

A matter of Feeling

In July 2007, the town of Zhob in the extreme northeast corner of Balochistan came to a virtual halt because of eighteen hours of load shedding. With the summer at its worst and no electric power, business suffered, schools closed down and those farmers who relied entirely on electric tube wells to irrigate their fields saw the crops began to wither away. Though the entire country was in the grip of a crippling power shortage, facing up to eight hours without electric power, Zhob had somehow been singled out for the greater punishment.

The District Focal Group, an essential accessory of SAP-PK's SDGP partner in the district, organized a meeting of political workers, members of the civil society and traders groups in order to work out a strategy to resolve the problem. A press conference and statements in local and provincial papers were suggested to bring the situation to the notice of the authorities. Repeated press coverage made no difference, however.

In a second meeting, the DFG called for a complete shutter down strike in Zhob to coincide with Independence Day on 14 August. As well as that, a public meeting to condemn the discriminatory treatment was to be followed by a rally. Now, Zhob has a population of a hundred and seventy-five thousand souls and such protest rallies in the past had never mustered more than a few hundred participants. That Independence Day three thousand five hundred turned out to register their protest with a peaceful march through town. This had never happened before in Zhob.

The next day the provincial parliamentarian from Zhob invited the organizers of the rally for talks in Quetta. No sooner did the three men reach the minister's chamber, they were ushered in for a hearing. Less than an hour later they were, together with the politician, in the office of the chief of the electric supply company. They walked out with the understanding of Zhob being put on a par with the rest of Balochistan in terms of load shedding. Unlike official promises, this one was kept.

Watan Yar Khilji and two of his colleagues from the NGO Awareness on Human Rights Social Development and Action Society (AHSAS) who traveled to Quetta and back that day in August could not have dreamed of moving the machinery of the State when they first began some ten years earlier.

A reader of Iqbal's poetry and the plays of Krishen Chandra and Chekov from his youth, Watan Yar why his native city of Zhob should be so backward and why no one moved to change things. But his youth and inexperience gave him no answer. Having spent eight years working in Karachi and studying part time to become a graduate he returned home in 1989. Mindful of Iqbal's belief in man's capacity to change his fate, Watan Yar set to work. But limited as his horizon was, he could only think in tribal terms and so in 1990 he established Anjuman e Itihad e Khilji – Society for Khilji Unity – with the aim of providing health care and education to the Khiljis of Zhob.

Getting together a few friends Watan Yar set up three youth education centers and a facility to register blood donors for ready availability in case of emergency. The idea was to work for the 'welfare' of the community in order to foster a better society. Everything this group of friends did was voluntary and the services they rendered were free. Donations collected from 'those who feared God' catered for expenses such as supplies for the education centre and for and mustering of blood donors. The donations also paid for the purchase of sewing machines for poor widows or to wed a girl whose family could ill afford the expensive affair.

Over time however neither the donors nor the persons who benefited from someone's fear of God were always strictly Khiljis. In keeping with its growth, Anjuman changed its parochial name to Development Association of Youth (DAY). Its focus was now on building a society where the voice of ordinary folks could be heard. In 1993 Watan Yar was visited in one of his DAY education centers by a team from SAP-PK. A year later he and a colleague were invited to attend the RDP training for 1995-96.

Understandably, the first session was informative, but the best part was that every subsequent session revealed another new truth upon Watan Yar and his colleague. He says RDP did not talk of rocket science, only very simple home truths. 'We learned that our welfare business was turning people into beggars. This was so true, but we had never thought of it.' He recalls being told that there were no free lunches. If he and his friends wished to bring about a long-lasting and significant change, DAY would need the participation of the target community.

Immediately DAY trimmed its business in line with the learning of RDP. The first target was the blood bank now operating out of the local hospital with proper storage facility funded by the federal health department. From late 1995, blood was given only in exchange for blood. That is, anyone calling in to receive a donation was asked to 'pay' for the facility with a donation of equal measure. They were also asked to provide a new empty blood bag to replenish the one being taken.

As the RDP training drew to its end, altogether new ideas were part of Watan Yar's intellectual vocabulary. He recognized the imperative of sustainability and of the essential need of walking the development road not alone but shoulder by shoulder with the communities. As well as that, environmental degradation became an issue for the first time for him and his colleagues at DAY. Among other things, the wholesale and illegal trapping of migratory cranes took on special significance.

Every winter as the graceful grey and black birds landed in the wetlands of Zhob, trappers from NWFP were in place to take thousands of them to be sold in the bird markets of the country. For some peculiar reason, the people of Zhob who traditionally did not trap the birds themselves played host to the trappers. Having first won over the Maliks and the mullahs, DAY began a campaign to educate the locals about the dwindling population of the beautiful migratory birds. Sadly, neither the government nor the other NGOs involved in environment and species protection had done their work in Zhob for the trappers' enablers were unaware of the protected status of the cranes.

Gradually the number of families willing to host the trappers fell and with that the illegal activity. The NGO may not have completely eradicated the unlawful activity, but they certainly have brought about a near seventy percent reduction in it. To this day, every year before the migration sets in about late November, AHSAS revisits the communities that were once host to birds and hunters to renew the pledge of no trapping.

Now, easy availability of heroin and hashish had ridden Zhob with widespread drug abuse, especially among the youth. Coupled with that the widespread ignorance of the connection between unsafe sexual practices and AIDS was cause of concern. There were and still are no statistics on unsafe sexual practices in Zhob, but drug demand has been significantly reduced. The only indicator favoring this claim is the rising hostility between AHSAS and the drug mafia.

It was now, in 2000, with its operations grown beyond its name, time for the NGO to register itself as Awareness on Human Rights Social Development and Action Society or AHSAS, the Arabic word for 'feeling.' That year with SAP-PK's Democratic Rights and Citizens' Education Program in full flow, a visitor from SAP-PK asked for a common meeting with women and men councilors. Members of AHSAS facilitating the meeting were aghast: this was not done in the strict Pushtun society of Zhob. A curtain between the two genders was suggested with the SAP staff member so seated as to be able to speak with both sides. The meeting went ahead to its end without incident.

For the outside world this was hardly remarkable. For AHSAS working in a strictly tribal society it was the crossing of a major bridge. Small wonder then that the first local government elections in the year 2000 filled seventy-five percent of women's seats in the district. Four years later, the elections saw an increase of another ten percent in women's representation. Admittedly, some of the women's representatives of the first elections were mere seat fillers, but the second round brought a complete change in the substance of women councilors. This time around they were aware, motivated and vocal, capable of playing their due role as representatives of an electorate.

If RDP had set DAY on the way to becoming a tight and efficient little organization with a clear vision and line of action, SDGP prepared AHSAS to begin to fully realize the earliest objectives of its founders: the journey to a better society; a society where ordinary people had a voice. Watan Yar knows that the double-quick official reaction AHSAS received after its rally demanding a better load-shedding schedule would not have been possible without the clout of DFG. It was after the NGO's efforts to restore electric supply in the district that a clear and massive shift in public perception in favor of civil society organizations was seen.

Meanwhile, AHSAS had already moved on to running WHO-funded mother and child health. With most of the forty government BHUs in the district either closed or working only one day a week because of non-availability of trained staff, healthcare, especially for children and expecting mothers, was sorely deficient. The maternity home in village Garda Babur with a catchment of thirty-five thousand souls now offers 24/7 service while

that in Zhob is preferred over the government hospital for its low fees and better facilities.

For women, who were scarcely better treated than chattel, this is a welcome change. Indeed, the emphasis laid by AHSAS on women's rights and equality is sowing the seeds of that transformation that DAY had first dreamed of more than a decade ago. The tactic of securing the approval of religious leaders has won AHSAS support from the pulpit and legitimized their work. Be it the 2000 SAP-PK initiative calling for curbing of public display of weapons or raising AIDS awareness and women's rights, AHSAS has the approving voice of the clergy.

Of the two decades of AHSAS Watan Yar Khilji has this to say, 'One of the things we learnt in the first RDP session was concerning the importance of getting the support of all stake-holders. Had we not done that from the very beginning, there is every likelihood DAY would have remained an association collecting donations to distribute alms. It would never have emerged as AHSAS that works with the federal Health Department, WHO and UNDP.'