

Awakening of Lasbela

In pre-partition days, the good people of village Moosani built themselves a school on self-help basis. Through the 1950s and 60s this school turned out a number of capable students some of whom went on to doctoral studies and made it to high positions in Pakistan and abroad. But while the nearby district headquarter of Lasbela saw a healthy growth of educational institutions, lying only a few kilometers from town, Moosani underwent an intellectual decline, especially among the poorer segment of the community.

Though the school was run by the government and charged but nominal fees, the poor simply neglected their children's education. It was said that shepherds and small farmers could do without wasting money on school for their boys. As for the girls, what use was education when one only had to fetch water, cook and rear children? Asim Lasi, a native of Moosani was disturbed by this peculiar set of the mind. Why, if things continued this way, Moosani would be illiterate in a few years' time.

To stop the village in its headlong rush to collective mental perdition Asim and a bunch of friends set up Rural Youth Social Welfare Association (RYSWA). The year was 1999 and the aim of this new organization was to educate out of schoolchildren and woo back into the fold those who had dropped out. But with little vision concerning how to go about their self-assigned task, the group thought the best means to this end was a tuition centre. Though there were no funds, there was nevertheless no dearth of spirit. Funded by donations and working as volunteers, members of RYSWA designated a room in one home as the centre and began to provide free education to out of schoolchildren.

A year after the group began work, the government sanctioned a girls' middle school for Moosani. Now, in such cases, land for the building is provided by the community. However, the plot offered by a rich landlord lay right by the Narag stream that periodically flowed over its banks. Surveyors rejected the donation and with none other forthcoming, the school was scrapped. Six decades earlier, this same community had built a self-help school; and now indifference prevented it from taking advantage of a government offer.

Disappointed with the way the project had gone and frustrated with its own lack of voice, the youth group turned to the NGO sector. Having heard of the work being done in that sector, they shot off a number of letters to various organizations seeking assistance and guidance. Only one response came forth: from SAP-PK. Shortly after this letter, sometime in late 2000, RYSWA received a visitor from SAP-PK and was invited to join the NGO's RDP training for the year 2001.

Because of the low literacy rate among the women of Moosani, the group was unable to find a woman participant to fulfill the one man, one woman condition. And so Asim was the only member to represent RYSWA. For him it was as if going to college for a degree in social uplift and community empowerment. As he returned home after each session to

pass on his knowledge to his colleagues, Asim and the RYSWA team began to cast about for something meaningful to accomplish as their way of serving the community.

Now, the drought of the 1990s had adversely affected agriculture in Lasbela district. While rich farmers had installed tube wells and moved successfully from seasonal crops to vegetable farming, the scarcity of irrigation was forcing the poorer ones to abandon their ancestral lands. Instead, they took to daily wage labor in Lasbela town. In the union councils around Moosani, some affected farmers had sold their land to affluent growers from the southern districts of Sindh who sank wells and brought the land under banana plantation.

Organizing groups of those local farmers who had given up agriculture, RYSWA began its own RDP training with them. Within six months, these groups were sufficiently motivated to begin working their lands again. Bridging the gap, RYSWA invited officials of the Agriculture Department to visit the farmers, assess their situation and needs and suggest suitable crops. Since 2003, dozens of farmers in the union council of Moosani have reclaimed their lands and are growing crops like legumes and seasonal fruit that thrive on minimal irrigation.

If the drought had run farmers out of business, it had also taken its toll on livestock, the other major means of livelihood in the area. That same year, SAP-PK provided a small financial input for RYSWA to initiate a goat rearing project to offset the loss of livestock owing to the drought. Introducing prolific breeders from Sindh and Punjab, the association helped bring back numerous families from abject poverty.

Kuz Bano and her three children had a good life until her husband was alive. He worked his block of land and minded a reasonable herd of sheep and goats. There was food to eat and the family had no complaints. Then the drought killed the crops three seasons running and slowly wiped out the herd. The strain was apparently too much for the man for shortly after he passed away from this life leaving it to Kuz Bano to fend for her family.

Assuming the part of the man, Kuz Bano, became a farmer; tilling, irrigating, harvesting the land herself. But in the drought situation there was precious little she could eke out from the sere land. It was a hard life until she was discovered by RYSWA and loaned a goat. Before the end of 2004, she had returned her loan in the shape of a yearling kid and was the owner of three other goats as well. Kuz Bano now has a dozen goats and though she still keeps slogging away on her agricultural land, her sales of milk alone are enough to keep her family properly fed and clothed.

Meanwhile RYSWA had not lost sight of its earliest goal of getting as many children in school as possible. Back in the year 2000, the proposed girls' middle school had come to grief because no one was willing to donate land for the purpose. This time around in 2004, RYSWA campaigned with one rich land owner after the other until a suitable block of land was pledged. Thereafter a fresh sanction for girls' middle school from the

Education Department was easy. Completed in 2006, the school now has a muster of two hundred and fifty students.

Interestingly, the Khaskhelis of the district had long been known for their indifference to education and were noted for their overall illiteracy. Consequent to the commissioning of the school, the RYSWA awareness raising exercise saw the enrollment of some eighty Khaskheli girls as well.

In 2006, Asim applied one essential lesson of RDP to the banner of the NGO. The word 'welfare' in the title of RYSWA had been rankling since 2001, now the organization was registered as an NGO called Sujag (Awakening) Social Society (SSS) and its office was moved from Moosani to Lasbela town.

In Lasbela, the divisions on religious and political lines were deep and very old. Now, Lasbela was not Moosani where the SSS team could take a campaign from door to door. Here things would have to be tackled differently. Aware that nothing galvanizes Baloch men more than a soccer match, SSS resolved to use soccer matches as their assemblies. No strangers to donation collecting, the team raised funds and arranged regular weekly soccer matches. The stadium became an informal RDP training ground with the commentary box belting out harangues on the need for peaceful coexistence and brotherhood, on participatory development and what have you.

It was seen that the Hindus kept strictly to themselves – even a soccer match failed to get them out in the stadium. The first attempts by the SSS team to get Hindu young men to join them were met with a bit of suspicion. By and by, however things changed; Hindu youth raised their own informal club and began to attend the SSS functions and football matches.

That left the political divide to be bridged. The joke was that no elections can be held in Lasbela without outbreak of deep rancor at best and at worst fights that led to long-standing hostilities. The villages of Narag and Kallan in union council Moosani were the most infamous in this regard. With the ground prepared during the football matches and their door to door campaigns, SSS got their big chance to try their hand at peace keeping in the run up to the 2008 elections.

Ensuring mass attendance, the NGO invited the various candidates, one at a time, to address the electorate of Moosani. At the end of each address, the SSS team added its own little bit about the need to ensure peace even in the face of extreme political divergence. To the utter surprise of everyone, even of SSS office-bearers, the elections of 2008 were conspicuous for the decorum and amiability.

Becoming partners with SAP-PK in SDGP in 2007 gave SSS its first taste of success as a development NGO. The Narag stream flowing past Moosani had burst its banks in the summer floods of 2007 seriously threatening the village. The community was offered a protective wall project if it could raise twenty percent of the cost. Now, the cost was a whopping Rs 2.6 million and on the face of it beyond the means of the poor people of

Moosani. For a time it seemed the project was on the same way as the school many years ago.

SSS intervened to convince the community that just about half a million rupees worth of manual labor would pay their share of the cost. Having never been in a participatory development initiative, the community was unaware of this angle. Today the stone and gabion embankment is in place and Moosani ready for the next flood without fear of a washout.

The roster of SSS successes may not be long, but it is remarkable that all the work the NGO has done thus far – save the livestock scheme – was funded by donations from local sources. Whether it was to ensure that tuberculosis patients saw their treatment through to the end or encouraging men to have their pregnant wives examined regularly by the gynecologist or getting children into school, SSS has worked on its own steam. That alone is their greatest potential.