

Desilting Bein Nadi: Guru Nanak Inspires Baba

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HIS EMPHASIS ON THE environmental message in *Gurbani* has struck a chord with the people. "Offering practical solutions to society's needs has more sanctity than mere preaching," he says with characteristic pragmatism.

It was this *self-help credo* that launched Baba Seechewal into *the project for the revival of the Kali Bein at Sultanpur Lodhi, where Guru Nanak spent time and is believed to have attained enlightenment while bathing in the Bein*. With the religious and historical significance of the rivulet forgotten, it had turned into a weed-choked, garbage dump. Three years ago. Seechewal began by cleaning the 3-km-long, stagnant stretch of the Bein between two historic gurdwaras at Sultanpur Lodhi. In less than two years the ugly site was turned into a beautiful landscape: clean Bein, stone-lined, leafy embankment, walkways with flowerbeds and fountains. But the fresh water still eluded the Bein because its source had long dried up.

Fed by seepage water and overflow from the Beas, the Kali Bein originates near Hoshiarpur district and meanders along the Beas before merging with it about 13 km from Sultanpur Lodhi. An important feature of the tributary is the Kanjli wetland about 4 km from Kapurthala. Besides being a source of water for agriculture, the Bein had been at the heart of a key ecosystem that formed a natural flood drain and recharged ground water in the region. But this changed three decades ago when a bund along the Beas blocked the source of the Bein.

Encroachments by farmers, silt deposition and wild growth virtually obliterated the Bein's course at many places. In the absence of fresh water even the Kanjli wetland – abode of migratory fowls from Siberia – faced serious threat. The Mukerian Hydrel Channel, close to the Bein's origin, was identified as a possible source of water but the bigger challenge of clearing the blockages remained. The government was wary of removing encroachments on the rivulet bed and angering the farmers who suspected the Bein water would flood their fields. It was then that the authorities, impressed with Seechewal's work in Sultanpur Lodhi, roped him in. "Given the scale of his social work and commitment to the cause of the Bein, he was the only hope for us," says Rakesh Verma, deputy commissioner of Kapurthala.

While the government provided initial logistical support, Seechewal mobilised his followers and local people. Soon villages, particularly on the Bein's periphery, pitched in with workers and machinery. Beginning with 50-odd followers, Seechewal's call for kar seva on what he calls "*Babe di nadi*" (Guru Nanak's river) is drawing a huge response with the number of volunteers touching 5,000 a day on occasion. A bulk of the funding for the project has come from NRIs. "The motivation made the manpower more effective than the machinery," says Seechewal. Wading through sewage-polluted and snake infested waters, the volunteers manually removed hundreds of tons of water hyacinth, while the farmers used their tractors to dredge out the silt from the bottom to widen and deepen the Bein's course.

It took less than a year for Seechewal to complete the clean-up job—a task that the Drainage Department, notorious for fund seepage, would have taken years to do and for many times the cost. "The quality of work and the pace at which Seechewal achieved it is simply incomparable," says Verma.

Baba Balbir Singh Seechewal is no ordinary construction site supervisor. In Kapurthala district of Punjab, he is popularly called the “ecological saint”, who is on a unique mission to clean up the 176-km-long Kali Bein rivulet and shore up its embankment. While the state government couldn’t afford to undertake the task due to the sheer scale of effort and resources required, 42-year-old Seechewal, who heads a little-known religious sect, single handedly mobilised the residents of villages close to the lost rivulet for *kar seva* by invoking its religious sanctity. His dogged voluntary efforts have also rescued a severely threatened ecosystem in Punjab.

A stocky figure with salt-and-pepper beard in ochre robes supervises construction work along a dry riverbed. With sweat pouring down the sunburnt face, he issues instructions, occasionally glancing at the clutch of musty maps rolled up under his arm.

If it is uncommon for godmen to invoke religion to carry out an ecological crusade, it is equally rare for religious heads to figure in a presidential address to the nation. Seechewal’s initiative impressed President A.P.J. Abdul Kalam so much that he lauded his work in his speech on National Technology Day. Seechewal is quite unlike the ubiquitous Babas who confine themselves to *kar seva* of religious shrines for cash and clout. This college dropout prefers to concentrate solely on community development projects. His passion for mobilising *kar seva* for building *kutcha* roads and bridges in rural areas has earned him the sobriquets of “Sarakwala Baba” and “Welfare Baba” among the locals.

For the first time in living memory, the Bein gurgled with water in June last year. “Having cleaned the Bein themselves, the people will not let it become polluted or go dry again,” says Seechewal. The impact of his awareness campaign is sinking in. While the towns and villages along the Bein have stopped dumping sewage into it, Sultanpur Lodhi has come up with its own sewage treatment plant.

The ecological benefits from the River Bein’s revival are evident. The drying up for the one-time perennial channel had led to water logging in the villages upstream, while the catchment areas downstream witnessed a steady decline in the water table. The trend has been reversed since fresh water started flowing in it. “The Bein has again become a lifeline for us,” says Resham Singh, sarpanch of Muktranwala, one of the 250 villages benefiting from it.

Nothing succeeds like success. While Baba Seechewal is focusing on the next phase of the *kar seva* on the last 13 km stretch beyond Sultanpur Lodhi, the state Government has supplemented his efforts by increasing the release of water to 200 cusec a year, declaring it the “holy Bein” and setting up a committee to develop the Kanjli wetland.

However “Beinwala Baba” – a new sobriquet Seechewal has earned doesn’t think his job is over. “There is still a lot to be done to beautify mother earth,” he says passionately. By channelising people’s power, the saviour of the Bein has shown how the tide of faith can be used for social good.

[Courtesy: *India Today*]

