

**Note for Record**  
(September 19-22, 2018)

**By: Shoaib Sultan Khan**  
**September 26, 2018**

**Subject:- Rural Development along Ceasefire Line**

It was mid-eighties that Dr. Anisur Rahman and Viqar Zakaria called on me in Skardu AKRSP Baltistan Office and expressed the desire to protect Himalayan brown bear on Deosai Plain. On my query as what AKRSP can do in something not even distantly related to the mission they were embarking. On their assurance that they wanted only a jeep to go to Deosai from AKRSP, I took a sigh of relief. But alas this turned out to be just the beginning. Anis and Vaqar team had all kinds of conservation initiatives in mind. Having completed their mission at Deosai, including getting the bear population increased and getting Deosai declared as a national park, they turned their attention to pasture new and next, I heard from Anis, he took me to an old fort along Mangla lake followed by visits to Rohtas Fort to see their restoration as well as enjoying a Light and Sound Show there.

The next surprise Anis sprung on me was offering the chairmanship of Himalayan Wildlife Foundation (HWF) which I found out was now involved in taking care of Margalla Hills and I got associated in opening of Trails 5 and 6, besides coming to know that adjoining the capital population, there was rich variety of wildlife from leopard to 17 kinds of other species. Perhaps the only capital in the world with such a large wildlife park adjoining it.

Not content with all they had achieved, Anis and Viqar turned to Azad & Jammu Kashmir. In the HWF meetings, we were briefed about Protection of Mahasher Fish in one area of AJK and setting up of a National Park in another area.

In one of the meetings, I suggested a visit to the National Park in Neelum Valley. I had heard so much about the scenic beauty of the valley although I had visited Chakoti Valley and other

areas while being associated with AJK Rural Support Programme. Anis and Viqar jumped at the suggestion and I had no idea what I was letting myself in. It turned out to be only a fourteen hours bone breaking journey on way back from the extreme corner of Neelum Valley Taobut to Islamabad. But the four day trip was an unforgettable experience.

The Neelum Valley, an over 200 km long valley from Muzaffarabad, is an incredibly scenic valley with the Neelum river (originally Kishanganga) flowing alongside the road throughout to the last village. Taobut from where the river enters India becomes Kishanganga Travelling from Muzaffarabad on the road, flanked by rich forest, the right side of the valley inhabited by villagers belonging to AJK interspersed by habitations belonging to Indian Kashmir. At some places the two sides are separated by the width of the river only. At one place the village was divided by the river, thus the two parts belonging to the two countries dividing families in two. Till recently very often the two related families used to stand on the banks of the river on either side and talk to each other by shouting over the river. We found the suspension bridge still intact joining the two parts of the village. With increased tension the people have been deprived of the pleasure of even shouting each other to compare notes about welfare of each other.

Since National Rural Support Programme (NRSP) is active in all the ten districts of AJK, the Regional General Manager AJK Attique also accompanied us along with Humera Hussain, who is Cluster Coordinator of RSPN's Waseela-e-Taleem programme funded by BISP (Benazir Income Support Programme) and implemented through NRSP. We were also joined by Jahanzeb working with Koreans, who have funded HWF.

Our first stop was at Neelum District headquarters Athmaqam where we met over 800 women BISP beneficiaries representing 12932 households, of whom 23877 children are out of school, of which 53% have been registered and in the last six months and 46% have been enrolled. It was indeed an incredible achievement on part of Humera to have motivated NRSP through Attique to achieve such % of the target. Every one of us were amazed at this tremendous response from women.

On my query from the women why they did not send their children to school, their response was poverty, lack of ability to pay school fees, uniform cost along with books, stationery and bags.

What impressed me greatly was the presence of Deputy Education Officer Ghulam Sarwar Awan and Assistant Education Officer Shad Anjum besides the Deputy Commissioner Raja Mahmood Shahid. The education department officers not only promised full support to the WT programme, Ghulam Sarwar Awan even asked the women to let him know the performance of the teacher in their respective schools, as they are being handsomely remunerated by government and have no reason to neglect their duties in teaching the children.

The Deputy Commissioner in his address assured RSPN/NRSP of his full support and pointed out that youth are very active in the area and desire ownership of programmes if involved by implementers. He also suggested need for a mobile education van due to inaccessible schools in the area.

Waseel-e-Taleem (WT) offers an excellent opportunity to foster Women Three Tier Structure i.e. CO/VO/LSO. RSPN should ask the Cluster Coordinators of WT to keep this core programme i.e. Social Mobilisation, of the Network in view. Seldom such incentive is made available for Social Mobilisation.

We left Athmaqam a little after midday and were overwhelmed by the influx of tourists from down country. The road is not only rough and bumpy but also narrow and if we encountered a truck or a lorry, there was total chaos. At one place, we had to wait for hours before the traffic coming from both sides was disentangled. I was amazed to see the spirit of adventurism amongst the Pakistan urban middle class, packed in their cars from land cruisers to small Suzuki venturing out on this road totally unaware what the road is going to do to their vehicles. A number of school children were also seen coming in their school buses or vans. Considering how safe the Ceasefire line is, they were not in the least bothered. The only people I met who were very worried about the security of the tourists were the security

people. Since tourism had become a great source of income to the local people, The Security People were afraid of antagonising the local population by putting restrictions on tourist movements. But an influx of a million or so people in the season needs to be regulated in terms of traffic movement, as well as the down country entrepreneurs constructing hotels and motels to make money without concern about environment and Ceasefire Line which flares up from time to time.

We were glad to meet the AJK Secretary Ms Nudrat of Department of Tourism at Taobut, the last village of the Neelum Valley just a few miles short of Kishanganga hydro power station built by India which has become a bone of contention, as it is depriving sufficient flow of water to lower riparian. Pakistan has just completed the Neelum hydro power station by diverting the river water through a seven km tunnel but the completion of Kishanganga much earlier has been presented by Indians as fait accompli.

Ms Nudrat was fully aware of the challenges increased tourism are posing to the Neelum Valley and its inhabitants. Through this phenomenon of influx of tourists only recent but I was surprised to see that even Taobut, subject to easy prey to Indian guns, but a breathtakingly beautiful place, has a number of tourist motels. HWF is encouraging guest rooms in local houses. In Sardari, I was accommodated in one of these with a clean and comfortable bedroom with an attached bathroom which would put to shame many of the motels room accommodation. HWF offered Secretary Tourism all assistance in regulating traffic and encouraging guest rooms in existing homes which has the added advantage of income generated by tourism accruing to locals instead of outsiders building ugly motels, an eyesore to the environment and taking away all the income with the exception providing a few jobs to the locals. HWF had engaged a corporate lawyer, belonging to the area, now settled in Lahore, Summera Ahmed Riza to give a women's touch to the building of the guest room and it was exquisitely done to set an example for others to follow.

HWF is working in the three Union Councils at the extreme end of Neelum Valley called Gurez Valley. The National Park comprises this area and is habitation of wildlife comprising leopard, bear and the Musk deer one of the rarest animal found in this valley. HWF is trying

to protect the wildlife as well as their habitation the forest. HWF succeeded in persuading AJK Government to enact a law not only to protect not only the fauna and flora but envisaged community involvement in achieving this objective. The three Union Councils have been organised with 15-25 households as Community Organisation (CO), federated at village level as Village Organisation (VO) and finally at Union Level as Local Support Organisation (LSO).

We met LSO members of Union Council Shezla which has 2600 households according to HWF Coordinator Arshad. We heard their achievements through the Chairman Shakir and General Secretary and many others. Viqar and Anis also spoke and articulated the responsibilities of the community through CO/VO/LSO towards National Park Preservation, making their village a model for tourism, changes in housing, spreading education, trees plantation and making government departments accountable. The communities promised to fully cooperate and collaborate with HWF. I exhorted them to make their foundation namely, CO viable and fully empowered to make their higher tiers like VO/LSO accountable to them, because VO/LSO are their creation and if VO/LSO neglect the COs, the benefits of HWF will remain restricted to only few and will not trickle down to the large majority for whose benefit HWF is working.

Since NRSP is also working in the area and I happen to be Chairman of that Organisation too, I asked RGM NRSP Attique to describe how NRSP can collaborate with HWF for benefit of the inhabitants of the area. Attique described in brief the packages including credit as a request was made by some of the members to increase the amount of loans they are in need of. Later I also requested Attique to make Community Investment Fund (CIF) also available to LSOs with whom HWF is working. He assured his full cooperation. Hummera also spoke about MT.

Dr. Anisur Rehman is the leading dentist in Islamabad and Viqar Zakria a sought after specialist and consultant on assessing impact of all kinds of projects on climate and environment. Both of them are very busy professionals and their time in their respective professions earns them money in gold. For them to find time for ventures undertaken by HWF means foregoing substantial wealth. In this materialistic world, where there is a rat race

making money, Anis and Viqar are indeed exceptional people, I have yet to come across more like them. Their dedication and commitment to helping not only humanity but also conserving forests, wildlife and environment and happily suffering the hardship, be it bumpy roads, terrible weather, rustic accommodation for spending nights in villages, show how personal comfort takes a backseat in the voluntary work they are doing.

I was so impressed how NRSP has stepped in the shoes of AJKRSP which is now completely dormant and having a presence in all the ten districts of the area. Attique's contacts with government departments are a great asset to NRSP which manifested in the Additional Chief Secretary Dr. Syed Asif Hussain coming to see me in Islamabad because he could not meet me during my visit to AJK.