields choked up with weeds were the legacies of bad markets and the slump. Agriculture was left in a state of neglect by the industrial upheaval. The weighty lessons of the World War No. I were soon forgotten. But a few sons of Britain's oldest industry, the inheritors of a complex and highly developed craft survived with their love for the soil, capacity for hard work and their prophetic sense of weather.

Under these stress of War their immediate job was :

1. To get 2 million extra acres under the plough for raising wheat, potatoes and sugar beet.
2. To arm, equip and man 3 lakhs of farmers to win back the neglected soil to fertility, to feed and sustain a nation.
3. To put in to practice the plans of the Agricultural Department.
4. Reclamation by the use of machines of bad lands, which so far resisted reclamation. (by human and horse power)
5. To open a national farm survey of every holding more than 5 acres in extent indicating (a) state of the land and type of the soils, (b) acreage of crops, (c) acreage of grass, (d) acreage of derelict land (e) state of buildings, cottages, cart roads, fences, water, electric supply etc. and a map of all the farms with details.
6. To fight the nation's food robbers viz. rats, squirrels, rabbits, wild birds etc. and also pests and diseases on crops.

7. To increase production of milk and its products manyfold as that alone could protect the nation engaged in a tough war, from malnutrition and the resultant weakness.
8. To improve livestock, to supply draft horses, dairy cattle, poultry and pigs.

To achieve these objects British Government devised a plan by which the improvements could be put through and the food problem solved.

To begin with the Government appealed for (a) leaders with good imagination, (b) men who worked hard on the land, and (c) men who spoke the tongue of the farmer, who knew his life and problems and who could induce the farmer to do an impossible thing.

These persons were grouped to form a committee for every county, and parish. These committees were empowered to enforce the special wartime measures of the Agricultural Minister. Theirs was a form of self-government and their brother farmers knowing that these powers would be exercised not by a band of remote officials but with the sympathy and understanding of their own kind, were willing to co-operate.

Farm workers' representatives who sat on the committees gave helpful advice on labour matters and encouraged the workers in their efforts.

Committees met in village inns, bars, farmhouses etc. The meetings were not mere talks but a useful discussion among hard-bitten fighters who had a very real and critical battle on hand.

From Whitehall to every farm in the country, the committees formed a visible human chain, and a chain that grew stronger with each year of war.

A Women's land army committee was formed for each county and empowered to find local representatives to watch over the welfare of the land girls coming in large numbers to assist the farmers in field operations.

The committees were helped by a staff of experts under an executive officer to spread modern methods, to explain and popularise them. New personalities appeared on the country side; cultivation officer, technical officers, experts on silage, straw pulping, hay farming, farm drainage, milk production, machinery, fertilizers, pests on plant and animals. Apart from the voluntary unpaid committee-men, the Ministry roped in the best technical brains as well.

Having set up an organisation to push through the schemes for the following production, the Government offered increasing concessions to farmers to serve as an inducement:—

1. Sharing the cost of ploughing every new acre and draining his fields.

2. The county committees organised a contracting service i. e. a nucleus of machinery with crew was sent from place to place. Committee offices became something like military headquarters. Wall maps with flags and coloured pins showed the position of machinery depots, movement of mobile units etc.

3. England quickly built-up her tractor strength and within five years she possessed 1,75,000 tractors as compared with 55,000 in 1939. Tractors played a most important role in the grow-more-food campaign by bringing extensive areas of pastures and waste lands under crops,

4. Farmers could obtain lime at half cost and basic slag at one-fourth the cost.

5. Tractors could be bought on hire purchase.

6. Fixing prices for his produce.

7. Hiring labour and machinery for the farmer and fixing rates for ploughing neighbouring land.

8. Selling him seeds.

9. Supplying with stud bulls, stallions and rams for his stock.

10. Analysing his soils.

11. Giving him expert advice on all his problems, animal, vegetable and mineral.

Buying his produce or at least guaranteeing its sale. Paying 50% of the cost of operations aimed at reclaiming bog land and flooded areas — cleaning streams and ditches, opening hill drains and clearing pernicious weeds from lands.

14. Paying subsidy to hill sheep farmers to help them maintain their flocks and to offset the decreased demand for sheep resulting from ploughing up of ley and grass.

15. In building flax dams so important to the flax industry the Government bore the whole cost. Responsibility for most of the large-scale reclamation fell on county committees for they were national organisations with special facilities for such work. They could command equipment, capital and expert knowledge outside the scope of the private farmer.

16. State protection for sickness and unemployment of labour.

As a result of the keen interest shown by Government and concessions offered to farmers, a thorough change spread over the rural areas. To mention a few, plough up offensive was directed towards pasture grass with all vigour. Men worked seven days in the week all day and even at nights. Night ploughing developed into a special technique.

4000 members in Woman Land Army and 90,000 Land Girls came up voluntarily to plunge whole-heartedly in the difficult task of fighting with the land.

One-time shop girls, typists, mill girls, hair-dressers, became tractor drivers, to plough up hard pastures throughout winter and summer struggling with storm and wind, milking, sowing, harvesting, threshing and living in wild parts of the country among strangers.

Schoolboys and girls and every form of available labour were engaged in harvest operations.

The Agricultural Department and the Ministry of Labour threw themselves wholeheartedly into the task of organising this vast and willing force. Camps and hostels were started throughout the country and workers came in thousands.

The Woman's Land Army first batch went straight to the land. The rest received training for their job, but the land girl thrived on direct experience. She was engaged by contract which guaranteed her regular employment throughout the year with a minimum of one week's holiday with pay, no deductions for sickness or wet weather.

British farming was changing not merely in its capacity to work more land with less labour but in the type of crops to be grown, the type of cattle to be raised and even in the methods of feeding them.

All British farmers grew new crops between rows of trees. All flower farmers changed over to vegetable and grain growing.

The-war time farmer showed great enthusiasm for the sharing of experience and desire to learn through his neighbours, new crops and methods. The farmer co-operated every way, organising discussion groups, meetings, lectures etc. 'Neighbours day' became a very popular method of contact.

Wages of agricultural labour increased from 30 sh. a week to 70 shillings.

The men and women who worked in the fields were exposed to one of the severest winters within living memory. For many hundreds of land girls fresh from offices and centrally-heated shops of the city, they were an ordeal which only enthusiasm could overcome; the wet winds came from every side along with soaking rains and they felt the whole winter draining through their bones.

The achievement is evidenced by the increased food production namely 109 per cent in wheat, 115 per cent in barley, 58 per cent in oats, 102 per cent in potatoes, 37 per cent in fruits, 34 per cent in vegetables and 55 per cent in fruits over the pre-war figures.

The example of the British farmers during the war, and their glorious success in food production and in saving the nation from collapse should induce those interested in Indian national welfare to ponder over our failure in food production. For it is well known that no weapon ever invented is more deadly than hunger. The finest armies in the world, courageous enough in the face of bombs or bullets can be reduced to helplessness and surrender by hunger.

REFERENCES

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