

The Journey of AKRSP
(35th Year Celebration)

By: Shoaib Sultan Khan
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I met His Highness Prince Karim Aga Khan for the first time in 1964 as Deputy Commissioner Kohat invited by Commissioner Peshawar to a luncheon hosted in his honour. When my wife Musarrat mentioned to him that she and I had travelled twice overland from London to Pakistan in 1957 and 1962, HH asked her which country you liked best on your journey. On her reply Switzerland. HH responded you must visit Northern Areas of Pakistan. I met HH again in 1972 as Commissioner Karachi, where he had come to finalise construction of Aga Khan University. HH told me it had taken him 12 years of planning this project. I had no idea at that time that fate will take me to Northern Areas.

This is 65th year of my working life and it is a bundle of coincidences. Having got into the civil service in 1955, which was a successor to Indian Civil Service, the steel framework of the British empire, I thought I had achieved ambition of my life but my meeting Akhter Hameed Khan (AHK) in 1958 in the then East Pakistan who had resigned from ICS in early forties, in search of a strategy for helping rural poor, I learnt how one can help rural poor observing what he was doing at the Pakistan Academy for Rural Development at Comilla. I thought I would do it by remaining in government and in 1972 I got myself posted to Pakistan Academy for Rural Development (PARD) Peshawar and invited AHK to help me, although he was on his way to Michigan State University as visiting professor, after coming into being of Bangladesh.

At PARD Peshawar I was trying to copy the Comilla Project which had attained international acclaim. AHK asked me to send progress report of the Daudzai Project which the Academy had initiated in the nearby Thana of Peshawar like The Comilla Thana of the then East Pakistan.

After a year of reading Daudzai monthly Progress Reports, AHK volunteered to come to Peshawar as Adviser to the Academy and also persuaded a Harvard Professor John Thomas to come with him for a few months. In a little over three

years Daudzai Project attained quite a reputation, even the then NWFP government agreed to replicate it province wide and got the proposal approved by the Economic Council of the National Economic Committee. AHK and I were delighted at this development. Unfortunately our political patron got killed in a bomb blast and the government support not only disappeared, with the change of the Chief Secretary, we lost both the political and administrative patrons. Academy was accused of subversion because Daduzai and its replication were organizing grassroots communities, I was made an Officer on Special Duty and AHK left in disgust and Daudzai withered away. I got disillusioned with government and sought refuge in UN Centre for Regional Development Nagoya Japan who gave me a consultancy to write a book on Daudzai experience which was printed by Vikas Publishers of India.

I did not look back or even thought of returning to work in Pakistan. UNICEF Sri Lanka offered me a long term job as their Social Development Consultant. AHK had by now returned from Michigan and had initiated the famous urban development programme, the Orangi Pilot Project in Karachi. I invited AHK to Colombo, with the approval of Hoda Badran, UNICEF Representative, for a day long retreat with him of UNICEF staff. My work in Mahaweli Project had earned me a full page in Newsweek entitled "A Man Named Khan" as I had decided to live in the project area which was infested with elephants, other wildlife and cobras.

It was on his visit to Colombo that AHK broke the news to me that AKF Geneva was looking for someone to initiate their rural development programme in Northern Areas of Pakistan and he had suggested my name to AKF Director of Special Programmes Bob Shaw who had come to AHK to seek his advice.

A few months later Bob Shaw appeared in Mahaweli to see what I was doing. Bob invited me to an interview in Karachi but I made it clear to him that I will only come on deputation from UNICEF. Having been bitten once I was not sure if Government of Pakistan will allow me to do something similar to Daudzai. Bob even persuaded His Highness to write a letter to the Executive Director UNICEF James Grant and got me deputed to AKF Geneva with headquarters in Gilgit.

Bob as Director Special Programmes in AKF, was the moving spirit behind AKRSP and never allowed any obstacle to come in my way. He even persuaded me to terminate my deputation with UNICEF by offering a permanent contract with AKF Geneva. In 1985 UNICEF informed me that Mr. James Grant was coming to visit Gilgit. He landed by PIA direct from New York to Islamabad and boarded on AKRSP helicopter to come to Gilgit. Spent two days looking at the programme on field visit and while departing from Gilgit told me that he had come to find out why I had resigned from UNICEF, but visiting AKRSP, if he was in my place, he would have done the same. I couldn't believe my ears and marveled at the greatness of the man who left for New York straight from Islamabad.

When I suffered the greatest tragedy of my life losing my daughter Falaknaz and her two children Shan and Pareesa, Bob arranged to fly me and Musarrat to Aiglemont, on the desire of HH to console us. No one could have consoled us the way HH did.

However, I had no idea what I was letting myself in, when after the interview in Karachi Bob took me to Gilgit flying from Karachi to Islamabad and then to our destination. It was only when the return flight to Islamabad from Gilgit got cancelled because of bad weather, we had to undertake a return journey by a hired taxi. Bob offered me the front seat to experience the frightening terrain through which KKH meandered while he at the back seat was sprawled snoring. In my 12 years I had to undertake this journey of 12 hours each 87 times.

In December 1982, the flight did not operate from Islamabad and I left on a borrowed jeep from AKF office along with the Chicago trained Economist Tariq Husain and had to break my journey at Battagram, where the newly built Rest House had a bed but nothing else. I slept with my clothes on and experienced the coldest night of my life. Finally we reached PTDC Motel at Gilgit which became my abode for the last 35 years with a permanently fixed rent thanks to my erstwhile Assistant Commissioner Captain Qayyum in Kohat, who became DG PTDC. Next morning AKRSP literally started its operation from a shop manned by Mohammad Yar and Tawallad Shah as Farm Information Centre till Alidad offered his office and till Jamil Haider Shah, the Commissioner Gilgit Baltistan, an erstwhile

colleague of civil service days took pity on us and requisitioned the defunct NA Transport Company office for AKRSP. We are still operating from that office.

I persuaded some of my old colleagues from PARD Peshawar who had worked with me at Daudzai project to help me and in less than two months, we visited 55 villages in the borrowed jeep undertaking journeys on horrendous jeep tracks in Gilgit, Ghizar, Hunza & Gujal valleys, sometimes travelling 8 to 10 hours at a stretch. HH knew the area well and much against everyone's opposition, made a helicopter available. But to our great dismay, the helicopter was parked at Rawalpindi airport till HH visited Gilgit in the fifth month of AKRSP and ordered its placement at Gilgit. He admonished "people might think it is a helicopter in my bonnet but I am not going to withdraw it till it is used and I am convinced that it is of no use to AKRSP".

The PARD professionals comprising Feroz Shah and Naqvi were soon joined by Hussain Wali, Mutabiat Shah, Zahur Alam, Dr. Riaz, Khaleel Tetlay, Maleeha, Ameneh Azam Ali, Shandana, Shahida Jaffrey, Majid, Javed, Izhar, Farman and many Canadian interns from time to time. The Social Organisers and Engineers who excelled in the field like Mutahir Shah, Ikramullah Jan, Noor Mohammad, Iqbal, Shah Karez, Miraj, Darjat, Sardar Ayub, Ghazi and many others. Tariq built up the MER section which did credit to AKRSP. For a short while Anis Dani and Najma also joined AKRSP. In Chitral we were able to entice Masoodul Mulk. My memory fails but there were many more whose dedication and commitment was my greatest asset. I do apologise if I have failed to mention them.

The support staff was no less dedicated. My personal staff Rauf, Shah Makeen and Naeem were ready twenty four hours. So was all the other staff and without our precision drivers, we would have been helpless. I can never forget how Sher Ali, Mir Ahmad, Jalil, Ibrahim and Naib Khan served me and others too whose names need to be written in golden words.

My first encounter with a donor was when Nazir Ladhani of AKF Canada brought John Martin of CIDA to visit AKRSP. John was simply bewitched with what he saw and the rest is history. CIDA have not left AKRSP till now and have been our steadfast biggest supporter. Catley Carlson who in UNICEF had signed my

deputation from UNICEF to AKRSP became President of CIDA giving CIDA-AKRSP relationship great impetus.

The second donor I met was in London when Director OXFAM came to visit HH and I was also invited to the meeting where I was asked to make a presentation on AKRSP. After the presentation, the Director said to HH that he had come to ask AKF support to OXFAM but hearing what AKRSP is doing, OXFAM would like to support AKRSP and donated GBP 30,000. I regretted having accepted that princely donation when their representative Nick Gardner appeared in Gilgit to see what AKRSP had done with the money. As per their requirement AKRSP had selected the most remote valley for their project. Nick refused point-blank to travel by helicopter and after a six hours road journey, we set out on foot early morning to the site of the irrigation channel at an elevation of 11000 feet in Immit Valley. It took us ten hours of climbing and descending to see the project. Next time on a follow up visit, I went by helicopter and it took exactly ten minutes to fly to the site from where we had walked. On his next visit when I asked Nick the reason for his refusal to travel by helicopter, he confided that one of his friends is a helicopter pilot and had warned him that helicopter is the most dangerous mode of flying. A year later our helicopter did crash in a snow storm but fortunately we all escaped unhurt and HH replaced it with two helicopters.

Without the helicopters and their valiant pilots and I was happy to see Cols. Mustafa and Ejaz here. I don't think AKRSP would have covered Gilgit, Baltistan and Chitral with such ease and would have been successful in attracting so much donor support. The helicopter facilitated the visit of the Secretary General Economic Affairs Ejaz Naik to AKRSP and he was greatly touched with what he saw. One evening at a reception in Islamabad, I met Netherlands Ambassador Von Geen who expressed a wish to visit Baltistan where I was going the next morning. When I made him an offer to come with me, he gladly accepted it and on return wrote to EAD offering \$ 1 million to support AKRSP in Baltistan. Much against everyone's opposition in EAD, the Secretary General overruled the opposition and the bilateral window was opened for support to AKRSP in addition to the NGO window.

OXFAM's donation attracted the attention of ODA (later DIFD now UKAID) and a visit by Sir Nicholas Barrington resulted in a GBP 5 million grant to AKRSP for Chitral programme. I was told that Sir Douglas Hurd had to certify that this grant will not be used for Pakistan's nuclear programme.

Thus AKRSP had three major donors one for each district joined by many others including NORAD with IUCN introduction. During my 12 years stay, there were no less than eleven donors thanks to Bob Shaw's persuasive advocacy. The last being GTZ when Ambassador Alfred Vestring after a visit strongly advocated German support to AKRSP and it resulted in initiation of AKRSP activities in Astore area of the Diamir district which so long had resisted anything to do with AKRSP on sectarian grounds. The Development Counsellors of the embassies were real supporters of AKRSP. Late Iqbal Nur Ali of AKF USA took me to all the major universities of USA including Harvard, Princeton, Berkeley, John Hopkins and many others to give presentation on AKRSP to the academics and students.

To please so many donors, Bob Shaw at AKF Geneva persuaded the Operations Evaluation Division of the World Bank to undertake periodic assessment of AKRSP. The Bank had never assessed project or programmes which it had not funded. They made an exception in case of AKRSP.

In their first assessment, the Bank evaluators opined that the first four years of AKRSP are the missed four years of all rural development programmes being implemented in the world because they adopt a blue print approach instead of the process approach adopted by AKRSP. In the second evaluation after ten years, OED came to the conclusion that in real terms AKRSP has succeeded in doubling the income of the million people of Gilgit, Baltistan and Chitral.

The evaluation of the Bank gave impetus to the second objective of AKRSP of developing a replicable model of rural development. The Independent South Asia Commission on Poverty Alleviation set up by SAARC head of States accepted the Commission's overarching recommendation asking governments of South Asia to make Social Mobilisation as the centerpiece for all the poverty alleviation strategies and to operationalize the recommendation, they recommended the AKRSP methodology as adopted by Government of Pakistan by setting up a

support organisation on the lines of AKRSP called the National Rural Support Programme (NRSP). Thanks to the then Finance Minister Mr. Sartaj Aziz who fully supported Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's idea to replicate AKRSP countrywide and sanctioned Rs. 500 million six monthly instalments. With the change in government, NRSP got only one and survived today to be the largest RSP in Pakistan thanks to the hard work and leadership of CEO Dr. Rashid Bajwa.

In 1993 World Bank convened a meeting at Annapolis to discuss implementation of the SAARC Commission's report to which I was also invited where I was approached by UNDP New York representative Henning Karcher who asked me if I would be willing to take the lessons learnt from AKRSP to South Asia and it resulted in launch of UNDP Regional Project called South Asia Poverty Alleviation Programme (SAPAP). UNDP Representative in Pakistan Von Sponeck and Neil Buhne insisted that 40 percent of my time will be devoted to Pakistan where UNDP was giving technical support to NRSP after the stoppage of support from Federal Government. They very kindly offered even that percent of my emoluments to the headquarters. This kind gesture of theirs enabled me to spend a major portion of my time in Pakistan despite headquarters in Nepal. Neil personally handed me the keys of a car for use in Pakistan which is now with NRSP still under my use as Chairman NRSP.

In Vice President World Bank Meiko Nishimizu AKRSP found the staunchest propagator of the strategy of Social Mobilisation. In Pakistan she helped in setting up of Pakistan Poverty Alleviation Fund (PPAF) and I am glad to see Azmat Isa as the CEO now, who helped in 1997 at Washington DC when Meiko called me there to convince her Sector Managers about the viability of PPAF in Pakistan. John Wall gave all the support to PPAF as Country Director. PPAF has been RSPs most sustainable support.

Of all the countries, India fully embraced the AKRSP strategy in Andhra Pradesh, when Meiko after a visit to Andhra with me and seeing what SAPAP had done calling it UNDP's miracle, offered full support to the State Government to scale it up. The State government mobilised 11 million households led by women. Later in 2011 Union Government adopted the Andhra approach and launched National

Rural Livelihoods Mission aiming to reach 70 million households comprising 350 million rural poor in next ten years.

In Pakistan Rocky Staples of USAID on a visit to Gilgit in 1988 offered me 5 million dollars if any other province in Pakistan would be willing to replicate AKRSP resulting in setting up of Sarhad Rural Support Programme (SRSP) in 1989. Today Masoodul Mulk has taken it to dizzying heights by doing all kinds of innovative things and getting Ashley Award for micro hydro projects managed by communities. This was followed by World Bank and WAPDA giving an endowment of Rs. 100 million to set up Ghazi Brotha Taraqiati Idara (GBTI) in 1995. Now looked at by large Dam as a solution to affectees' problems. Government of the Punjab giving an endowment to establish Punjab Rural Support Programme (PRSP) and Government of Sindh giving an endowment of Rs. 1 billion in 2003 setting up Sindh Rural Support Organisation (SRSO), Governments of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Baluchistan gave an endowment of Rs. 500 million each to SRSP in 2008 and Balochistan Rural Support Programme (BRSP) in 2017 which was revived by Shahida Jaffrey in 2001 and taken to new heights by CEO Nadir Gul.

DFID in 2000 funded setting up of Rural Support Programmes Network (RSPN), thanks to their Consultant Steve Jones. Shandana has steered it throughout making it an invaluable asset to RSPs.

In 2009, Government of Sindh gave resources for AKRSP type mobilisation in two poorest districts of the province. Because of my experience in India, I took permission from the Chief Minister Syed Qaim Ali Shah to implement the Union Council Based Poverty Reduction Programme (UCBPRP) only with women. The women of Kashmore and Shikarpur responded so positively that a group of European Union (EU) officials visiting the districts, offered to support UCBPRP type programme for an additional eight districts of the province and subsequently also offered assistance to Government of Balochistan to initiate a Sindh type programme through BRSP for eight districts of the Province. Earlier EU had offered assistance to SRSP to organise half a million households in Malakand Division besides hundreds of micro hydro projects. Currently EU is championing what AKRSP due to personal interest of Ambassador Cautain. This year

Government of Sindh is planning to cover the entire province on the lines of the 18 districts where Social Mobilisation of AKRSP type is already being implemented. Thus reaching two million households out of total three million rural households. The major RSP being SRSO under dedicated leadership of CEO Dittal Kalhoro.

AKRSP has inspired nearly 200 million rural people to improve their livelihood in South Asia especially India and Pakistan. In Pakistan there are still millions in rural areas needing this support.

I was lucky to get full support from the Federal, Provincial NWFP government and political leadership of GB and Chitral and AKRSP Board of Directors chaired by Mr. Ramzan Merchant assisted by CEO AKF Hakim Feerasta during my 12 years stay with AKRSP. But the most critical support from amongst donors was from my erstwhile civil service colleagues who served as Commissioners and Chief Secretaries and in other positions. They facilitated AKRSP at every step. It is impossible to monetize that support. It continues even now as evident from the Chief Secretary Kazim Niaz and Planning Secretary Babar's support to AKRSP.

I am most grateful to Chairman AKRSP Aziz Bolani for arranging this event celebrating 35 years of AKRSP and giving me an opportunity to recount the journey of AKRSP and appreciate the continued support by CEO AKF Akhtar Iqbal.

Above all it is the rural men and women of GB and Chitral and their Activists who were the real jewel in the crown and the dedicated and committed staff of AKRSP currently led by a Shepherd boy of Shimshal Muzaffaruddin whom I recruited in AKRSP in 1990 and guided by honorary Board of Directors that AKRSP has reached where it is today, thanks to the hard work put in by my successors Hussain Wali, Steve Rasmussen, Izhar Hunzai and Abdul Malik.

My personal inspiration was the support and encouragement I received from His Highness the Aga Khan by listening to umpteen presentations on AKRSP both in Pakistan and abroad at Aiglemont and many field visits he undertook to organised communities in Gilgit, Baltistan and Chitral.

On my first meeting with HH, after taking me as GM AKRSP at breakfast in Islamabad where Chairman AKRSP was also present. HH said to me AKRSP is my programme, if I ever face any problem, you have my permission to come directly to me. The occasion never arose in Mr. Ramzan Merchant I found a most kind and understanding Chairman, very ably assisted by CEO Hakim Feerasta.

GM Bill Spoelberch is a genuine supporter of AKRSP and never wavered in what I was doing and most indulgent to me acting as a direct conduit to HH. When UNDP asked me to initiate South Asia Poverty Alleviation Programme, I could not do so without HH's blessings. On my request Bill arranged for me to meet HH at his house near Notre Dame in Paris. HH gave his assent on condition that UN agrees to keep 10 percent of my time for AKRSP which UNDP readily agreed.

Without the support and hardships of separation suffered by my late wife Musarrat and daughters Roohi, Afshan, Falaknaz and Shelley, I would never have been able to take up this assignment. In fact, on their visits to Gilgit, they not only encouraged me, they fell in love with the area and the people. I am glad that Afshan is here this evening on a visit from London.
