

Hope in Balochistan

For its short life of seven years, HOPE has come a long way. When it was established in 2002, its founders only wanted to 'serve the less-privileged' among them. And Besima, part of the newly created district of Washuk in the backwaters of Balochistan on the unpaved highroad from Kalat to Panjgur, is largely comprised of the under-privileged. These were people existing on a distant edge of Pakistan whose voice had never been heard.

Perched at 1700 meters above the sea with the arid Balochistan uplands to the east and the sandy Kharan Desert to the west, Besima sits in the catchment area of the Rakhshan River. Theoretically, that would make this a rich country of orchards and vineyards. But the extreme aridity takes everything away from Besima because the meager agriculture depends upon the rains. Also, as it lies off the national electricity grid, Besima cannot have electric tube wells and the high cost of transportation makes it impossible to run diesel-powered wells.

The government bequeathed a middle school to Besima some time in the 1970s. As with most government schools, here too the standard of education was hardly anything to get excited about. It was from this institution that a boy named Karim Baloch did his early schooling to move on to Quetta for his degree. During his years in college, he heard of people helping others better their lives. The Urdu word that most fitted this activity was *khidmat*, and that was what he got into his head to do for the people of Besima.

Having completed his high school (12th grade) education and back in Besima, Karim spoke to his friends about his dream. Other than the notion of doing good, neither he nor his partners were clear what exactly needed to be done. With only hope uplifting their souls with visions of a better world, they established Human Organization for Peaceful Environment (HOPE) in the year 2002. With precious little to do, the team began going out to remote villages with visiting anti-polio teams. Their mission: to see that no child below the age of five missed the essential immunization.

However, polio vaccination was periodic with long gaps between that needed to be filled with useful work. The next best thing to do was to collect donations and help the poor in need. But in cash-starved Besima, what little collections they made could only pay for the HOPE team's own running expenses.

Late in 2002, the HOPE office received a visitor from SAP-PK surveying for suitable organizations to join the forthcoming RDP training. Other than their single room with the palm-frond mat on the floor, the young dreamers of Besima had nothing to show him. There was no activity, save the periodic trips with the anti-polio teams, no record. The letter a couple of months later informing them that HOPE had been selected to attend the training came as a bit of surprise for Karim.

The critical demand by SAP-PK was that there should be a participant each from both genders. Now, Besima with its strict Baloch code of conduct did not take women's

activities outside the home lightly. No woman was therefore ready to travel with Karim to Quetta to be part of the training. Taking the boldest decision of his life, the young man asked his sister Sharaf Khatoon to join him.

It was an uncomfortable first day in Quetta for the siblings. Because of his greater exposure, Karim was able to stumble through the preliminaries but poor Sharaf, a total stranger to such activities, was at a complete loss. Karim recalls that he himself was surprised by the miraculous change he saw in his shy, village girl of a sister by the time the first workshop ended on the third day. Through 2003, a flurry of training sessions in various cities of Pakistan followed. And when they were home, Karim and Sharaf organized sessions respectively with men and women in Besima to pass on what they were learning.

Karim says the RDP training opened a new world for them. The big discovery was the difference between charity and development. The idea of doing good by giving alms from donations evaporated as dew in the sun from the minds of the siblings. Gaining a brand new vocabulary, they learned that people could be 'empowered' to build a better life for themselves. By the end of the year, they also knew how to run an office, manage finances and keep records. Advocacy, the art of winning others over to one's side, was another important item now part of the sibling's professional repertoire.

In the RDP, it had been said that charity or welfare activities were short-term schemes that rarely changed the recipient's situation. Development, on the other hand, was sustained and paid dividends over the long term. Nothing, Karim recognized, could have a more enduring influence on society than quality education. And so, Besima saw the establishment of the HOPE school.

A large residential building owned by a retired government servant and abandoned since the owner's move to Quetta was acquired. Donations from local well-wishers and friends paid for the necessary and very basic school equipment and the rolls were opened. With Karim and his colleagues working as volunteer teachers, the HOPE school started for a mere eighteen students. That was March 2006.

Even from the beginning, the school charged a monthly fee of a hundred and fifty rupees from students whose families could afford the expense. For poor children not only was that waived off, they were also provided free uniforms and books. If the act of taking his sister to the workshop in Quetta and then farther afield had been 'against Islam,' this was worse. Why, Baloch children were made to wear neckties with the uniform, a piece of attire of the unholy West. What is more, the school had co-education. The first attack against these perceived religious deviations came from the mosque.

Karim canvassed with the mullah and though the weekly attacks died off, the mullah yet remained repugnant to the way the school was run. Parents thought otherwise however and in the beginning of the second school year, the register had strength of thirty-four. Most of the new entrants had switched over from the government school. Compared with the nominal fee of the government school, HOPE was expensive yet its allure was the

higher standard of education. As of late 2009, there are over a hundred and fifty students. Two of them are the mullah's children who come duly attired with neckties.

Averse to letting the school building remain idle after hours, HOPE set up evening English language classes on the premises. Unmindful of what the country's reactionary politicians say about learning of that infidel language, the young people of Besima flocked to the new facility and the first year the centre trained nearly a hundred young women and men in spoken English. From that early batch, one young woman is now following a masters program in English literature at the university in Quetta.

Encouraged by the success of the school in Besima, HOPE began to eye some outlying villages a couple of hours drive away that had never seen a school. Early in 2009, HOPE opened three more schools, one each in Zard, Rakhshan and Sajid. In the absence of roads and public transport it was impossible for a Besima teacher to go out every day, consequently local girls who had finished ten grades were trained to run the new establishments. Beginning humbly with a few students each, the three schools now have a collective strength of a hundred and forty-four students.

Three years is a very short time to assess the accomplishments of a school, but the case of little Waheed is a fine indicator of where the Besima school is heading. A new entrant in school and still in the first grade, the boy took part in a function during an exposure visit to Quetta in October 2009. Standing on a chair behind the rostrum so as to be visible to the audience the boy spoke in English. Waheed comes from a family amongst the poorest of Besima's poor and is exempted school fees. In the audience, his mother broke out in tears to see her son who, in her estimation could not have been any better than an illiterate shepherd, hold forth in a language her family could not dream of ever speaking.

That day it was not just a mother moved by her son's performance, however. Funded by SAP-PK and held in a posh Quetta hotel, the function was attended by senior government officers and politicians besides several NGO workers – all visibly impressed. The management of the hotel was the most overcome with the show: it waived off thirty percent of the agreed payment. That, it is reported, was the hotel's contribution to the cause of education in Besima.

Meanwhile, Sharaf Khatoon had not been idle. Her time in the village between the RDP sessions was spent in training other women. In Besima, a place where women were not permitted to either work outside the home or go socializing, Sharaf organized Anjuman e Khwateen e Rakhshan – Association of Rakhshan Women. The group daily gathered in a home ostensibly to sew and embroider, but in reality to socialize and discuss their problems.

The women of Besima gradually began to discover themselves as individuals and in 2005, the sewing group evolved into Women's Development Organization. However, they had to tread very carefully in order not to upset the tribal notions of their families and it was only in 2008 that WDO was registered as a CBO. By this time, the women had agreed that their biggest problem was non-availability of potable water. The few sources

being at various spots around the village, women had to spend as many as four hours daily to fulfill the household's needs. Approaching TVO with a proposal, WDO procured eighteen hand pumps for installation around the Besima union council.

With more free time on their hands and bolstered by all-round appreciation for the hand pumps, WDO carried out an assessment to identify the next most important need. Funded by TVO and in progress in October 2009, the in-house, deep pit toilets will soon put Besima on the map as the first village in the region to have this facility. This was a mental turning point in the village. Whatever opposition there was to this increasing women's mobility, now simply died away. Indeed, even the village mullah became appreciative of WDO's work.

From this sound footing, WDO proposed a women's rights awareness program for SAP-PK funding. Once through, this will enlarge WDO's work to three other villages in the union council of Besima. Consider: as little as three years before their first success, the women of Besima had no voice. For its short existence of just a year and as the only women's organization in the district of Washuk, WDO has much to show and holds great promise for the future.

Back in 2002 when Karim and his friends laid the foundation of HOPE, they were frequently haunted by the fear of failure. The efforts to assist the polio immunization teams were commendable, but what would the healthy young people do with their lives in arid Besima? That was a question Karim had asked himself so many times. He says that the magic word he learned in his first RDP session and which led him to choose education as the major concern for HOPE was sustainability.

The children that HOPE teaches today will be better equipped to face their world as grown-ups than any previous Besima generation. Surely many of these girls and boys will become the flag-bearers of WDO and HOPE to carry the good work begun in 2002 to the farther corners of the district. This will be the true essence of the *khidmat* that Karim Baloch and his friends had wanted to do.