



In the Shadows of the Pine

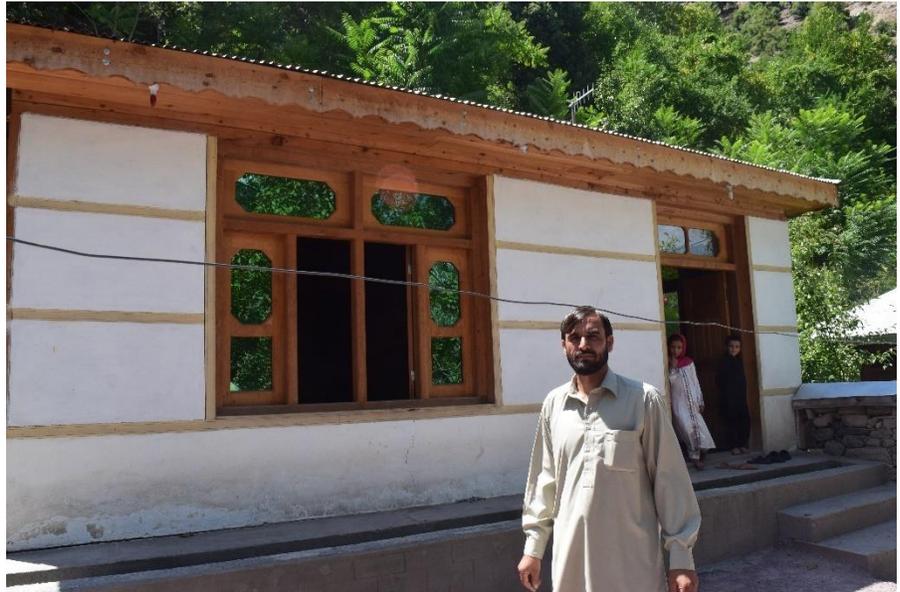
“It was really heart pinching that after all this hard work for collecting pine nuts, a bag was worth so little. We had no linkages with the outer world and the only option was to sell the nuts collected through hardship and life risks on the price fixed by a broker. I was living from hand to mouth, there was no house, no fodder for animals, and no money for cultivation. Now together with the other producers, we turned the market forces in our favor. I took the role to roast pine nuts locally so that producers can fetch a better price with value added product from the source. Today I have my own shop and constructed my own house. Even the vehicle I drive is earning money as people rent it for transportation.”

Abdur Rehman - Pine Nut Association, village Birga Nisar, Shishikoh valley, District Chitral.

Village Birga Nisar has to be seen to be believed. It is situated at the heart of the beautiful mountainous valley of Shishikoh in District Chitral and is famous for its pine nuts. Survival in this area is not easy as the climate is harsh, winters are severe and the access becomes locked during winters without means to health

and other services. Despite all odds and hardship, Abdur Rehman a native to Birga Nisar still loves his land, "I want my generation to survive and thrive well just the way we did". His livelihood has been dependent on the pine nuts since the last two generations, at the very least, "My first source of earning was pine nuts. I used to collect them all day during the season (month of October for Birga Nisar), climbing the tall trees of pine on steep slopes. I was not properly trained but, looking at my father, I learnt how to pick the pine cones". He along with his fellow workers would climb the hard, tall trunks of the high pines, without any safety measures to collect a few pine cones so as to be able to make ends meet. Many of his friends have received injuries, including himself, from minor to deadly. He recalled three friends who had died due to their injuries.

Lured by the pine nuts, brokers from different part of the country would come to the village to buy on nominal prices. "We are such a simple lot", recalls Abdur Rehman, "all that risky hard work, and one bag of pine nuts would fetch us only PKR 250. The brokers, mainly from the Bannu region, were really exploiting the situation. We had no linkages with the outer world and were not aware of the market rates so the only option was to sell the nuts at the price fixed by the brokers". It was only much later that he learnt how badly they were being cheated as the rates for pine nuts are much higher in the markets outside of Chitral. The situation remained the same until the LP



project representatives came to the valley. Realising pine nuts to be the major source of livelihoods for the locals and also the fact that this expensive delicacy was being harvested unsustainably due to lack of knowledge and tools, the locals were encouraged to form a group to be able to think collectively. This group or 'the Pine Nut Association' was established under the auspices of which, the members were trained in different sustainable methods of picking pine nuts, roasting and then selling the product. All this resulted in improving the quality of pine nuts. According to Abdur Rehman, "the main success was in providing exposure visits to the potential markets in different parts of the country which just opened up our eyes". The markets in Gilgit and Zhob gave Abdur Rehman an insight into the market actors, whole sale market proceedings and market rates.

Realising what pine nut could bring in to their lives was like a wake-up call, "now the middle-man cannot manipulate as before. Because of the links established, the information is just phone call away from us. If we (the Association) agree, then we even give some discount if we like, when he comes to pick the produce at our door step". This knowledge has given a much-needed boost to the pine nut business in the area. Abdur Rehman narrates an incidence, "Once when we checked the market rate, we saw that there was a difference to the rate being offered by the middle man. While in Bannu and Lahore markets pine nut was sold for PKR 1,400 per kg, in Swat it was PKR 1,300 and in Peshawar it fetched PKR 1,100. So judging and weighing our decisions, we sometimes send our products directly to the markets and for that purpose we calculate and estimate which market is more feasible and profitable".

The LPH provided the Association with the roasting machine, showed proper way of storage, grading and roasting the pine nuts and also trained on packaging and maintaining the weight per bag. Previously, the nuts were sold according to the number of bags and not by weight. Now one bag is sold at a price of PKR 5,000 instead of the PKR 250 Rehman mentioned. Filling a bag irrespective of the weight often pushed towards loss. So the group was trained to prepare bags weighing not more than 100 kg so as to standardize volume through weight.

Most importantly, as harvesting itself is a dangerous activity, Abdur Rehman says that they “heaved a sigh of relief when we received the harvesting tools from the project”. Injuries and losses dramatically minimized. “There are safety belts to prevent us from falling down the trees, gloves to use when handling the pine cones and rough branches”. When asked about the climate, Abdur Rehman says “since my childhood I have observed many changes in the village especially climate. Now the flood inundates every year destroying the water channels, agriculture land, fruit trees, orchards and houses and we try to restore them at our own. I also grow maize on my land and the flood damaged my standing crop. The cost of damage was approximately PKR 60 to 70 thousand. Fodder is very expensive here so is not feasible to keep buffaloes. I had two cows but one of them died. We also dry tomatoes and onions to consume in the winter season”.

“In the early 2000; I was living from hand to mouth, there was no house and no money for cultivating the seasonal crops. Now I have my family, my own shop, constructed my own house, own a vehicle which I drive as a hired service. I also work as a trainer on pine nut. World Wildlife Fund (WWF) often hires me for the trainings. I am payed PKR 2,000 a day. Recently I went to Balochistan to deliver trainings. All this is possible due to my pine nut business”, says a happy Abdur Rehman.

