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**The road to school**

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In April 2012 an avalanche struck a Pakistan Army base in the Gayari sector near Siachen and took the lives of 129 soldiers and 11 civilians, making it the deadliest in the history of Pakistan. Search & Rescue teams were able to recover 131 bodies from the site. Then began the task of delivering the dead back to their families with the honors they deserved.

Among the teams of officers that were given this somber responsibility was a family friend of ours. He recalls that in the course of this duty he and a senior officer reached a village with a view of the Nanga Parbat. After the funeral and last rites had been performed, they sat with the people of the community where one villager asked if they could request a favour. He was wondering what they would ask for; better cell phone coverage, a steady supply of electricity, a road, a telephone line?

Their living situation being what it was, there were no wrong answers – any request would have seemed reasonable. The villager asked for a school for his village. In spite of the fact that a career in the army generally leaves no shortage of memorable events and adventures, eight years later my family friend recalls this as one of his life’s most moving experiences.

According to figures from 2018, the literacy rate in Pakistan is 62.3 percent. Broken up across the provinces it turns out AJK’s literacy rate of 74 percent is second only to Islamabad’s (85 percent), with Punjab (64.7 percent), Sindh (62.2 percent), Balochistan (55.5 percent) and KP (55.3 percent) bringing up the rear.

More recently, this same family friend had the opportunity to meet the prime minister of AJK at a dinner. At an opportune moment he put the following question to him: “As someone born and raised in AJK yourself, how do you explain Kashmiri people’s drive for education reflected in its higher literacy rate?”

In reply, the prime minister offered a sensible explanation – Kashmiris, particularly those in mountainous regions, live hard lives that require a lot of effort just to get by. The local economy is small, and opportunities to make a good living are limited. This is in stark contrast with life in major cities and agricultural Punjab and Sindh. When someone from their community manages to get a good education, they often witness him/her gradually uplifting the entire family. The people in these hard areas, perhaps more than the people of any other region, realize that a good education is their children’s ticket to a better life.

Last week my work took me to Chitral and adjoining areas. For school-going children of all ages, their daily route can only be described as an uphill hike. Some of the children I talked to described 45-60-minute walks to school as routine in the area. Further north, in Upper Chitral, the time children walk to school grows to several hours (one way!). Cultural differences aside, like Kashmiris, Chitralis understand the importance of education and send their children to school, despite the harsh challenges.

The experience of meeting and talking to locals (in some cases with their families) made me realize the fundamental importance of roads in not only connecting their economies to the larger national economy, connecting people to opportunities, but also to grow the service radius of schools. It is more beneficial and more economical, in the long run, to build an all-weather road than to replicate social services like schools, colleges, hospitals, etc.

Road connectivity in and between towns and valleys is poor, as roads are generally dilapidated, poorly marked, and plied by reckless drivers. The nearest schools are often at great distances, which means that these roads are walked by children upwards of five years, often for as much as an hour, endangering them every school day. The road that connects Chitral with lower lying areas verges on barely usable, which is why most visitors arrive by plane.

I am not a civil engineer, but I consulted an army engineer who has spent some years maintaining road connectivity in the most difficult terrain in the north. While there are some areas that will inevitably be cut off in winters or where the only reliable way to ensure year-round access are major investments into tunnels, many more places could be served by constructing and maintaining decent roads.

This assessment is borne out by the example to our eastern border. India has been maintaining a good road network in similarly difficult mountainous regions, albeit for military reasons, for a few decades now.

When I asked locals to name any significant recent development delivered to their area by their elected representatives or influential locals, no one could give me any. In my wider exploration of the area to Garam Chashma in the northwest (Lower Chitral), Kalash valleys in the southwest of Chitral town, to Booni further up north in Upper Chitral, I could not find any evidence of significant development anywhere – no recently built roads.

To my astonishment, only dirt roads lead to the two Kalash valleys (Bumburet and Rumbur). At one point a road sign tells the distance to the three Kalash valleys of Bumburet, Rumbur, and Birir as 10, 12, and 15 kms, respectively. City dwellers can be forgiven for thinking they have almost reached their destination, but the slow, painfully bumpy, dusty, uphill drive takes another 45 minutes (to Rumbert and Rumbur) and much more than an hour to Birir – and this is just to get to the closest end of the three valleys. Farther parts are even less accessible and, therefore, not frequented by tourists. If getting to Kalash valleys, touted as one of our most treasured tourist destinations, is so difficult, one can imagine how difficult it must be to reach other parts of the district.

My local driver rightly pointed out that the average life of an ordinary car in the area is much shorter than it is in ‘down country’ (to my amusement, many locals refer to areas below Lowari tunnel as down country). This is the main reason why rental cars are very expensive in Chitral. So, what are development priorities for this area and many others like it?

As if to answer my question, while I was still there, Chitral was graced with a visit by the present chairman of the National Tourism Coordination Board, Zulfi Bukhari. He was there for the groundbreaking ceremony of a five-star hotel being set up by a private investor, a welcome development. The chairman arrived by the same airport (not in a commercial flight but in a private jet!) and moved on the same miserable roads as I did.

Surely, the irony of how poorly connected and hard to reach this aspirational vacation destination is to the rest of the country could not have been lost on him. Visitors will want to get out and enjoy the area, not just want to lounge around a hotel all day, no matter how nice it may be. The fact is that a road to and in Chitral (and similar areas) could solve all kinds of problems for its inhabitants.