

Note for Record
March 24-31, 2012

By: Shoaib Sultan Khan
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Subject: **Visit to Rajiv Gandhi Mahila Vikas Pariyojana (RGMVP), India**

In 1982 when I had initiated the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (AKRSP) based on development principles enunciated by Raiffeisen in 19th century Europe and learnt by me under the tutelage of Akhter Hameed Khan (AHK), it was not in my wildest dreams that the efficacy and universality and applicability of these principles would be proven from Gilgit-Baltistan to Gwadar, from Peshawar to Tharparkar, from Andhra Pradesh to Uttar Pradesh. In a nutshell, Raiffeisen had advocated ORGANISATION, CAPITAL GENERATION and HUMAN SKILLS DEVELOPMENT.

Applied by AKRSP in Gilgit-Baltistan Chitral, over a period of a decade, the income of the million people, living in one of the harshest and most inhospitable terrains of the world, doubled in real terms, according to a World Bank assessment. The RSP (Rural Support Programme) approach currently extends to 4.5 million households comprising 30 million people in Pakistan. The same principles applied in Andhra Pradesh transformed the lives of fifty million people over a period of fifteen years, enabling the ten million organized households to access 100 billion Indian Rupees from commercial banks in 2011-2012. These are the poorest of the poor households and some of these women whom I met in 1996 used to earn Rs. 5 a day weeding the fields of the rich farmers.

In 2007, RGMVP applied these principles in Uttar Pradesh beginning with a few Blocks. I have had the privilege and pleasure of participating in RGMVP's Visioning Workshop in 2008, attended by Mr. Rahul Gandhi personally. Since then this was my third visit to RGMVP, on the kind invitation of the CEO RGMVP Mr. Sampath Kumar.

This visit took me to the districts of Varanasi, Mirzapur, Jhansi, Lalitpur, Raebareli. Additionally I got the opportunities to interact with Activists and staff from districts of Amethi, (CMS Nagar) Banda, Hamirpur, Karvi, Fatehpur, Sultanpur, Pratapgarh and others. Meeting people from Karvi and Hamirpur took me down memory lane 72 years when I was a student of Karvi Government Middle School and Hamirpur Government High School. It was nostalgia to see the hillocks,

fields and greenery seemingly unchanged, as if time has stood still and I was back in my childhood. It all looked so beautiful and enchanting from the train travelling through Bundelkhand passing by Mahuba famous for Ala Auda and betel leaves.

Like a spectator who sees more of the game than the players, I am amazed at the progress made by RGMVP since my first visit. The main features of RGMVP adoption of Raiffeisen principles is that it has implemented these principles in letter and spirit, with the result that RGMVP has developed a low cost activists (CRPs) centred approach which is both sustainable and conducive to taking it to scale. It has also ensured inclusion of the poorest of the poor (PoP) from the beginning. RGMVP's greatest contribution is persuading the banks to make Cash Credit Limit (CCL) accessible to organized groups. This is of course, dependent on the Groups fulfilling all obligations and coming upto the criteria, laid down by the Banks, for CCL entitlement. This has resulted in instilling Group discipline, especially of savings, proper record keeping and trustworthy management. This had led to fostering of institutions of the people built on very strong foundations, namely, Groups (Samoo), Gram Sangathan and Block Sangathan. These institutions of the people are gradually getting empowered to demand their entitlements be it NREGA, Below Poverty Line (BPL), ration cards, health entitlements etc. However, the empowerment process is a long one and if these people's institutions are left to fend for themselves before these take roots and become financially viable, these might be overwhelmed by reactionary elements in the society.

An excellent example of what these institutions (Group, Gram Sangathan and Block Sangathan) are capable of achieving, I witnessed on my visits in Jhansi to Gram Sangathan at Nyakhera and Block Sangathan at Babina.

Nya Khera in Block Babina having organized 17 Groups, comprising 204 households, has an accumulated savings of Rs. 354,000 who have accessed CCL from Banks which the households have utilized for consumption, health, education, purchase of livestock, poultry rearing, opening retail shops, irrigation, debt payment and many other activities. Some of the members of the Groups narrated how starting with a small loan from the Group CCL, they had improved their economic status by taking multiple loans. Their repayment performance was excellent.

Once the Groups got federated in the Gram Sangathan, they formed various committees to deal with issues relating to poverty, education, health, social evils, group mobilization and decided to elect the Pradhan (Panchayati headperson) from amongst themselves. The Pradhan was attending

the Gram Sangathan (GS) meeting as an ordinary member of the Group. The GS meets twice a month and this was a regular meeting of the Sangathan that we were attending.

The GS has initiated a Grain Bank and each member is required to donate a minimum of 2 kgs, normally 5 kgs. Grain so collected is given to those in need or the poorest of poor to tide them over emergencies. The grain so taken is replenished as and when the recipient is able to do so. The Grain Bank was an item for discussion in the meeting along with collection of grain in a sack.

The moving spirits behind the GS were the Sahiks (activists) in garb of president, secretary, bookkeeper, committee members. They ensured participation of each and every member and by their own example set a high standard of community service on voluntary basis. These indeed are the prime movers of the institutions of the people. Each committee activist gave an account of their activities for the information of the entire membership of the GS. When the education committee found the teacher relaxing whereas all the students were playing truant outside. On being questioned, the teacher took little notice of them. The committee persisted visiting the school again and again till the teacher mended his/her ways and started taking her duties seriously. The Committee is ensuring full enrolment of boys and girls and visits recalcitrant parents persuading them to send their children to school. The Health Committee Sahik gave a most knowledgeable discourse on maternity and child care and answered questions about benefits of the BCG and iron tablets.

The most important step towards financial sustainability of the GS by Groups was subscription of Rs. 110 per month by each Group, which was collected in the meeting. The Chairperson and the Bookkeeper were strict disciplinarian and ensured that GS meeting was a serious business.

Mr. K.Raju of the National Advisory Council, which is presided over by Shrimati Sonia Gandhi, brought up the issue of entitlements of the poor under various government programmes and exhorted the GS to seriously take up this issue and ensure that the entitlements are accessed by their members.

At the Babina Community Resource Development Centre (CRDC), we met the Block Sangathan (BS). The CRDC reminded me of the pioneering work AHK did in sixties by setting up Thana Training and Development Centre (TTDC) in 110 Thanas (police station jurisdiction) of what is now Bangladesh. The TTDC are a viable unit of development administration and are surviving to

this day. To my mind, CRDC have the same rationale and hopefully would eventually develop into a viable unit for development administration of the districts.

At every place we went to, women had their stories to tell us with pride and confidence and what they were and what they have become with the support of their organisation, facilitated by RGMVP. Many were overwhelmed with emotion recalling the past and shedding tears of joy at their current status in a short period. Even organisations formed, less than two years at places like Gadauli in Marzapur, Newada Mangari in Varanasi, Virdha in Jhansi and Phuleri in Raebareli, showed lot of promise and many women narrated what they have achieved by getting organized. They all spoke of the unity and neighbourhood feelings generated by Groups. How each one now not only knew each other but helped each other irrespective of caste or religion. When the daughter of a poor member of the Group in Phuleri was getting married, all members of the GS donated towards the expenses of the marriage – hindus and muslims alike. How in Babina, the Pradhan tried to bribe the GS chairperson by offering her job card ignoring others. Her refusal made him to do the right thing. How one GS took out a “chappal” rally to defy the upper caste demagogues who would allow them only to appear barefoot in their presence. When a boy of the village disappeared and the police would not pay heed to the complaints of the villagers, their GS members went to DIG of Police in Jhansi and got the boy recovered. The organisations of the people have given the poor the confidence and the dare to look in the face of injustice and get redress.

The one thing I heard everywhere was the amazing impact of exposure visits of the activists to Andhra Pradesh. This was nothing new to me as I have seen what an exposure visit can do in explaining the process of unleashing the potential of the people through social mobilization, even to the most learned and most experienced, nothing else can do it. Sampath was very wise in exposing hundreds of activists to the Andhra experience. RGMVP has indeed now a pool of their own community resource persons (CRPs) who seemed to be second to none. As Raju observed comparing RGMVP with SERP that there is much faster progress in RGMVP and more importantly it is being led by poor women themselves. AHK used to describe the activists as diamonds of the community and I must say I saw hundreds of them on this visit. Being associated with nearly a million community organisations (COs, SHGs) in South Asia, I can say with full confidence that for the success of the Group, a good honest and competent activist is a must. RGMVP has done wonderfully well in fostering such a large pool of CRPs.

I have always found three ingredients essential for success of a social mobilization programme, namely, willingness of the poor households to get organized, presence of an honest and

competent activists to lead them and a sensitive support organisation of professionals. As Raju explained to the field staff and management of RGMVP that this only happens based on the fundamental conviction in potential of women and so long as you go on putting trust in women and enhancing their capacity, avoiding to impose a preconceived plans like government programmes, you would further strengthen what you have achieved so far, in enabling each member of SHG participating in the development process. In my view RGMVP has demonstrated that poor women are willing to organize and that there is no dearth of honest and competent activists amongst them.

When UNDP brought me to India as Adviser to the South Asia Poverty Alleviation Programme (SAPAP), like the Sahik (activist) of the RGMVP SHG/GS/BS, I was also in search of a professional who could lead the programme. I was lucky to find Raju, thanks to the then Secretary to the Prime Minister Mr. Venugopal, and the rest is history as to what happened in Andhra Pradesh. I see the repetition of history in UP and the beginning has been made by RGMGP and Rahulji was very far sighted in selecting Sampath to steer the programme. The management and field staff I interacted with greatly impressed me with their understanding of the approach of the programme and complete dedication and commitment to fostering institutions of the people and letting women be in the driving seat in implementing the programme. In this way, Sampath has chiselled a truly social mobilization programme envisaged by Raiffeisen and AHK.

RGMVP now faces two challenges; firstly how to consolidate its gains so far in terms of making the Samoo, the Gram Sangathan and the Block Sangathan financially viable, for example, when I raised this issue with one of the BS comprising 612 SHGs and 30 GS representing 7260 households, they had not thought of it. They were happy and contended receiving a subsidy of Rs. 20-30,000 per month from RGMVP. When I posed the question, in view of substantial income of the households due to access to CCL, would it be asking too much of each member of SHG to contribute Rs. 5 per month to meet the recurrent cost of running the BS. There was silence but no disagreement. I suggested they need not stop taking the support from RGMVP but time has come for them to start building up an endowment for future sustainability of the Sangathan. I got the idea from what I saw already happening at Nya Khera in Jhansi.

The CCL provides the much needed glue to keep the SHG members together. I was privileged to attend the distribution of OCC Pass Books by the Indian Bank to 46 SHGs raising their CCL to Rs. 8.6 million from 2.2 million. There were nearly 300 women present and the smiles and happiness on their faces was indeed heartwarming. RGMVP can rightly be very proud of CCL

initiative. Without CCL, the social mobilization would not have happened at the pace it happened. However, to access CCL one has to be a member of the SHG and not a defaulter. This has resulted in exclusion of many poorest of the poor because they could not afford to save every week, amount fixed by the SHG or those who defaulted in paying loan taken previously under SGSY or any other project. I had mentioned about it in my last report also. I do hope there has been some improvement in the situation. As regards savings by the poor, we discussed with the members of GS and suggested ways to get round this obstacle by taking savings amount after giving membership to the poorest of the poor and enabling them to increase their incomes to be able to reimburse their savings dues in future.

The bigger issue is that credit is not the end all and be all of a poverty reduction programme, as the experience of the world has shown and my personal experience with Rural Support Programmes (RSPs). Credit is an excellent glue to begin with to organize households but the management and field staff should not stop there, they should continue to stimulate the aspirations of the organizations of getting their entitlements and rights, as has been done in many places but this has to be mainstreamed like CCL. It is only then organizations of the people will be sensitized to achieve their higher goals, which are within their grasp.

The Independent South Asian Commission on Poverty Alleviation, set up by SAARC States in 1991, made an overarching recommendation to the Heads of State, on the basis of empirical evidence from rural areas of South Asia that Social Mobilization should be the centerpiece of all poverty reduction strategies of the States and to achieve this goal States should allocate resources to set up independent and autonomous sensitive support organizations to organize the poor because social mobilization does not lend itself to a support structure fettered by bureaucratic norms and procedures. RGMVP, SERP and RSPs are examples of what the Commission had in mind. RSPs and SERP successes are largely attributable to support from the governments.

RGMVP, despite lack of support from the State Government, has demonstrated clearly and unquestionably that there is tremendous potential in rural women of UP and given the requisite support, they are capable of transforming the lives of the rural poor of the State. However, this transformation, as it happened in Andhra, will only take place if the poor women of all the 800 Blocks in 75 districts of UP are brought in an organized fold. RGMVP has the wherewithal, except the resources, to take it to scale. To my mind, National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM) has the requisite resources to partner with RGMVP, to achieve its objective of poverty reduction in the State. In my meeting with the Commissioner Rural Development UP, kindly arranged by Sampath, Mr. Srivastava did not seem averse to NRLM's linkage with RGMVP.

Raju feels that this can be arranged by the Ministry of Rural Development giving RGMVP the status of a national resource centre on the lines of SERP. In my meeting with Mr. Kanishka Singh, at 12-Tughlaq Road, I earnestly implored him to get this done otherwise posterity will cry at a golden opportunity lost to banish poverty from UP.