

Masters of their destiny

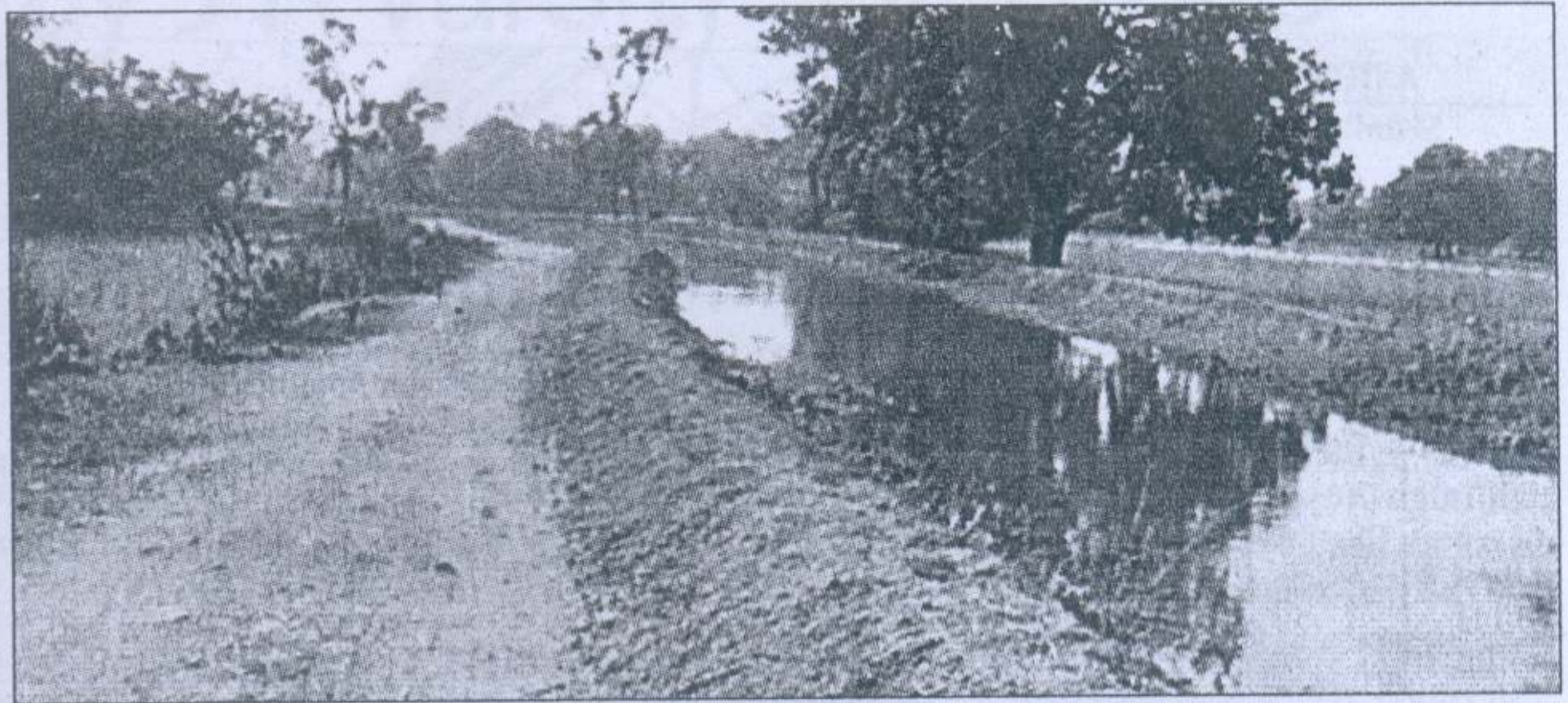
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OPPORTUNITY
 FROM ADVERSITY

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Lucknow, February 15

Villagers in drought-hit Bundelkhand villages built their own canal, saw wasteland turn into fertile farms



HT PHOTOS

SOME PARTS of Bundelkhand district in Uttar Pradesh have seen severe drought over the last five years. For the 150 families in Talbehat block of Lalitpur, 380 km south of Lucknow, the going was particularly difficult, bordering on, and often tipping over into, hopelessness.

A 20-km canal, Chandpur Minor, fed by water from the Shezaad dam on the local Shezaad river — envisaged to bring water to Talbehat — had been dug 12 years ago. But it had never been completed because of the difficult terrain, and parts of it had been damaged due to lack of maintenance, leaving the local people, literally, high and dry.

Conditions were tough. Some people in the block's eight villages had even begun eating *ghaas roti* (bread made out of grass) to satiate their hunger in the absence of food.

That's when these families decided to take charge of their destinies. They decided to dig the unfinished 1.5-km section of the canal themselves — and did it, without much official help, in 50 days flat. This canal now irrigates more than 1,000 acres of land.

"What we did is simply unbelievable. Look at the water," said Matadeen Ahirwar, one of those men who toiled on the canal called Chandpur Minor.



Of the 1,000-acre land that has now been irrigated, 300 acres was wasteland. So, the canal has converted these 300 acres of wasteland into agricultural land. Not just this, the canal even filled up wells and ponds in the villages.

But the community effort was by no means easy to execute. Rajendra Goswami, one of the villagers who led the task, said: "When we started out, most people thought it was an impossible and foolish dream. Many were not ready to participate. But we managed to persuade and convince everybody that this was our only chance."

The local panchayat contributed the funds needed for the project — all of Rs 40,000. And the villagers used their own tools — crowbars, hammers and spades.

But how did they overcome the big boulders on the way? "They could not use dynamite

Drought-hit, 150 families in Talbehat block dug unfinished 1.5-km stretch of Chandpur Minor without much official help, in 50 days. The canal now irrigates 1,000 acres.



and so used potash instead to blow up the boulders," said Sanjay Singh, a social worker who helped organize the villagers for the task.

"Our war cries and folk songs helped us keep going and kept the atmosphere passionate," said Ahirwar.

The villagers worked from October 28 to December 19 last year. "We've set up a committee to maintain the canal and regulate the use of water," said Singh.

The sweat of these villagers has brought water back to the canal.

Once the work began, the rest turned out to be an inspiring story. So much so that a little distance away, in Jhakar village, another set of villagers began to carve out a canal.

How they did it

- Division of labour
- The villagers set up a Gram Chetna Samiti to organize the work and set a timetable for completion
- Young men were allotted the task of digging the canal while the older men cleared the debris
- Young women built the shallower channels to carry water to the fields while their older counterparts cleared the debris

Postscript

Now, the villagers have set a target of extending the canal by 6 km; this will benefit four more villages in the region

