

NOTE FOR RECORD
September 13-18, 2019

By: Shoaib Sultan Khan
September 21, 2019

Subject: Nepal is Shining

I was going to Nepal after two decades of the phasing out of South Asia Poverty Alleviation Programme (SAPAP), a UNDP New York Regional Programme of which I remained Senior Adviser for eight years. The visit was a sequel to Rural Support Programmes Network's (RSPN) approval of the proposal of Serendip Productions to make a biopic on me on the lines of what they had done two decades ago on Akhter Hameed Khan which can be seen on www.rspn.org

The driving spirit behind Serendip is a husband and wife team Dr. Farooq Beg and Huma Beg. Farooq claims that he has been pursuing my work for the last twenty years. He has visited AKRSP many times and made films on the programme besides NRSP and Sindh Rural Support Organisation (SRSO) where Huma shot a fifteen minute scintillating story of a village woman called Mehnaz (can be seen www.rspn.org). Farooq and Huma wanted to visit Nepal to see what I did there through SAPAP as Farooq had already visited Andhra Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh where I had been associated with SAPAP as well as Rajiv Gandhi Charitable Trust programme 'Rajiv Gandhi Mahila Vikas Pariyojana' (RGMVP) a women empowerment programme in UP. Farooq also took the opportunity of visiting my ancestral village and Lucknow University where I studied.

I sent an email to Dr. Jaysingh Sah who had worked with me as National Project Coordinator (NPC) for SAPAP Nepal and after phasing out of SAPAP, had gone to Ukraine to do countrywide Social Mobilisation for eight years as UNDP professional. Now he had retired and was in Kathmandu. On arrival at the Kathmandu airport, along with Farooq and Huma, after a 12-hour journey from Islamabad by Qatar Airways via Doha which on a direct flight PIA used to take less than three hours, we were warmly welcomed by the SAPAP team with whom I used to work headed by Jaysingh

comprising Yadav, Om Prakash and Tarun. I was overwhelmed by their heartwarming welcome with garlands and straightaway from the airport we headed towards Pokhra reaching there by midnight, an eighteen hour journey from Islamabad. So much for the advice of my daughters and Shandana not to tire myself too much.

However, next morning when we visited Arjun Choupari, the first Village Development Council (VDC) where SAPAP was initiated, the fatigue and tiredness of travel evaporated in thin air and what we saw was incredible progress and development. When I looked at the Note for Record (NFR of December 1994) I had recorded my first visit in the following words:

“After a brief stopover at Syangja, we proceeded towards Arjun Choupari, our destination for night stay. When we left the asphalt road darkness had overtaken us and the track we followed meandered through a river bed, making us cross and recross the river no less than half a dozen time. At one crossing, the old Toyota wagoner seemed to have reached its limit and for a moment, I dreaded the prospect of being stranded in the middle of nowhere, but I had underestimated the expertise of the driver. He got us across and for the next four days, I had nothing but praise for him not only for being a very safe and dependable driver but for his total immersion in the spirit of the programme and his willingness to change his role from a driver to a cook to running errands of all types. He reminded of the AKRSP drivers, whom I used to call precision drivers and ready for duty twenty four hours of the day.

“Suddenly we stopped on the track seeing Om Prakash Singh (OPS), I was informed by JS that we have to climb for half an hour to meet the community. OPS with a local villager led the way. Fortunately I had bought a Nepali cap at Syangja which protected my head from cold but by the time, I reached the village, I was sweating. To negotiate a rocky trail strewn with stones during day time, would have been disastrous”.

“The meeting had its lighter side also and some anxious moments for me, when a couple of drunkards tried to disrupt the proceedings, much to the discomfiture of the present throng. I thought this to be a good opportunity to persuade the organization to have their

weekly meetings during day time, when everyone will be sober. One of the drunkards got quite incensed at this insinuation and questioned the basis of my uncalled for comments. I was amazed at his sobriety and the tongue lashing he gave me”.

“Arjun Choupari is a small rural bazaar and headquarters of the village development committee (VDC). The VDC is the lowest unit of the local council structure. It is divided in nine wards and elects one member per ward, who constitute the VDC. Thus it comprises nine members and one Chairman. Arjun Choupari has 25 hamlets with 962 households”.

“It was now 10'o clock at night and we were treated to a delicious dinner, especially prepared by the two sisters who run the hotel, which JS and his team uses as their base camp in Arjun. I was most impressed by these two young women entrepreneurs. Everything was rudimentary. The floor was of mud, the chairs wooden, the beds of wooden planks, the toilet was outside and the washbasin a simple tap but the warmth and friendliness with which the family treated us, compensated for all the other shortcomings”. (one of the sisters met me at Pokhra on this visit where she was running a restaurant).

“During the next four days, I was to come across hundreds of such women. Young, bright, beautiful, smartly dressed and born entrepreneurs, going about their chores and business with the greatest pleasure. No frowns on their faces even though carrying heavy loads. On one of our village walks, I saw a smartly dressed woman in sari, as if, going for a beauty contest when she turned around taking the strap attached to a sizeable load and fixed it to her forehead. The poise, the elegance and the dignity of labour that she exhibited, was incredible. The rural women of Nepal appeared to me the richest resource of the country”.

“Another half an hour's walk downhill brought us to Sisne Pani, where more than 30 interested members from three village and one women's organizations had gathered to seek clarification on some issues from me and also to listen to me”.

Jaysingh had hired a vehicle owned and driven by SAPAP driver Porna, my old driver, who used to drive me whenever I visited SAPAP Nepal. The road to Arjun Choupari which took off from the main road, had changed so much that even Porna missed it. It was now a broad asphalt road on the left side of the river connecting Arjun Choupari

(AC) on the right with an impressive long bridge. Looking at the river, I was quite surprised how Porna used to manage to cross the river at so many places without getting drowned.

It was lush green countryside with many beautiful and stylish houses on the way to AC which in those days was devoid of any pucca buildings. Now I found many pucca houses and a grand building of the Cooperative of the VOs fostered by SAPAP at AC.

We were welcomed by over 250 men and women representatives of the erstwhile VDCs which now had been merged with a Rural Municipality called Arjun Choupari encompassing 5 VDCs. Besides the representatives of old VDCs which are now called Wards, the Chairman of AC Municipality Dirgha Naryan Aryal, the Chairperson of AC Cooperative Dhan Bahadur, the Vice Chair of the Cooperative Prem Bahadur, the Manager of the Cooperative Shaligram Kafle, an MBA, the Board Members of the Cooperative and the ex-Chairman of VDC Rodh Narayan were present in the meeting to welcome us, where we reached two hours late because on the way Huma stopped at so many places to film the beautiful lush green terrain endowed with mountains, with river flowing alongside the road, the girls in uniform along with the boys going to school. The umpteen girls riding motorbikes. The empowerment of women were visible on the road.

The first Chairman of VDC Rodh Narayan recalled how in 1994 all the households in the VDC were organised through Social Mobilisation and adhering to the principles of organisation, discipline of savings for capital generation and human resource development for unleashing individual potential for livelihood improvement. When SAPAP phased out in 2000 besides the infrastructure built by the VDC members with technical and monetary support from SAPAP, the mainstay for sustainability of the VDC was the seed capital or later called Community Investment Fund (CIF) which by revolving had increased to over Nepalese Rs. 1 million. He was a teacher and took responsibility to act as the trustee of the capital and continued their monthly meetings and savings and then they decided to give themselves a legal cover by converting into a cooperative. However, as the cooperative format did not fully suit them, they formed a multipurpose Society including agricultural credit for which government was also giving a grant. It began with 1740 households as shareholders and increased its capital to Rs.

6 million by 2010. When 4 more VDCs were merged with AC and AC Rural Municipality came into being with 3733 households, 21772 population and a bigger Cooperative was formed with AC Cooperative as the apex. 56% of the women households are shareholders and according to Rodh Narayan, women are much more active than men.

Dhan Bahadur, Chairman of the Cooperative thanked SAPAP for laying the foundation of the Cooperative which has now a capital of over Rs. 20 million with 2,300 shareholders and there are two other Cooperative Societies besides AC which have over 1500 households as shareholders. Except for 200 households, all households in the AC municipality are organised and shareholders of the Cooperative with community organisations continuing at Ward level which were the defunct VDCs.

AC Rural Municipality has 32 elected and 2 selected members with 40% women members. It has a budget of Rs. 200 million per annum including budget of government departments like health education etc. The pure Municipality resources are Rs. 70 million. The representative of the Health Department whom we also met at the office of AC Municipality which was housed in another impressive building with a grand office for the Chairman. I could never imagine that the village AC, I knew would be so transformed. He told us that their budget although devolved is still controlled by central Education Department and hoped in due time, would be fully devolved to the Municipality level.

Talking to the women with Huma who had attended the Cooperative meeting, some of them described where they have reached with the help of SAPAP, starting with small enterprises, now they were doing much bigger things in terms of agriculture, dairy, business and one of them informed that she went to Israel and got training in business management and horticultural practices and disseminates her knowledge through the organised communities to others.

It was late evening when we reached Sisnepani and I had to negotiate a muddy and slippery climb to reach the Vocational Training Centre for agricultural processing and production. Padam Bahadur Giri, one of the first VO Managers narrated how he has formed 8 farmers groups and has achieved over 400% cropping intensity by growing

vegetables and also done seed production of maize, rice etc. They have accessed individually from the cooperative Rs. 100,000 to 1.5 million credit. There are 20 Enterprise Development Groups with 190 women members. While I spent time talking at the Centre, Huma and Farooq went to the house of Padam Bahadur to interview his wife. By the time, they finished, it was night and we returned to Pokhra by 10.00 pm. All restaurants were closed even our hotel dining room but we did find a Thali eating place.

On Saturday morning, we went to visit The Syangja Urban Municipality and were welcomed by the Mayor Shrimati Kumari Chattar, Deputy Mayor Mahesh Puri (an old SAPAP professional), Ex-District Council Chairman Ram Bahadur Thapa and 14 Ward Chairmen, representative of 9 members of each Ward of the old defunct VDC. Besides there were also Planning & Admin Officer Tara Chand and 14 Social Organisers of the Wards, Communication Officer, Ward Coordinators besides Community elected Municipality members.

The 4000 old VDCs have now been merged in 773 Urban and Rural Municipalities in the 7 Provinces. Over 500 are Rural Municipalities. Nepal has a population of about 30 million (it was 14 million when SAPAP started) with nearly 6 million households. The population graph has stabilized and the household size from 5 may further go down.

The Municipality physical jurisdiction and population seems to conform to the idea of a viable unit of Development Administration where all government development departmental services and supplies are located to be easily deliverable by departments and accessible to all the households in the Municipality. In Bangladesh, Akhter Hameed Khan succeeded in the erstwhile East Pakistan setting up of a Thana Training and Development Centre (TTDC) as a viable unit of Development Administration. In India the colonial law and order and revenue collection administration was converted into Development Administration by setting up Blocks and Mandals below the District. In Nepal they have done it now. In Pakistan, Rural Support Programmes (RSPs) are trying to achieve this objective by fostering Local Support Organisations (LSOs) at Union Council level which in physical terms is equivalent to Nepal's Rural Municipality. Nepal has converted the top down administration to Development Administration by creating Urban and Rural Municipalities.

The Deputy Mayor Mahesh Puri because of his SAPAP experience convinced the Mayor and other members to adopt Social Mobilisation approach in the urban setting. My experience in Pakistan had been that due to the lack of cohesiveness in the communities, the urban households are averse to organisation but Syangja demonstration shows that in Nepal the urban households are as willing to get organised as the rural communities. This was indeed a learning experience for me. The key incentive for the organisation was the revolving fund like SAPAP's Seed Capital. The 1135 households in 14 Wards have been organised in 293 community organisations and the Rs. 6.3 million revolving fund has been accessed by 137 members in the first year year. There are monthly CO meetings and savings. The revolving fund is being invested in trade, vegetable farming, goat, poultry development, tailoring and other businesses.

The PowerPoint presentation by the Planning Officer raised challenges facing the Social Mobilisation programme like raising of resources for revolving fund and sustainability of COs and I suggested to them to learn from the experience of Arjun Choupari. The Mayor in her speech expressed her resolve of allocating at least Rs. 10 million every year for the revolving fund.

When Farooq had suggested the visit to Nepal, I had wondered what would there be to show him to film. Nearly twenty years had passed of which nearly a decade was devoted to insurgency when the government was literally confined to the capital. Visiting AC and Syangja seeing what was happening was unbelievable. I was told the Maoists did not much obstruct the Social Mobilisation. In fact, I was told in Kathmandu when I met some of the government officials that during Maoist insurgency their contact with rural areas was only through organised communities as none of the government officials could go there.

Seeing how rural people still remembered SAPAP and the love and affection they showered on me, left me overwhelmed with joy and humility. My appreciation and praise for Jaysingh and his team found no bounds for the rapport they had forged with rural communities and the credit the villagers gave to them for their current prosperity and happiness.

Yadav and Jaysingh in their speeches recalled the SAPAP days and highlighted the tremendous support everyone gave from District Administration to District Council and VDC and above all the rural households without their willingness and enthusiastic participation SAPAP would never have achieved what it did.

The Mayor in her concluding remarks thanked Jaysingh and especially Yadav for all that they did for Syangja and continue doing it and expressed her resolve to cover the entire Municipality during her tenure with Social Mobilisation approach.

On her request the ex-Chairman of the now defunct District Council Ram Bahadur Thapa recalled how after World War I, Communist revolution happened in Russia and later in China. In Nepal also a revolution took place at the advent of the 21st century. When he visited he saw something similar unleashed by SAPAP without violence. He was happy the Government of Nepal has adopted the SAPAP route and Syangja Municipality is the best example how to do it.

In my speech I thanked the Mayor and everyone in the assembled audience for the warm welcome they extended to us. On the challenges raised by the Planning Officer in his presentation about sustainability and resource mobilisation for Social Mobilisation, I urged them to understand the importance of capital and its generation by the people themselves through the discipline of savings. Without their capital, they cannot expect to attract and access outside capital. AC Municipality is a very good example and demonstration to learn how to generate your own capital and be sustainable. Urban Syangja Municipality has a distinct advantage of a very dynamic and supportive Mayor for Social Mobilisation. I urged the Ward Social Organisers that it is their job to ensure adherence by COs to the principles of Conceptual Package of Social Mobilisation and to achieve this they can only be helped if they persuade the COs to identify honest and competent activists from amongst them to take the organisation on the right path. AC would never have succeeded without these activists.

We took leave of the Mayor and others and especially of Mahesh Puri, the Deputy Mayor who was the driving force for initiating Social Mobilisation in urban setting. He

gave credit to his mentor Deo Krishan Yadav who taught him the principles of Social Mobilisation when he was working with him at Syangja under SAPAP.

From Syangja we proceeded to Pokhara lakeside. Pokhara is a tourist resort. I could not believe my eyes that the small town that I saw during SAPAP days would emerge into a huge mega city and one had now to discover where the lake was, hidden by a jungle of concrete buildings. Huma was bent upon shooting me walking alongside the lake. The lake which used to have a few boats, was now crowded by hundreds of them. The para glider from the hill opposite side was also there. The walkway along the lake was thronged by tourists while Huma was making me walk and then sit down and walk giving confusing directions another drama was going on without our knowledge.

A Nepali couple enjoying the lake, saw this filming going on as Farooq was also shooting other things. One of them asked SAPAP team members what was happening and pat came the response we are making a film. They asked who is the hero of the film and the group pushed forward. Om Prakash whose non-hero physique made them ask who is the heroine. The response was she is a foreigner. The couple remarked without a good heroine, your film will not be a success. In the meanwhile the team saw a Japanese rather glamorous girl with a hat standing next to Farooq and they pointed her to the couple saying she is the heroine. Yadav claimed to be the producer and Tarun as Director. They also offered his wife a role. Afterwards when Huma had finished shooting me, Yadav, Om Prakash and Tarun were doubling with laughter at their cruel joke played on the poor couple.

It was now the norm to arrive late at our night destination and as on the first day, we left for Kathmandu by road from Pokhara late arriving at Himalaya Hotel, where I used to stay during SAPAP days, at nearly 2.00 am with my first appointment at 9.00 am.

Jaysingh had informed many of those with whom I had interacted in SAPAP days and I was thrilled and most grateful that not one but three of the members of the Planning Commission met me and also SAPAP first Operations Manager besides the Minister and officials of the Ministry of Poverty Alleviation.

September 16th Friday began with a call on Dr. Shankar Sharma, former Vice Chairman of the Nepal Planning Commission, the nodal point for SAPAP in the government. Dr. Sharma after retirement from the Commission and doing a spell as Nepal's Ambassador in USA, had set up a consultancy called Public Policy Incubator and was one of the think tank providing input to government. After giving us a brief discourse on what he was currently engaged in, he described how after SAPAP phased out, government continued and replicated the programme by launching two programmes called Local Governance Programme (LPG) and District Participatory Development Programme and spread it to all the three Regions of the country. The setback came with the insurgency but the organisations of the VDC had the resilience and strength to survive the on slaught. After peace was restored, government has now created over 700 Municipality in place of the 4000 VDC and Urban Municipalities which he thought was not a good idea. I tried to allay his apprehensions about this action by describing the concept of the Municipality becoming a viable unit of Development Administration.

After this meeting I made an unscheduled call on my UNDP office, my old organisation. Fortunately, Secretary to SAPAP at Headquarters Ms Bandhana was still there now elevated as Executive Secretary to the Resident Representative (RR). There was hardly anyone else from that time. Bandhana was overjoyed to see me and volunteered to take me round the office and may get some time to meet the Deputy Resident Representative. The office had been rearranged and was now divided in cubicles in rows with a path in between the rows. At the end, one row Bandhana took me inside a cubicle slightly larger than others and a lady sitting there greeted me. I recalled my association with UNDP and gave her the history of SAPAP. She was from Sri Lanka and I described my visits to Sri Lanka earlier as UNICEF Consultant of Mahaweli Project and later as Senior Adviser to SAPAP. While taking leave, as Bandhana had told me she will take me to the DRR, I asked her who is the RR and she said with a smile " I am". I felt so embarrassed and apologized and thanked her profusely for giving me so much time for an unscheduled meeting. Ms Ayashanie Medagangode-Labe gave me her card.

Our next meeting was at Ministry of Poverty Alleviation where the Minister Ms Padma Kumari was called by the Chief Minister when we arrived but Huma was able to snatch a statement from her on SAPAP and its current replication in Nepal. Our detailed meeting was with Joint Secretary Ms Chandrakala Poudel and Under Secretary Anant Kumar Basnet. The JS listened patiently to my narration of the SAPAP since its inception in Nepal and stated how the organised communities are vibrant and active in AC and Syangja. She raised the issue of coordination amongst department and how to achieve it because all their efforts have been futile. I explained to her the dynamics of trespass on turf which each department jealously guards and would resist any attempt at coordination if their turf is threatened. The only way the departmental services and supplies can be coordinated if all of them use community organisations as the conduit for their interventions, because these institutions of the people are there as receiving mechanism for the services and supplies of the Administrative and Political Pillars of the State. The Under Secretary raised the issue of giving legal cover to COs and making them cooperatives. I cited the example of AC because the traditional cooperative rules and regulations are only regulatory not to develop cooperatives. If COs are to be made cooperatives, their rules and regulations have to be modified because the current law does not encourage the development aspect of cooperative. It allows Executive Committees to hijack it with General Body Meeting only once a year.

Our last meeting of the day was with my old friend Dr. Shree Krishna Upadhyay who was also a member of the Independent South Asia Commission on Poverty Alleviation set up by SAARC Heads of State in his capacity as Member, Nepal Planning Commission. After retirement, Shree Krishna is very passionate about organic farming and in the meeting he enthusiastically described what he is doing much to the delight of Huma who is an ardent advocate and producer of everything organic. Huma pinned us both down to an interview asking questions about SAPAP and bombarding Shree Krishna with questions trying to see any conflict in our interpretation and understating of the conceptual package of Social Mobilisation. I was delighted that Shree Krishna said the same things about Social Mobilisation completely in conformity with my definition and practice.

On Sunday, September 17th , our last day in Kathmandu Dr. Jagdish Chandra Pokharel, former Vice Chairman, Planning Commission of Nepal very kindly came to see me at the hotel and besides reminiscing SAPAP days and its impact on Nepal, discussed his idea of having an international conference in Kathmandu to discuss the various dimensions of the Social Mobilisation approach and how to catalyse the impact on poverty reduction of the approach be deepened and spread. I enthusiastically supported his idea.

My next visitor who also kindly came to the hotel was Mr. Shyam Khadka who was the first Operations Manager of UNOPS/SAPAP and used to come from New York. After leaving UNOPS, he joined IFAD and FAO and became their representative in India. Being a Nepali, he decided to come back home and look after his father. Shyam was a great supporter of SAPAP and greatly regretted UNDP's action in phasing out from such a successful programme. We both were in agreement how UNDP initiates programmes and when they reach the stage of being scaled up, it allows others to step in and take all the credit. We mentioned about SAPAP in India, how World Bank took it to scale supporting Government of India making it one of the largest poverty reduction programmes in the world, as claimed by the Bank. Shyam mentioned people who were supporting SAPAP in UNDP especially Henning Karcher when they left, the successors started doing something new. I was delighted to meet Shyam and greatly touched by his gesture to come and see me when he came to know I was in Kathmandu because I didn't even know that he was here. Shyam was succeeded by Richard Snellen and Pournik. At Headquarters Ingunde was our great supporter.

I do hope Farooq and Huma got what they were looking for. They are an amazing couple supporting each other in the best possible way in the work they are doing. Besides they are a most enjoyable company. I am beholden to Farooq for bringing me to Nepal.

After the visit to Nepal, in the words of Wordsworth, when I am in vacant or in pensive mood, I reminiscenced my eighteight years of life including 66 years of working life and found it full of coincidences. I was three years old when my mother died, my maternal grandfather adopted me giving me an exposure of a civil servant's household and by

the time I did matriculation, my strong ambition was to become a civil servant. At the young age of nineteen if I had not fallen in love with a girl and married her whose father belonged to Frontier Province (now KP), I would probably have never come to Pakistan in 1953 and gone to Peshawar after taking my Master's degree from Lucknow University. Having joined the Civil Service of Pakistan (CSP) in 1955 achieving my lifelong ambition, I would never have left it if in 1958 while serving in the then East Pakistan, I would not have met Akhter Hameed Khan and had been exposed to his theory and practice of rural development in Comilla Project and later in 1972 his joining me at Peshawar Academy as Adviser when I was implementing Daudzai Project on the lines of Comilla. In 1975 the Government of the Day making me Officer on Special Duty because in collaboration with Akhter Hameed Khan, I was charged with preaching subversion at the Academy resulting in my seeking refuge in the United Nations. While working with UNICEF in Sri Lanka, I was approached by Aga Khan Foundation, Geneva in 1982 at the behest of Akhter Hameed Khan, whom AKF Bob Shaw had approached to suggest a suitable person for the Foundation's proposed Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (AKRSP) and in 1993 UNDP New York's Henning Karcher who was UNDP ARR in Pakistan in early seventies, asking me at the World Bank organised conference at Annapolis, USA, if I would be willing to implement a South Asia Poverty Alleviation Programme to take lessons learnt at AKRSP because the Independent South Asia Commission on Poverty Alleviation set up by SAARC Heads of State made an overarching recommendation that Social Mobilisation should be centerpiece of all poverty alleviation strategy of South Asian States which was fully endorsed by SAARC Dhaka Summit in 1993 by all Heads of State.

Later in December 1993 I was invited to the UNDP RRs cluster meeting to Nepal, also attended by Ms Elena Martinez, the Acting Regional Director and Division Chief of UNDP Henning Karcher. After my presentation at Dhulikhel, the audience broke into spontaneous clapping and the Regional Director (a Cuban) rushed up to me saying "you have inspired me". I was asked by Henning to lead a mission to all the SAARC countries to sell the idea of the Regional Programme of UNDP. As I knew I had friends in every South Asian countries who were members of the Poverty Commission, the

mission got positive feedback and in August 1994 UNDP New York asked me to launch SAPAP.

Without the enthusiastic support of RRs Carroll Long and later succeeded by Henning Karcher and with office support from Manoj Basynet, Nepal SAPAP would not have achieved what it did. Akhter Hameed Khan always used to say you don't replicate programme, you replicate people. Finding Dr. Jaysingh Sah as NPC was my biggest breakthrough and his finding Yadav, Om Prakash, Tarun, Neupane and others as his team members achieved the objectives of SAPAP Nepal.