



## THE PROCESS OF SOCIETAL TRANSFORMATION: KHYBER VILLAGE EN-ROUTE TO DEVELOPMENT

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During the last half century, Khyber village in Upper Hunza (Gojal) went through diverse experiences, encountering hardships and conflicts as well as pleasures and happiness in socio-economic and politico-cultural realms. This paper attempts to review the societal transformation process in the village by using AKRSP's intervention year (1983) as a point of reference. This would enable us to develop an outlook of the changes and development through the perspective of local community.

### 1. Introduction

Khyber is spread over an area of 330 sq km and is situated at a distance of 187 km from Gilgit City towards the northeast. The village is located at an altitude of 10,000 ft above sea level. The 828 individuals of the village live in 108 households (64 in the centre and 44 in Imamabad). The people speak two languages: the Wakhi—an old Eastern Iranian language (also prominently known as a Mountain Tajik language), and Burushaski—a unique language of the world as its family root is not yet traced out. The villagers are genealogically affiliated with six different descent groups, i.e., Sobir *Ktor*, Sakhi *Ktor*, Bahor *Ktor*, Hassan *Kuts*, Shah *Kuts* and Akbar Ali *Kuts* that have their prominent roles in development of Khyber. All these inhabitants belong to the Shia Ismaili faith in Islam.

### 2. Development Scenario before AKRSP's Intervention

Before the intervention of AKRSP, the people had sole dependency on agro-pastoralism (agriculture and livestock raising). The people were growing limited quantity of baqla (black beans), barley, wheat and potatoes for household consumption. In horticulture, only few farmers were growing spinaches, and people had limited number of fruit trees especially apricot.

After the opening of the Karakoram Highway (KKH) in 1978, some villagers attempted to venture in business and some affiliated with services especially Pakistan army and Aga Khan Education Service (AKES) as teacher<sup>1</sup>. The literacy rate was very low for both men and women, even though the first school was opened in the village in 1950. There was no health facility in the village and people heavily depended on the traditional healing methods such as the local hakeems. The khalifa—religious authority at the village level—and Ostons (shrines) had their dominant roles in providing spiritual healing and satisfaction to the people.

Kinship created strong economic dependencies and social bondages among the descent groups. Intra-clan, parallel and cross cousins' marriages preferred. There were strong gender-biases, and women were showed down and had no say in decision-making process, within and out of the house.

Political structure for governance included a village headman, representing the Mir (ruler) of former Hunza State, assisted by his Usher (chorbuew); and all the communal activities revolved around him. Abolition of the Hunza State in 1974 led to the power transformation. The Government introduced its administrative structure and the *Jamati/religious (voluntary) Institutions* such as the Shia Immami Ismaili Councils and Religious Education Boards established social governance set-ups in the village.

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<sup>1</sup> Aga Khan Education Board (AKEB) for Hunza established DJ school in Khyber during 1950 and Mr Qurban Shah after completion of his primary education from Baltit acted as the first teacher. Mr Muhammad Sirat after completing Middle education joined the school after 1954.

The abolition of Hunza princely state brought up internal conflicts not only in the village but rather within the households who bifurcated into pro- and anti-Mir: these days under the umbrellas of Pakistan Muslim League and Pakistan Peoples Parties. The negative facets of this phenomenon still have its implications on the society, which clandestinely hampers the development process.

The Karakorum Highway (KKH), which passes through the Khyber village at its length, brought new avenues and diverse opportunities to the people in terms of its accessibility to and interactions with other villages and regions<sup>2</sup>. The communities however also had constraints in terms of capacity (knowledge) and financial resources.

### **3. AKRSP's Intervention and Developments**

#### **3.1: Mobilisation and Social Organisation**

In a difficult circumstance, AKRSP initiated its function in Khyber village with community mobilisation through community leaders and jamati institutions. The intensive mobilisation has resulted in the formation of Village Organisation (VO) Khyber on July 11, 1983 with 55 memberships<sup>3</sup>. The VO members started weekly meetings and savings from one or half a rupee<sup>4</sup>.

#### **3.2: First PPI to the VO: Construction of Irrigation Channel**

In 1983, the VO members passed a resolution in their regular meeting to construct an irrigation channel for a barren land, which was not possible till that time due to resource constrains. AKRSP approved their resolution and granted Rs. 93,444 for the community identified project. Enthusiastically, the VO members constructed the irrigation channel in 1985. Thus, VO Khyber became a model (an active) VO during the initial years of the interventions of AKRSP in Northern Areas.

The VO members, according to the directives of AKRSP, did collective labouring in developing the barren land (801 kanals) before dividing the plots among the households. The collective labouring strategy was developed while taking in consideration the inability of some members to develop their respective plots.

The community developed the land within about two years of collective labouring. The members who could not participated in labouring paid fines of more than one hundred rupees on daily basis.

#### **3.3: Shoaib Sultan Khan's First Visit to the VO Khyber**

During the development of the new settlement, Mr Shoaib Sultan Khan, the Founding General Manager of AKRSP along with the then Chief Secretary visited the VO Khyber to witness the achievements of the local community. This created a new linkage between the Northern Areas bureaucracy and the local community. The Chief Secretary, on request of the community, ordered the construction of bridge for Karimabad settlement, by replacing the unsafe suspension bridge.

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<sup>2</sup> The village elders said that they never dreamed to witness such revolutionary developments during their lifetime.

<sup>3</sup> In 1983, there were 55 households in Khyber, which has doubled as in 2007 there are 108 households. The main reason of abrupt increase in number of households was the joint families bifurcated in order to get a piece of land in the new settlement.

<sup>4</sup> The weekly savings of the VO members reached to Rs. 9,313/- in 1984. Savings for 2005 was Rs. 906,468/-. It is noteworthy that savings of the VO Khyber was around 1.5 million but decreased due to internal lending , as some members could not recover it and their savings went in.

### 3.4: His Highness, Prince Karim Aga Khan's Visit to the VO Khyber

His Highness, Prince Karim Aga Khan visited the new settlement<sup>5</sup> in October, 1987 and applauded the efforts of the V/WO members made for the socioeconomic development of the villagers.



Fig 1: His Highness Prince Karim Aga Khan and Shoaib Sultan during the visit of Khyber in 1987.

### 3.5: Beginning of Conflicts among the VO members over Collective Labouring

The first rift started among the VO members when some of the questioned about the lack of participation of many households in collective labouring on newly developed land. These people were of the opinion to distribute the plots among the members and the respective owners would be responsible to develop their allotted lands. To resolve this issue, the plots were equally divided among the villagers through toss system.

### 3.6: Heifer Project to the WO Khyber

The Women Organisation Khyber was formed on February 9, 1984 and there were initially 72 members (more than one member from a household). Through this WO, AKRSP provided a **heifer project** to the village. The project provided 10 heifers, 10 calves and one bull and established a Dairy Farm in the village. This was a project of WO, but the VO members dealt the project, as the women per cultural norms, were unable to regularly travel and live 2 km away from the village. This project also got a great boom. The milk was commercialised and sold to distant villages—50 km away such as in Sost and Gulmit. This project benefited the villagers in many ways. Three VO members were employed at Rs. 800 per month. The people however faced problems in collecting fodders for the dairy farm. The VO members volunteered time to collect fodder from far flung areas, some 200-250 km away from the village. Those who did not participated in fodder collection were fined.

<sup>5</sup> This new settlement was named Karimabad after the visit of His Highness, Prince Karim Aga Khan to Khyber.

### **3.7 : Conflict over Heifer leading toward Separation of V/WOs Khyber**

However, after two years, severe conflict arose among the members on the issue to collect fodder for the dairy farm. Around half of the members refused to participate in the project activities, and there were only 25 members left. Many people demanding separation of V/WO. This issue was raised in a conference in AKRSP's Office, Gilgit. According to the then President of the VO, Dr. Akhtar Hamid Khan, a globally renowned development Scientist of proposed the separation of Khyber V/WO.

Ultimately, the conflict on heifers led to division/bifurcation of V/WO Khyber in V/WO Khyber and V/WO Imamaabad. It is explained that undercover of this phenomenon was political issues and reaction for the leaderships in the V/WOs, and fodder for the heifers was just an excuse.

### **3.8 : Distribution of Heifers**

Later on, the heifers were distributed among 20 members according to a toss system. Individuals, especially women, started feeding the heifers proactively. Therefore, through the V/WOs, ten more heifers and two bulls were provided to the members, who get maximum benefits and were very pleased. The local cows were sold, and now about 80% of the community members have heifers and crossbreeds/hybrids and the families have got abundance in milk and other dairy products.

### **3.9 : Restart of V/WOs**

The V/WOs Khyber Centre restarted its journey after coming out of their hardships, as cited above, and while the V/WO Imamabad began with its novice spirit with their savings and other activities and trying to move forward from each other. The savings of these V/WOs, which can give us some insights, as under:

1. VO Khyber Centre	17/02/2005	Rs. 906,468/-
2. VO Imamabad	19/12/2005	Rs. 550,116
3. WO Khyber	2006	Rs. 1, 100,000 (1.1 Million)
4. WO Imamabad	19/12/2005	Rs. 195,000/-

### **3.10 : V/WO Banking: Internal Lending/Credit System**

One of the major activities of the V/WOs were internal lending system in Khyber. AKSRSP provided these organisations a sizeable amount as credit and kept the TDRs of these organisations as deposits. The V/WOs lent that amount of credit to the needy members at an interest rate of 24% per annum. The loans were taken in line with businesses, educational fees of children, health emergencies, land development, and purchasing agricultural inputs. It was a good experience at first, but adequate rules and regulations were not formulated and strictly adhered to. Consequently, the V/WO Khyber (when united) and later on the V/WOs of Khyber and Imamabad faced bitter experiences.

The current office bearers of these V/WOs are now optimistic and have determined to recover the loans from the borrowers that were given before and after bifurcation of the V/WOs. Furthermore, efforts are there to decrease the high interest rates down to maximum 12%, while currently it is 16%.

### **3.11: Competition between the V/WOs and Emergence of SKIWO for the Reunification**

The conflict among the V/WOs turned into a sort of less positive competition. Some of the youth (neutral and educated) were the silent spectators observing these phenomena. They took the initiative to reunify the V/WOs

by providing an umbrella organisation for them. The youth after broad consultations with the V/WOs succeeded to form Shahi Khyber-Imamabad Welfare Organisation (SKIWO) in 1990 as an umbrella organisation for V/WOs.

#### **4. Role of SKIWO**

SKIWO not only played its role in reunifying the community, rather became a legal entity (registered with the government through social welfare act in 1992). Eighteen persons (three persons from each clan/descent group of Khyber-Imamabad) were selected as members of SKIWO for a period of one year. These 18 members then elected the office bearers<sup>7</sup>.

Since its inception, this locally clan-rooted social welfare organisation, has been resolving all local issues and disputes of the village. SKIWO also took a marvellous initiative in conservation of the nature for human development—the idea disseminated by AKRSP to the V/Wos. It imposed bann on hunting ibexes and other wildlife, deforestation and unnecessary extraction of minerals within Khyber’s area of jurisdiction. In the beginning, some hunters, strongly resisted and perceived it a jealousy. But gradually, campaigning for around five years, with both mild and wild behaviour, the hunters compelled and announced to relinquish hunting, if the steps are taken for the communal cause. This was a unique success of SKIWO.

#### **5. Formation of SKIDO as an Umbrella Organisation**

Some officials in AKRSP were initially sceptic of SKIWO’s role among the V/WOs, as they considered the emergence and presence of SKIWO a sort of threat to and meddling in the affairs of V/WOs. Therefore, SKIWO was not given due recognition in the beginning. Later on, the same respective official(s) in the AKRSP suggested that the umbrella organisation’s scope needs to be broadened. In this connection, Shahi Khyber-Imamabad Development organisation (SKIDO) was formed in 1995 and registered with the government under the company act. Thus, development in its holistic perspectives, ranging from social to economic, cultural to environmental and physical development was included within its focus areas.

SKIDO is now the umbrella organisation of Khyber. SKIWO, and the two VOs and two WOs of Khyber-Imamabad form the general body of the SKIDO. The respective organisations then select/elect members for the executive body for a period of one year. The office bearers include the Chairman, Vice Chairman, Secretary and the like. Under SKIDO, different committees operate for control over free-grazing, conservation of nature, management of schools etc.

After its inception, SKIDO has been actively contributing to the community by creating linkages and partnerships with different organisations in public, private and NGO sectors. In partnership with Mountain Area Conservancy Project (MACP) of the IUCN, SKIDO constructed an irrigation channel above the old irrigation channel of Khyber. In addition, a Guest House was also constructed at the cost of Rs. 1.5 million in the village. With the financial support of the government (Khushal Pakistan Project), SKIDO successfully completed the irrigation channel of Mastan Kerch.

SKIDO is now determined to bring further mega projects for its community by establishing linkages with national and international donor agencies for the rural development, which it could not do so far.

#### **6. Formation of Khyber Seed Growers Association**

There is also a business association of the farmers called Khyber Seed Growers Association (KSGA) with a membership of 37 local farmers. KSGA supplies potato seeds of high quality in all over the region. This is also noteworthy that every year, the per sac price of KSGA seed remains higher than other villages.

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<sup>7</sup> This strategy still exists in SKIWO.

## 7. Rural Women Economic Development Project

For around two years, a native philanthropist, named Shaukat<sup>8</sup>, has taken a noble initiative to have his share in Khyber's development, especially for women. In this regard, he formed an organisation with the name of Rural Women Economic Empowerment Project (RWEED). The key objective of RWEED is to help the rural women of low income group to generate and increase their income, and build their capacity by providing them skill enhancement trainings. Mr Shaukat has donated his house and vehicle to these women. Shaukat has donated his fields to the women in order to cultivate potatoes and earn money for different activities of the organisation.

Local women were trained in sewing, knitting, cooking, embroidery and other areas of income generation. The philanthropist provides free of cost cloths for the sewing centres. RWEED has also opened a computer centre for the young/less educated and students of Khyber. Before RWEED, the Aga Khan Social Welfare Organisation (AKSWO) within Sost Ismaili Council also provided the rural women some training for skill development, as mentioned above.

## 8. Summary and Conclusion

In summing up, today's Khyber is not that village, which was before the AKRSP's intervention in 1983. Political structure has transformed from an autocratic ruling to more democratic rather social governance. Previously, there used to be a village headman, lumbarदार (autocrat of the political institution at village level), but now the lumbarदार's role has transformed into the modern village councillor elected by the community. Gender-bias with regard to women was high, now to a greater extent, this has decreased.

Traditional agricultural and horticultural crops have transformed into market based crops (especially potatoes, both seed and ration/table). Different varieties of vegetables are now grown while previously<sup>9</sup> only few households were growing limited spinach, carrots and turnips for household consumption. Previously, there were very few fruit trees, especially, apricots, though some people had apples varieties, but now a large number of apples, apricots, pears, cherries, almonds etc have been planted by the farmers, introduced by the AKRSP.

The locally less productive cows have been replaced by highly productive heifers and crossbreds/hybrids. The numbers of goats and sheep, which were high before, have not only decreased rather some community members have given up in result of labouring. Previously, children were great supporters for the goats and sheep caring, now children are not spared for this purpose, as they pursue their education, and more particularly the quality education.

The previously traditional system of *tol*<sup>10</sup> (credit of grains) has been replaced by the modern credit/internal lending in the V/WOs and the scheduled banks.

Intra-clan/ cross and parallel cousins' marriage was preferred which is now decreasing and discouraged by literate community. Kinship-based voluntary works in the fields have decreased, which are preferred previously. For such works, now labourers are hired from Ishkoman, Yasin and Baltistan.

The previous household patterns with regard to the traditional latrines have changed to the additional modern rooms with bathrooms. More investment and emphasis is now made on education rather quality education and hygienic issues, as there wasn't such awareness. Emphasis is made towards business and commercialisation, as these components lacked before.

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<sup>8</sup> Mr Shaukat, a native of Khyber, is currently the General Manager of Landscaping for the Serena Hotels in Pakistan.

<sup>9</sup> Previously or before in comparison refers to the socioeconomic conditions of the people before the AKRSP's intervention in 1983 in the village.

<sup>10</sup> Tol was a traditional system of lending grains (wheat, barely & baqla) to the needy persons as credit.

Practical campaigns are taking place for the conservation of nature that was considered ridiculous before. Afforestation is more encouraged in contrast to the deforestation that was in practice previously. Ibexes, blue-sheep, snow-leopard and other wildlife have been given protection, which was a mockery again, and were hunted. The ibexes, without any fear, come down to the village and Karakorum Highway.

SKIDO is working hard to broaden its linkages with relevant organisations in order to multiply the benefits of modern eras to the villagers. The key challenge may come up for them in sustaining voluntarism.



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