

Dead river comes to life

Balbir Singh Seechewal's efforts give Punjab village a significant facelift

Geetika Bhagat

Before 1960s, the 160-km-long Kali Bein river in the village of Sultanpur Lodhi in Kapurthala district of Punjab was a healthy source of water for the locals. The river was also an object of reverence for it is believed that Guru Nanak had bathed in it every day for 15 years before laying the foundation of Sikhism.

The 60s saw industrialisation take place in the state and with it began the degeneration of the river. It was filled with garbage and industrial waste and thanks to the apathy of administration, by 90s the river was virtually transformed into a drain full of stagnant water that emitted foul smell.

When people thought that the river was nearing its death, it was Balbir Singh Seechewal who took up the task of cleaning up the river. A college dropout, Seechewal had already given up the material world for "environmental spiritualism" and was known in the region as *Rodda wala Baba* (saint of the roads) for his missionary zeal to make pathways and connect people. When he heard of the river's plight, he volunteered to battle on its behalf and started work on July 29, 2000.

"Without water there is no life. Water is not just water but a scared purifier for the human kind. If water would be clean, humanity would flourish or otherwise simply perish. Kali Bein has been associated with Guru Nanak so we should have respected it and taken good care of it but unfortunately we did everything opposite. We changed that river into a sewer. The condition was so bad that no one ever used to go near it. It was so smelly and full of waste," says he.

Having made up his mind to restore the dignity of the river and make it alive again, Seechewal called his followers (*Israr sevaks*) and got down to work. As Seechewal continued

with his mission, people got inspired by his obsession and joined in, first in trickles and then in huge waves.

"We held a conference in Jalandhar and decided to take things forward. We visited all the homes in the village and asked the people not to throw garbage into the river. We also asked the officials to take care that industrial waste is not thrown into the river. Apart from cleaning it, we also restored the flow of the water that had become stagnant," he adds. Three years later, Seechewal went into the second phase of his cleaning up

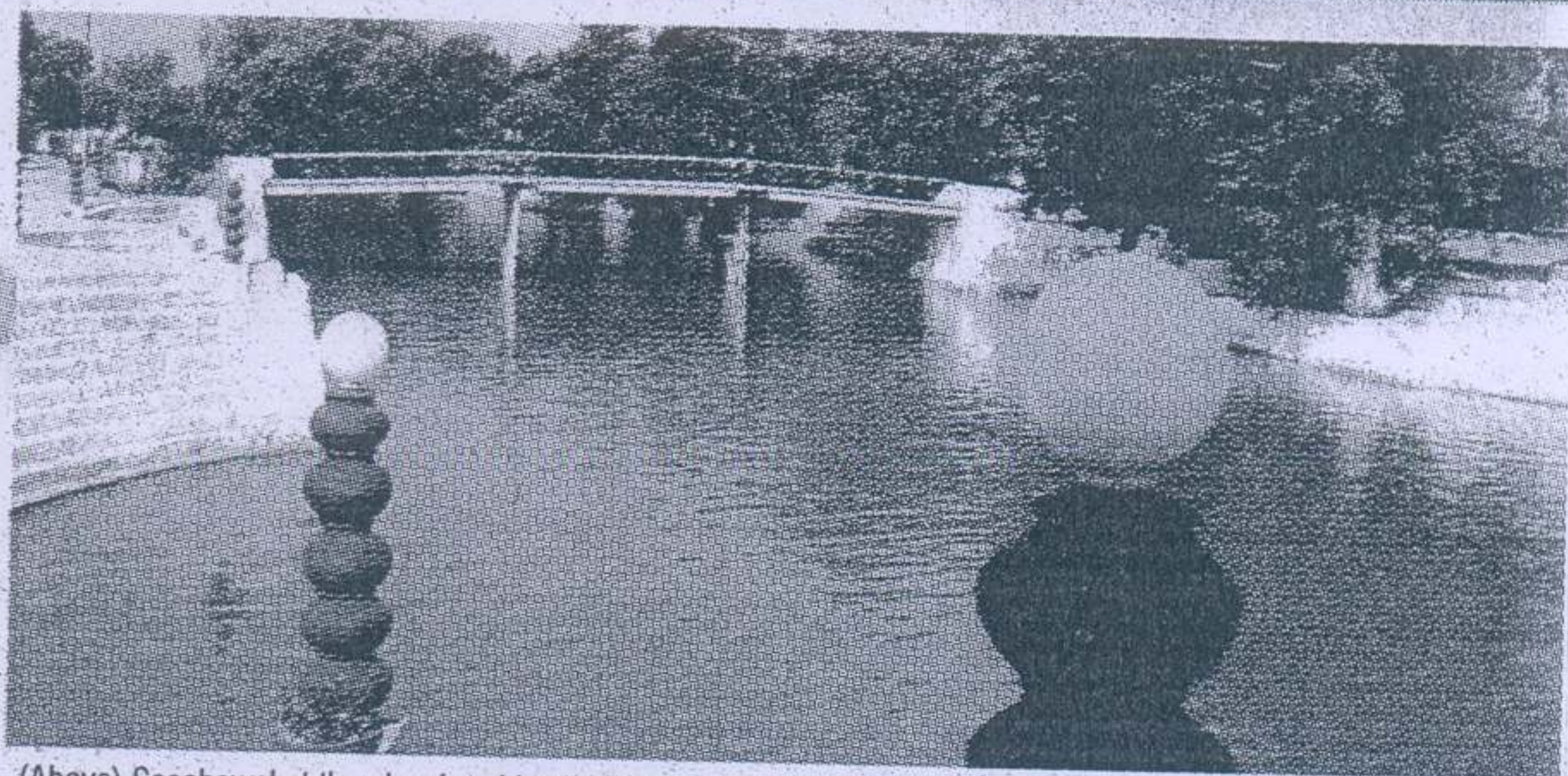
campaign and stretched his efforts till Dhanao, the river's starting point. Encouraged by Seechewal efforts, thousands of people lined up to help for the 'saint of the roads' who had made environmental activism trendy. Everyone wanted to be seen cleaning the Kali Bein.

By the beginning of 2006, the project was seeing unprecedented success. The *Kar Seva*, that's what people called the mission, entered a new phase where bed of the 35 km stretch of the river was deepened. "As the river began to get cleaner and cleaner, it began to come

back to life. And with it returned the happiness," says Seechewal.

The results of his hard labour are for all to see. The perennial problem of water pollution is no more and sewer water is being treated for use in irrigation. "We import fertilizers from other countries but we don't know that we've enough in our own country. It feels nice when you do something for your country, mankind and the environment," says Seechewal.

Bisht and Seechewal will feature in *Unsung Heroes* to be aired on 9X today



(Above) Seechewal at the cleaning drive on the banks of Kali Bein (below) The river after it's cleaned

The ruling BJP though wants to believe otherwise, with Dholi falling in the supply scheme area of the Narmada water canal. Says local MLA Kiritsinh Rana: "We are providing them Narmada water and there is no scarcity in the village. The village earthen used to face a water problem, but that is not the case now."

However, District Water Supply

"Walk into any home and you will easily get a meal for free. But nobody will give you a bucket of water," says Ganga Chauhan, sitting protectively on the side of her own well near the pond. "We cannot let this water be stolen, so we keep watch after locking it up, because every home here is hard up for water and some might try and steal it."

While Dholi does have a public water-storage tank, the villagers have never seen it full since it was built two years ago. "We get piped water at the only outlet in the village for barely half

While Dholi falls
in the supply scheme area of the Narmada canal, Water Supply Board officials say that this village, in addition to some others, suffers as it is located at the end of the supply scheme

Board (DWSB) officials admit that it isn't as simple as that. Dholi village was earlier getting some water as part of the Panshina Group Water Supply Scheme, but subsequently it was made a part of the Laxmisar Group Scheme, which draws water from the Vallabhipur Branch Canal of the Narmada main canal. The board officials say that with the village being at the tail end of the water supply scheme, water just doesn't reach there with enough pressure.

N V Patel, chairman of the Sardar Sarovar Narmada Nigam Ltd

an hour. The pressure is always so low that there are fights and quarrels at the outlet," says Prabhuhai Gami. "The situation is such that people have stopped marrying their daughters into our village."

The quality of the water too is a problem, says Prabhu Gami. Many in the village suffer from kidney stones and other ailments.

DWSB Deputy Engineer P P Gupta says the water board has been planning to find a solution by setting up a pumping station closer. He promises it will happen "soon".

(SSNNL), expresses ignorance about these villagers not benefiting from the Narmada canal which, he points out, has ensured regular potable water to over 5,000 villages across the state. "We provide water to the water supply board wherever they need it. I don't know why Dholi or these villages are not getting water from the Narmada canal. You had better ask the water supply board people," he says.

The village sarpanch, Dahyabhai Bawaliya, says they have tried all of that. "We have been complaining for

so many years to the water supply board and the local politicians. Nothing has ever worked," he says.

"Our forefathers taught us to dig wells around the village pond during summers to get water," says villager Prabhuhai Gami. "In monsoon, all these wells get sunk in the pond, and every year we make new ones."

Around the village pond one can see many of those wells that have come up this summer, each carefully covered with a wooden lid and a padlock, and none left unwatched, day or night.

Amid Narmada 'bounty', village keeps water under lock and key

At the tail end of the water supply scheme, Dholi gets a trickle, guards its pond and wells day and night

PARIMAL DABHI

DHOLI (SURENDRANAGAR),

JUNE 1

IN summer, water is a precious commodity in many parts of the country. But at Dholi village in Limbdi taluka, one of the driest villages of Gujarat's parched Surendranagar district, water is so scarce that they guard it with their lives.

If women and children keep a watch over the small village pond with its meagre amount of potable water, at night, the men not only lock up their wells but sleep over the wooden lids as well, to ensure nobody tries breaking in and stealing water.

In this village of around 4,000, life has always been this way, even as the state sets itself up as a model for development. Dholi does not have even a proper approach road, with hardly a government official dropping by.

Besides Dholi, there are many more parched villages in the region that are left praying for the monsoons every summer when the sun saps the ponds and wells and bakes the fields into dry, cracked hectares — such as Kamalpur, Wakhatpur, Anandpur, Devpura, Karsangadh and more. This happens when the Narmada canal brings succour to thousands of others not far away.



Prabhuhai Gami from Dholi village takes no chances when it comes to his well.

JAVED RAJA