

Women to Fore!

Village Chak Number 234-A TDA has an interesting demography. On the one side it is a village of the poorest of the poor of whom fifty percent could only be share-croppers or have tiny holdings of five acres or less. Another twelve percent hold twelve acres while the remainder are the so-called landlords with fifty acres or more – landlords who hold the poor in contempt and wish them forever to remain caught in the morass of miserable poverty and ignorance.

Lying just smack on the famous Mianwali-Muzaffargarh (or MM) highway as it passes through Layyah district the village could have considered itself fortunate for its easy connection with the rest of the country. So far as the village was concerned, the connection worked fine. The trouble was that its farmland lay all to the westward, that is, farther away from the road. Cutting across the landscape between the farmland and the village was a network of no less than ten branch irrigation channels. These channels run the year round closing only two consecutive days every week.

There are villages that would have given an arm and a leg for such perennial irrigation, but for the farmers of 234-A TDA, there was little joy to be had from it. When they took their harvest, there being no connection between their farms and the market, they had two choices to get it out. They could extract it by donkey cart on the two days the channel was dry – a process that could take well over four weeks for the average farmer to get his produce safely into a warehouse. During this period there was always the dread of rain spoiling the produce lying under the open sky. Conversely, the crop could be sold to a buyer where it stood.

This was a no-win situation. If they got their produce out to the village themselves the cost per 50 kg bag was as high as thirty rupees. And if they sold their standing crop, the buyer paid them thirty percent less than the going price. Caught between the dread of rain destroying everything or getting thirty percent less, the farmers of 234-A TDA settled for the latter. The result was they lived in grinding poverty for as far back as they can remember.

That was problem number one. The other was the lack of access for that large part of population that lived in tiny farmhouses away from the main village. Even the simple task of attending a wedding or a funeral in the main village required the crossing of ten water obstacles without soiling one's garments.

The people of this village were not resigned to their lot, however. There was that internal fire to change their lot. The quest for change brought Mohammed Ikram of the village in contact with SAP-PK. Soon 234-A TDA became the home of Awaz Kissan Committee with a membership of six women and eighteen men. To take the community in confidence by giving priority to their genuine demand of infrastructure, it was decided to bridge the irrigation channels between their farms and the village. The entire lot of the village's poor farmers worked on their project as daily wage earning laborers. In a record eight weeks the ten culverts were in use.

Now, traditionally it is womenfolk who look after livestock. This had been a hard chore in the past because between the home where the animals were kept and the fields that grew fodder, were the ten water obstacles. Crossing them with loads of up to twenty-five kilograms on the head was hard work. Consequently, though they had the capacity to grow larger quantities of fodder, they were obligated to keep the number of animals low and manageable because of poor access to the fields. No sooner were the culverts completed, it was as if the women were electrified: they went into a frenzy of planting fodder on every available block of land.

Meanwhile, the culverts had come in good time for the wheat harvest to be taken out in April 2006. For once, and surely for evermore, the cost of transporting a 50 kg bag fell from the usual thirty rupees to ten. Two years since completion of the project, with profits at prevalent market rates from the two wheat and two cotton harvests, the farmers now breathe a bit easier. The extra income has turned on a switch on the purchase of livestock. Today every housewife boasts a five-fold increase in her livestock. This spells substantial profits from the sale of animals and dairy produce.

This creeping prosperity has had an electrifying affect on the women of the village. Shabana, a member of the committee, says that their part in the building of the culverts drove home the awareness that women too could be catalysts in changing their world. They got together and came up with the idea of the Seed Bank. This was the answer to the curse of the middleman. Now, being poor as they are, the farming families of 234-A TDA being unable to buy seed against cash, procure it on loan which comes with a stiff mark-up. When the crop is lifted, the purveyor of the seed becomes the buyer of the harvest. He walks off with the greater chunk of money leaving the poor farmer with little for household budgetary requirements and none to get the next crop going. Over the years this cycle had remained unbroken; now its time was over.

The great change, and one that will in the years to come surely be seen as the means for an overhauling of the society of 234-A TDA, came over the women. They were no longer subdued, less-than-human auxiliaries of their families meant only to bear children, cook and help in the fields. A bunch of them put their heads together and entirely independently of the men devised the Seed Bank and its working.

The little extra income that was now coming formed a pool for the purchase of fertilizer and seed and the Seed Bank of village 234-A TDA went into business in 2007 on very simple terms. It is interesting that the village committee that started off with six women and twelve men had now turned itself around with a membership of twenty women and just five men. Says Shabana with a laugh, 'We've only permitted the men to be on the committee to do the purchasing in the city. Everything else, including the accounts, we manage by ourselves.'

Since the purchases were made at the wholesale depots, the farmers were happy to pay a ten percent mark-up which was still a darn sight lower than the retail price. There was also the occasion when, at the time the commodity was most urgently needed, the retailer

hiked up the price by as much as thirty percent. With the seed bank in operation all that was behind the farmers of 234-A TDA.

The one year of successful operation of the Seed Bank has boosted the women's confidence no end. Now they are taking on the rest of the world. Rashida Bibi, unlike the educated Shabana is completely illiterate but she says she knows where to go with her complaints. The local government girls' school had long run the scam of fining late-coming girls or making periodic collections for this item or that required for the school. The illegal levy was not much at two rupees per student, but with three hundred and fifty girls to pay, it added up to a goodly sum which was shared by the teachers as a sort of an on going bonus.

Several months ago Rashida Bibi marched into the school one day to tell the head mistress and the teachers to return the seven hundred rupees they had collected that morning on the pretext of buying a broom costing just fifteen rupees. She was told to get lost and do what she could. She stood their, arms akimbo, and informed the staff that she knew where the district education officer kept his office and that was where she was going next. She turned around but had not even cleared the threshold of the room when she was called back. Without a word, the teachers returned the money. That was the last time the school ever demanded a donation.

It was again Rashida who took the bull of the Union Council by the horns. It is well known that sewing machines are routinely sent out by the provincial government for councils to gift free of cost to the poorest women in their areas. But they seldom go where they should. Instead, they are sold in the market and the coterie that runs the council divides up the proceeds. Rashida confronted the local Nazim. The man tried every which way to convince her that the government being poor, there were no sewing machines. Once again this good woman told him what she could do.

She got her sewing machine all right, but the scam becoming known in all quarters put an end to the scheme. Now at least some rotten politician was not getting what was the right of Rashida and her sisters.

It needs no reiteration that 234-A TDA is a village of the poorest of the poor. Many among its population were share-croppers whose landlords told them at the start of the sowing season what crop it would be. Half of the proceeds from the harvest went to the landlord who had not done a jot of work; the rest went to the farmer who had purchased the seed, ploughed the land and cared for it through the months it came to maturity. What the share-cropper received was a pittance that did not even pay for a fraction of his time and effort.

The slight reduction in poverty since the building of the culverts has enabled even the poorest share-cropper to lease out farmland. True, that many of these leases are just tiny plots. But whatever acreage they may have, lessees are now free to sow as they please. The proceeds that come from the harvest are theirs and theirs alone. With growing income, these farmers now look forward to annually increasing the size of their leases.

As of February 2008, the changes in village 234-A TDA may seem insignificant, but they are harbingers of a new day. As they say in English, 'From small acorns grow great oaks.'