

**Note for Record**  
**August 27-30, 2012**

**By: Shoaib Sultan Khan**  
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**Subject:                   Visit to Swat**

A visit to Swat always takes me down memory lane encompassing 59 years of my working life. How on July 12, 1953, I travelled by Government Transport Bus from Peshawar to Thana in Malakand Agency, which left me high and dry thirty miles short of my destination Saidu Sharif, as the Swat State did not allow government transport to cross its borders. The last private bus had already left for Swat before the arrival of my bus. Sensing lost look on my face, a venerable white bearded gentleman approached me and asked if I needed any help. Hearing my predicament, he took me to the Thana Government School, of which he was the headmaster, accommodated me in the school guest room and early morning arranged a Tonga which arrived in time for interview with the Wali of Swat. This was my first taste of Pakhtun hospitality. The horse had to be changed midway at Barikot, I was reminded of Churchill's travel by Tonga from Nowshera to Malakand, mentioned in his book Malakand Field Force. In 2005, RSPN arranged its annual Retreat at Kalam and the road from Dargai to our destination was bone shaking.

Now we were travelling in an airconditioned land cruiser and the road from Peshawar to Swat Serena Hotel in Saidu was a most comfortable smooth drive on excellent surfaced roads through a lush green countryside.

Swat which had been ravaged by the militants only a few years ago and its population uprooted showed no signs of the devastation it had gone through except the army check posts. The resilience of the people of Swat is incredible.

The Board meeting of SRSP at Swat Serena attracted besides the Chairperson Munawar Humayun, Rahimullah Khan Yusufzai (BBC and News senior columnist), Niamatullah Abid (DG PARD), Azam Khan (ex-Chief Secretary NWFP and first Chairman SRSP), Dr. Parveen Azam (Dost Foundation), Maryam Babar, Government of Khyber Pukhtunkhwa representatives from Planning Department, Bacha Khan Poverty Alleviation Programme, Masoodul Mulk, CEO SRSP and myself.

From initial presence of just one district, from one million rupees borrowed from AKRSP, later funded by USAID and then stopped due to Pressler Amendment, Masood CEO of SRSP has taken SRSP to 19 districts of KP with nearly 20,000 community organizations comprising half a million households as members. SRSP struggled against all kinds of odds from lack of monetary resources to hostile environment but in this Board meeting, a budget of nearly 4 billion rupees was approved including a five year project for Swat of 40 million Euros sanctioned by EU. The achievements of SRSP over last five years, including an endowment of Rs. 500 million by Chief Minister Amir Haider Khan Hoti, are extremely laudable and Masood should justifiably feel proud and so should the Board especially the Chairperson.

The Board especially the Chair, strongly endorsed my plea to the Management and the Field Professionals to foster financially viable framework of the Institutions of the People namely WO/CO/VO and LSO. Without this framework, SRSP would never be able to achieve sustainability and would always be dependent on the largess of the donors. Much of the work SRSP will do, without the financially viable peoples institutions, would wither away as soon as the project will come to an end. Seeing the results and achievements of Local Support Organisations ( LSOs) fostered by SRSP in KP, it is apparent that the LSOs are capable of sustainable development, if they are encouraged to become financially viable.

The approach should be to sensitise LSOs. The importance of having a strong relationship of COs and VOs with LSO to ensure that LSO is a true representative of the constituent COs and their members. In order to ensure the institutional continuity of the LSOs, the LSOs to develop a system to arrange financial resources for running the essential operations of the LSOs from the VOs and COs. In order to ensure that the LSOs do not become extravagant institutions, it should be proposed to cap the operating cost of the LSO and once the monthly cost is agreed upon, a clear resource plan and system should be developed to meet this cost. For example if in an LSO, the operating cost is Rs 15,000 per month and it has 1000 CO members, then its members should be convinced to contribute on an average Rs 15 per month. Obviously, for the poorer members this can be less and for relatively better off it can be more. This mechanism of monthly fixed fee will prove LSOs regular contact with the COs and their members.

On our field visit to Charbagh, I was taken aback when an old long white bearded man tottering on his walking stick introduced himself as my old student, whom I taught 59 years ago in Jahanzeb College. Ahmad Jan indeed made me feel ancient but I was overjoyed to meet him.

Charbagh Union Council with 4,557 households having a population of 34,175 people was first mauled by the militants and in 2009 was devastated by floods. Activist Kishwar Khan, as chairman of the VO Gulshan made an excellent presentation with charts about poverty profile according to poverty scorecard, formation of community organizations (Cos) encompassing 330 hh out of 400 into male and women COs. He described the linkages VO has forged with local MPA for improvement of irrigation, with PaRRSA for livestock deworming and agri inputs, with SRSP for cash grants and UNDP assistance, Hujra for water management, BISP for 170 monthly grants, NADRA, ACTED, SEEDS, Pakistan Army and other NGOs. They had taken the initiative to get organized even before SRSP appeared on the scene. But with SRSP arrival, they have institutionalized the COs and their future plan is the formation of LSO by helping other villages in the Union to get organized like them.

The people were very happy to see Rahimullah amidst us and enthusiastically welcomed him and also Maryam Babar's spouse Bashir Babar who served Pakistan abroad as ambassador. Azam Khan erstwhile Chief Secretary of KP needed no introduction.

However, the story from the assembled women, whom Munawar, Parveen, Maryam and Shandana met separately, was horrendous and heartbreaking. Some of them complained of widespread use of drugs resulting in deaths or invalidity of their men. But the most tragic practice was doctors taking away their off springs in lieu of payment of their fees for treating their men. We could not believe that such cruel and heartless professionals exist in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in some parts of Pakistan. Parveen, whose organization Dost has excelled in helping drug addicts, promised to do something about this unfortunate situation. I would urge Masood to instruct SRSP staff to take this problem seriously and sensitise the COs to confront it. Women staff of SRSP can play a very effective role in tackling this scourge and staff training would play an important role in equipping them to deal with such situations.

At Aryana, we saw a picturesque bridge spanning the river built by the VO with SRSP mobilizing funds from Citi Foundation of the Citibank. A large number of villagers were sitting on the green slope to welcome us. After the inauguration of the bridge, we all walked across and then came back to have dialogue with the assembled throng. They were obviously very happy as the bridge was going to help a population of nearly 4,000 on both sides of the bridge. In my address, I said that nearly 60 years ago, I had come to Kalam on foot from Bahrain, a distance of about 30 kms, with my College Tutorial Group. At that time I had observed dense forest all along the path we traversed and hardly any population. Today I am seeing less trees and explosion of population. I urged them to increase number of trees compared to people. Unfortunately, I had commandeered a local to translate what I was saying in Urdu into Pashto.

He translated along with increasing population also increase planting of trees. I was trying to be careful not to give a direct message about population control, my interpreter destroyed my message.

The highlight of the day was when we all trooped to Buyoun, high above Kalam as darkness fell. We were greeted by hundreds of villagers standing on both sides of the village path leading to microhydel power station with total capacity of 100 KV for the benefit of 450 households. The project was funded by RAHA, OSI and AusAid costing Rs. 6.2 million, excluding community contribution in cash and kind.

On arrival at the power station, I was given the honour to switch on the light. I felt most nervous, especially in presence of an international journalist Rahimullah Yusufzai and other pressmen. I knew it will be all over Pakistan if the lights don't come on. Gingerly I got hold of the lever and lifted it and suddenly there was a deafening shout from all corners of the village especially of children. I heaved a sigh of relief. The shouts were the sweetest music to my ears. Not to be left behind, Ehsanullah Khan, who is the spirit of Swat, matching the shouts, shouted a prayer for success of the power station and the people of Buyoun. It was indeed great fun.

Since we were scheduled to come next morning for the formal inauguration but Zahid, the SRSP Swat Manager, decided that it would be more dramatic to switch on the light when it is dark. But when we saw so many people assembled, Rahimullah suggested why don't we have the meeting now. Little realizing that the management would not allow to thwart their plans. On my asking Ehsanullah put the suggestion to the people in such a way that it was rejected outright and people's will prevailed of a meeting next morning. Rahimullah and I could do nothing.

Next morning there was again a big gathering when we arrived at Buyoun. At the meeting entrance, we were greeted by a small boy fully in military uniform and a toy klashankov in hand. Ehsanullah gave a pen in the free hand of the boy and declared before the audience that this is more powerful than the gun.

The President of the VO narrated the isolation and remoteness of Buyoun which has none of the basic facilities like health, education, drinking water etc. The literacy level was 1%. By organising 250 households in 10 COs, they have succeeded in getting electricity to which the community contribution was Rs. 1.2 million. They plan to organize the entire village and also women.

Masood in his speech congratulated them on their achievement and offered a teacher at SRSP cost, till government teacher arrives to make the school functional. He promised all possible support to the VO provided it is kept active and viable.

Munawar in her speech underscored the importance of women and urged the VO members to make special effort to bring women in an organized fold which would enable them to unleash their potential and be equal partners in development with men. She offered her congratulations to the VO on completing the electricity power project.

I pointed to the beautiful natural beauty of the valley which would compare with the most beautiful countries in the world like Switzerland. When I asked the villagers why despite being blessed by God with abundant natural resources, they are not like Switzerland. The President of the VO said it was due to lack of education. I said Yes of course education plays a very important role but God has endowed illiterate people also with intelligence and potential to improve their situation. For example, there are ten matriculates in the village who are doing nothing. Why can't the VO engage them to teach the children till more satisfactory arrangements are made by government. If the VO can charge electricity cost from each household, it can also levy a charge on the parents of children to remunerate the matriculates. The teacher, Masood has offered, can give basic training to matriculates in teaching. I emphasized and urged them to make it stronger and stronger. I congratulated them on their achievement which was a clear demonstration of the power of the VO.

On our way back we visited some of the houses built for flood affectees for which funds were provided by Imran Khan Foundation. The owners of these houses were most satisfied. At Matta, we were Ehsanullah Khan's guests to a sumptuous high tea and fruits picked from his orchard.

It was a most exhilarating and enjoyable trip to Swat and a demonstration if the State wishes how a war ravaged area can be restored to normalcy and peace. SRSP's role has been praised by all especially the army which indeed is a great tribute to the leadership, dynamism, dedication and commitment of Masood and the way he has inspired his team at Swat led by Zahid. Ehsanullah, of course, is a class by himself. Being a Swati, no one can match his passion and yearning for a peaceful and prosperous Swat. The contribution of Chairperson Munawar in supporting Masood and his team is an example for all volunteer Directors.

I was especially impressed by Rahimullah Yusufzai, an international journalist, to have taken out three days out of his busy schedule contrary to the current thinking of journalists that "good news is no news".