

Note for Record
April 29, 2014

By: Shoaib Sultan Khan
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Subject: Mason Fellows Programme of the Harvard Kennedy School

It was an invitation I could not refuse saying “Greetings from the Mason Fellows Programme of the Harvard Kennedy School ... the oldest international programme at the Harvard University, this year bringing 88 accomplished mid-career students from 51 developing, transitional and newly industrialized countries for an MPA degree ... as the Director of the Mason Programme (Ms Suzanne Shende) I would like to invite you to lead a panel for Mason Programme ... for this year’s fellows, a series in which they have been addressed by scholars, ex-presidents and innovators. The culmination is a lively discussion between you about this most essential topic – confronting global poverty – is a perfect, provocative and hopefully inspiring way to send them off after their year here ... I am pleased to say that you were also the number one choice of the students of South Asian region, who are very eager to have you come, speak to the whole group”.

I know this must have been at the behest of Sampath Kumar, CEO of the Rajiv Gandhi Women Development Project in UP, India. Dr. Rashid Bajwa, Chief Executive Officer (CEO) National Rural Support Programme (NRSP) accompanied me from Islamabad and my daughter Shelley Le Breton flew from Monaco to hear her father speak at Harvard.

The seminar was held in BELL HALL of the Kennedy School from 6 to 8 pm. To my pleasant surprise, Professor John Thomas, who spent six months with me at Daudzai Peshawar in 1974-75, also made an appearance. Suzanne told me John has been the moving spirit behind the Mason Fellows Programme. I was

greatly touched when John asked Suzanne to say a few words before she introduced me. John recounted his association with Pakistan being part of the Harvard group and his association with Comilla and Daudzai and ended by saying “Shoaib is my hero”. It was overwhelming and most challenging how to live up to all the wonderful things said about me and the hype Sampath had created with the group. In addition there was Rashid and my daughter in the audience. I was thinking would I really come up to their expectations? The other panelist was Harvard Professor Abhijit Banerjee, acknowledged by FOREIGN POLICY MAGAZINE’s TOP 100 GLOBAL THINKERS AND FOUNDER OF POVERTY ACTION LAB.

In my opening speech, how my career as a civil servant changed coming under the tutelage of Akhter Hameed Khan about whom Nobel laureate Professor Yunus wrote to me “it is not enough to say he was a great man. He was a great human being of the past century ... we have a lot to discover and a whole lot to learn from him”. I was lucky for nearly 40 years, I had the benefit of learning from him from time to time and his advice that I should not try to be a reformer because only Prophets can be reformers, nor an innovator because inventions are very rare and revolutionary I cannot be having joined the civil service. If I truly wanted to serve the poor and the impoverished, I should learn from the experience of the world and he would refer to the principles of subsistence holders development enunciated by Raiffeisen in 19th century Europe, namely organisation, capital generation and upgrading of human skills. Of my nearly now 61 years of working life I have spent last 36 years implementing Raiffeisen’s principles learnt through Akhter Hameed Khan (AHK) and have personally held dialogues with over 5,000 rural communities in Pakistan and South Asia. This evening I would like to share this experience with you.

I mentioned how in Gilgit, Baltistan and Chitral, communities looked at me with dismay and surprise that instead of the AKRSP offering to solve their problems and meeting their demands, was only offering a Development Partnership and

asking them to first to fulfil their obligations of organisation, identification of sincere and honest leaders to lead the organisation, generating capital through savings and participating in human resource development training. A programme bearing the name of one of the richest persons of the world asking them to do things first before the programme will do anything for them was bewildering to them. They would demand in case we accept the terms of partnership what is the limit of the help the programme will give us and my response used to be your limit is our limit. Whatever the organisation has the capacity to do, the programme will help them to achieve it.

Many people had advised me I would be wasting my time and communities will never accept these terms of partnership. In ten years of my staying in Gilgit 91% of the households got organized and saved millions of rupees besides getting a pool of thousands of village activists, trained as service providers. The first assessment of the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (AKRSP) in 1986, the World Bank OED observed that the first four years of AKRSP are the missed four years of all rural development projects in the world, where a blueprint approach has taken precedence over a process approach followed by AKRSP. At the end of ten years, the WB Evaluation concluded that the income of the people in the programme area more than doubled in real terms.

I described how the organized communities took advantage of the terrain and planted over 50 million trees on land brought under irrigation range, took quantum jump in improving horticulture and conserving wildlife in collaboration with government Wildlife Department, WWF and IUCN. I narrated concrete examples of villages the transformation that took place from pre-AKRSP to post-AKRSP era. I referred to the most recent education survey of Pakistan wherein Gilgit, Baltistan appeared with best indicators countrywide, e.g. the girls' enrolment in schools was 99%.

In terms of replication of the strategy of social mobilisation, I gave the example of India where UNDP took me to implement lessons learnt from AKRSP to be demonstrated. In Andhra Pradesh (AP) State, UNDP's demonstration in 20 Mandals with WB support, was replicated in 1100 Mandals covering over 11 million rural households, all led by women. In India the organized communities became the conduit as well as the receiving mechanism for services and supplies of not only of government departments but also commercial banks and other development agencies.

In 1998 after her visit to AP, the Vice President, World Bank, Dr. Meiko Nishimizu wrote the following:

"I have just returned to Washington and did not want my time to pass on by before sending you a note of deep appreciation for making my dream visit to AP possible.

Every time I visit South Asia, I learn and grow as a professional. But the visit to India with you was extraordinary in many ways. I gained invaluable insights into foundations of poverty alleviation as an economist and a development banker. I feel I also grew a little wiser perhaps as a human being. That fire in my belly is definitely back again and so are the stars in my eyes. It was one of those trips, I wished never to end and felt as if I lived a thousand lives now that it has ended. I do not know how to thank you enough. Thank you all the same from the bottom of my heart and with my soul".

How empowered women became I illustrated by giving a few examples that how the organized communities in the hierarchy of institutions of the people asserted their rights and made functionaries of government departments accountable to deliver services they are charged to deliver. In AP the organized people's institutions also took the initiative called Community Managed Sustainable Agriculture adopted by 300,000 farmers to date, covering 12 million acres. The Society for Elimination of Rural Poverty (SERP) plans to make AP a green state demonstrating that we need a people centered solution to food security and climate change.

Comparing the progress of social mobilisation approach in Pakistan and India, I pointed the importance of political commitment and support to social mobilisation strategy, which attained miraculous results in India becoming a common political agenda uniting rather than dividing political protagonists. In India, unlike Pakistan, it also built up a top class pool of professionals largely from government. The sustained government support in India has also resulted into a cascading of institutional development, namely, a hierarchy of Institutions of the people and with NRLM, a main stream programme of Government of India, it is being replicated countrywide. The widespread replication happened through the evolution of community resource persons (CRPs) and finally the Indian programme owes its success working only with women. Not that Pakistani women have not the same potential, as has been demonstrated wherever RSPs have worked with women in Pakistan but they never got the same support from the government as in India. I explained it was for these reasons that Pakistani RSPs though older than Indian programme, by at least a decade and widely acknowledged to be highly successful and in fact provided the model and the inspiration for the Indian programme, yet in terms of coverage as well as achievements, the AP programme has been able to go beyond of its source of inspiration.

My talk was followed by Prof. Banerjee saying that he has nothing to say how development programmes succeed but he has done many studies showing why and how programmes failed and he went on to give many examples of interventions, introduced by governments and donors, in the field of education and others which did not work.

His talk followed Fellows asking a number of questions seeking clarification.

At the end the Director of the Programme Suzanne Shende complimenting me on the talk extended an invitation to me for the seminar next year and also gave

me a bunch of brochures of the Mason Programme asking me to recommend suitable candidates for Fellowship for future courses.

On the sidelines while at Cambridge, prior to my session with the Mason Fellows, Sampath organized an evening session for the South Asian students at Harvard who had expressed a desire to meet me and were not part of Mason Fellows. I had a most interesting couple of hours interaction with them.

I was delighted to meet my granddaughter Zahra's friend Emma Woo who had organized my talk at the Atlantic College last year. Atlantic College offered scholarships to Malala and her two friends. Emma is now pursuing studies at Harvard combining Economics with Music.

Another most interesting luncheon meeting was with the Prof. Asim Khwaja, who had served at AKRSP and was now a Professor at Harvard and was also associated with Prof. Banerjee in the poverty lab. Asim promised to visit LSOs on his next visit to Pakistan.

As Sampath Kumar was the prime mover in inviting me to Harvard, I was delighted to receive the following email from him:

"I am writing this email to express my profound thanks for coming to Harvard to deliver lecture at Mason seminar. Many of my colleagues consider your speech as one of the most inspiring speech they have heard at Harvard. We were indeed spellbound by your crystal clear message and idea for poverty reduction. As one of my colleagues put – the power of a practitioner is much more appealing than an academic professional".