

## No ordinary voters in Dallu Khelanwala

Abdul Rauf Khan, thirty-ish and lean is very much a live wire who, with his matriculation is by local standards a pretty reasonably educated man. It is his kind of folks that take communities forward. But in his village Dallu Khelanwala he does not appear to be a rarity. He is one among many who are struggling to change their world that had stood still for the past sixty years.

He had been a farmer for some ten years when back in 2003 he first came in contact with SAP-PK. The NGO recognized the fire in him and after a few brief sessions the young man was set to begin as vice president of the Gharib Kissan Tehrik. That started his exposure to the work of development NGOs. Shortly after that he entered an NRSP program where he trained as a para-veterinary worker. This was the training of choice for Rauf because not only Dallu Khelanwala, but neighboring villages are home to a fairly large population of cattle.

He remembers the time the prize buffalo of his family needed treatment. Rauf Khan had to ride the local bus to Wan Bhachran, pay the vet's fare to bring him to the village, buy the medicine and then pay for the man's return to town. Above that there was also the vet's fee. All of that had set him back by a good six hundred rupees. And this was the story of all cattle owners in his area. So when Rauf asked to be trained as a veterinary worker, he knew where he was headed.

As for his own Dallu Khelanwala; although it is a rather prosperous little village of sixty households and some five hundred souls, its only connection to the Shadia-Wan Bhachran road that passes nearby was either through the fields or by a half-kilometer unpaved path winding around the fields. Even in the best of times when there was no rain, the path, running at the level of the fields, was flooded in various places. This being because the low earth walls separating the path and the fields would sometimes break because of the odd animal straying across. The result was irrigation water flooding the road. The detriment was two fold: precious irrigation was wasted and the road became impassable.

The soil of the village being a rich sandy loam, the path became a sucking morass during the rains making entry or exit for Dallu Khelanwala a near impossibility without completely soiling one's clothing. Even the slightest shower would keep children from school because not even the humble donkey cart could get through without bogging down. There was many an occasion since Rauf Khan had learned his trade that he was unable to answer a call because of the condition of their only access to the main road.

Others remember how they took their elderly and ailing family members in case a doctor was needed: with four young men at each corner of the *charpai* bearing the sick one. But these, says Rauf speaking for his village, were their unforeseen and infrequent difficulties. The biggest problem which they faced every harvest, be it sugar cane, wheat or cotton was sale and removal of the produce. There being no access to their fields, no

buyer was willing to get his shoes dirty. Whereas buyers usually lift the crop from the fields, in the case of Dallu Khelanwala, the farmers had to carry it to the road head.

Wheat and cotton were easy. All the farmers had to do was bag them and either man haul or use donkey carts and tractor trolleys for the short haul to the road. But owing to its bulk, sugar cane was always tricky. Donkey carts being able to take only so much, could spend days removing the harvest running up a high transportation bill. Tractor trolleys could have been the answer, but with the harvest in full swing it was another thing: tractor drivers sought long hauls from farm to sugar mill because that meant more money. The haul of a few hundred meters from Dallu Khelanwala to the road was just a hassle and scarcely feasible as it burned more fuel and paid a lower return. Consequently, tractor drivers used the ploy of being 'too busy' for Rauf and others of the village. Those who agreed asked for very high rates per trip. With all these difficulties, there were times when the harvested cane waited so long to be transported that it spoiled right where it lay.

In December 2006 the farmers of Dallu Khelanwala put their heads together and resolved to sort out their problem with SAP-PK input. That was when the NGO was working on Strengthening Democratic Governance Program with peasants, workers, women and religious minorities in focus. In February 2007, SAP-PK facilitated the formation of Ittefaq Kissan Committee, provided the members initial trainings and then guided them to how to demand for a brick-pitched road from their village to the road head and undertake the task with participation of the community members. The grant had to come through Pakistan Poverty Alleviation Fund.

Survey was carried out and the road length came to 2300 feet (700 meters). SAP-PK helped the PWG in generating resources. The farmers from Dallu Khelanwala took time off from the cotton harvest to work four hard months on their road. There was the incentive of not only directly overseeing the quality of construction, but it also meant daily wages which reimbursed the contribution they had made from their meager savings. December was not yet over when the road was opened to all kinds of traffic. 'For the first time ever, I saw a real car in my village!' says Rauf Khan.

The cotton harvest was already in. But December was time for the sugar cane to be taken out. Suddenly, there were no overly busy tractor drivers. They came, loaded up and drove straight off to the sugar mills. Sooner than they knew, the entire crop had safely been removed. When Dallu Khelanwala farmers sat down to tally their accounts, they were pleased to note that they had made Rs 10,000 per acre of sugar cane more than past years! Already they envisage that in future transportation of wheat and cotton crops will be no less than fifteen rupees cheaper for each 50 kg bag.

That is an indicator of collective economic uplift whose real effects will be measured in the coming years. As for Abdul Rauf Khan, the road has helped his veterinary service considerably. Earlier he could not imagine getting out in case of rain or an outbreak of irrigation water. Now, by his own admission, he is servicing no fewer than eight to ten animal patients every afternoon. With a great sense of satisfaction he says that in the first

month after the soling was completed, his daily income shot up to Rs 1500, that is threefold.

Not to be left out of the tally, the women of Dallu Khelanwala are quick to point out that their laundry bill has fallen drastically in the month since the project was completed. School uniforms that were soiled in one day now last two, and for the more careful youngsters, even three days – even when it rains.

The new-found ability to solve their problems through means other than the local politician or a government agency, has given the people of Dallu Khelanwala a confidence they had never known. With their road complete and electioneering in full swing, they were no longer prepared to listen to the useless harangues of their candidates. The women being more vocal than the men are reported to have told the candidates, ‘We now are capable of addressing our problems. We want you to tell us what legislation and laws you will enact for our collective good!’

Many a worthy politician has had to beat a sorry retreat because legislating is one thing so few of them are prepared for. The importance of the economic benefit can hardly be denied; but in the long term the people of Dallu Khelanwala will thank the 2300-foot soling for the socio-political uplift it precipitated. That will be its farthest reaching consequence.