

NORTHERN AREAS 1986

(Notes from Arif Hasan's Diary)

This is my third visit to the Northern Areas. This time after three weeks of travelling the length and breadth of it, and speaking to hundreds of people from all walks of life and all ages, I think I can paint a picture of its transition from feudalism to its present state.

Settlements in the Northern Areas exist only where agriculture can take place. Such locations are few and far between. Thus interaction between different settlements has seldom taken place. Where settlements have been close together, they have often fought each other for control of meagre land and resources. Due to this most of the settlements were fortified and are in locations that are difficult to access.

The Northern Areas consisted of fiefdoms and society in them consisted of three classes: the rulers (Mirs, Rajas), their serfs; and the Beyricho. The last are musicians and blacksmiths and are considered low caste. Their language, Beyrizki, unlike other languages of the Northern Areas, is an Indo-European one with similarities to the North Indian Prakrits. As such, it is possible that they were imported into the Northern Areas by the rulers or were wandering gypsies who were enslaved by the Northern Area societies.

The older generation in all the villages visited paint a similar picture of conditions in the Northern Areas when they were children. The ruler was supreme. He taxed the serfs by acquiring a part of their agricultural, fruit and dairy product; he administered justice and handed out punishments; he recruited people from among the serfs for war; and through *beygar* (which is called *rajaki* here); he maintained and developed agricultural infrastructure. He did all this through a bureaucracy that was drawn from his family and courtiers. In addition, he could call upon any one from among his serfs to do *beygar* for him.

Social custom in the Northern Areas dictated that every agricultural family should be self-sufficient. They were to produce their own fruit, grain, dairy products, wool for their clothes and fuel for cooking. Seeking assistance for these items from another family or borrowing any of these items was considered degrading and even if one did it, it was at night so that people did not get to know about it. This arrangement produced almost no surplus, and whatever surplus there was, was taken away by the rulers or exchanged with wandering Kashmiri merchants for tea (which was a luxury) or cotton textiles. As such, there was no cash economy, no markets and shops (except in Gilgit and those too belonging to Kashmiris) and no connection with the outside world for the vast majority of people. The children of the courtiers, however, did leave the Northern Areas to study in Kashmir and the rulers kept in touch with the court of the Maharaja in Srinagar.

Apart from the Beyricho, there were no artisanal castes in the Northern Areas as in the rest of Pakistan. As such, most families had some member of the other who could work timber and stone for house building and for the making of certain types of agricultural implements. Where metal work was required the services of the Beyricho were enlisted in exchange for food.

However, the families here did do a lot of collective work. If a family wished to build a house or to add to it, its neighbours got together to help it. In exchange the family provided food to the persons who worked with it. The practice still continues. Taking animals to the mountain grazing

lands was also often a collective activity, and of course for land colonisation and for the development and maintenance of agricultural infrastructure, large scale collective work was organised by the feudal order. In addition, festivals with collective dancing in which both men and women participated, were also held during harvesting, sowing and marriages. During the festivals polo matches were also played.

Houses were never built on the farm lands. They were built in fortified settlements called *kots*. This was for purposes of security and defence. The buildings, in addition to houses, consisted of *langar khanas* and *pir khanas*. All old architecture, including the houses, are of the same design. They are built around a central fire place and are almost square in dimension. There are no internal walls. The division of space is created by varying the floor levels and each space has a specific function and a name. The external walls are of mud bonded-stone-rubble and are windowless. The only opening is in the centre of the roof above the fire place. The roof is supported on the walls and on four timber posts. These are sometimes linked at plinth level by timber members so as to resist earthquakes. The floor is normally of compacted earth, and in the case of more affluent houses, of timber boards. The roof consists of rough timber rafters covered with the branches of trees. These in turn are covered with *halli*, the skin of the *tall* (birch) tree for water proofing, and finally with *gara*. In the poorer homes, animals were also kept in a special place in the room in winter, so as to provide warmth.

The older generation reports that there were no roads when they were children, only tracks on which horses could move. As animals could only be afforded by the rich, people walked for days from their villages to their destinations, sleeping at night at *langar khanas*, during their journey.

The picture painted by the older generation no longer holds good. Things have changed and the reasons for change and the milestones of change can both be easily identified. The first major milestone was the war for independence against Dogra rule. The people of the area defeated the Dogra army and police with sticks and stones and joined Pakistan. The Northern Areas became a sensitive area in the Indo-Pakistani Kashmir dispute. The army moved into the area to build jeep tracks, bridges and cantonments. The people provided labour for this activity and in the process acquired building skills and money, as they were paid in cash for their work. The tracks made mobility possible and the interaction between people of different regions in the area increased. Many residents joined the army and this process received a big boost when the Aga Khan in 1960 or 1961, issued a *farman* commanding his followers to join the army. A large number of young men obeyed the *farman* and were stationed in different parts of Pakistan where they came into contact with more "evolved" societies and came back with new ideas. They also received salaries in cash and this money found its way to the Northern Areas.

In 1964, the building of the Karakoram Highway (KKH) was undertaken and the people of the regions it passed through came into contact with the Chinese and worked on the KKH as paid labour. Rations and items of daily use came to the area for use of the Chinese and Pakistani soldiers building the KKH and these were acquired by the residents. However, the most important aspect of the process of road building was the introduction of new ideas and values and a new way of looking at society.

The KKH was opened in 1972. Tourists started to visit the area and the local population started to engage itself in the developing tourist industry. At about the same time, army men started to return as pensioners to their villages. They had cash and new ideas. They wanted development, schools, toilets, health centres and a better way of life. In all the villages I had visited, it is these army men that are at the forefront of promoting change and development projects. They are the most effective social activists.

The most important change that took place was in 1974 when the Bhutto government abolished the feudal authority. The peasants became free. Mobility, both social and physical became easy. Young men went to Karachi to study and to work. A strong link between Pakistan's largest city and its most mountainous area developed. The educated boys came back to form political parties and pressure groups for development. An interest in the revival of local languages and culture also surfaced. City culture and middle class values and lifestyle found its way into the society.

Along with the abolition of feudal authority, the Northern Areas was divided into three newly formed districts. The Pakistan bureaucracy moved in creating a large number of jobs for the local population and initiating fairly large building programmes to house the civil administration and build social and physical infrastructure. The people worked on these projects and in the process further trained artisans and managers were produced and the cash economy started to consolidate itself.

And finally, the Chinese frontier was opened in 1980 and as a result tourist industry boomed. A large number of foreigners started to visit the Northern Areas and hotel accommodation, food, trekking, site seeing, transport and their other requirements had to be satisfied. All this has resulted in a big change occupations, attitudes and the physical environment.

The Northern Areas is now a cash economy. There are markets and shops in various settlements. The tradition of self-reliance is finished. People are moving away from agriculture into trade, commerce, service sector jobs, tourism related services, transport and artisanal work. They have discovered that this is far more lucrative than agriculture. An increasing number of young men work in Islamabad and Karachi and send back money. Gilgit now imports large quantities of wheat which are marketed to the villages whereas previously there was almost no wheat in the market. Agriculturists are turning to planting orchards and cash crops and middle men from the Punjab and NWFP are providing support to them in those areas which are easily accessible.

The people working in the commercial and services sector are emerging as the new middle class. They are moving out of their one room houses in the *kots* to houses on farmlands and building homes in the towns. These houses have more than one room built round the traditional one room house. They have latrines, *verandahs* and bedrooms. They are eating away at the limited agricultural land and transforming the rural landscape.

The establishment of the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (AKRSP) and other AKDN initiatives have also had a major effect on the area. The emergence of village organisations which operate savings and credit programmes are creating new community level institutions. The programme for the establishment of girl's schools will completely change the society within a decade. People are anxious to get their girls educated since they say that educated boys are not willing to marry uneducated girls and as such they may marry outside if educated girls are not available. Traditionally children were responsible for grazing animals. However, since they now go to school there is no one left to graze animals and so the number of animals has declined and a further fall is expected.

Most of the developments described above are taking place in an ad-hoc manner. As such, they are adversely effecting the built and natural environment. This deterioration is likely to increase considerably in the near future unless steps are taken to plan for it in an environment-friendly manner. This can only be done through the AKRSP Village Organisations or through Village

Organisations developed especially for this purpose. Also, a major social revolution would come about once the girls who are going to school today come of age. What the repercussions of this revolution will be is very difficult to predict.