



Environmentalist Baba Balbir Singh Seechewal in Jalandhar.

ECO BABA

By Barney Roster

When no one else, not even the local government, did anything about a polluted river, one man took the task upon himself. Kali Bein, a river located in the district of Punjab, fell victim to pollution and was becoming a dying river. The once mighty river was reduced to a drain due to various pollutants. Waste from villages along the 160km river, as well as from

farms and various factories were indiscriminately dumped into it.

This was a huge **desecration** of the river where Guru Nanak, the founder of the Sikh order had once bathed in. Unable to bear the pain of seeing this anymore, Sant Balbir Singh Seechewal took action. The Sikh priest started appealing to the local government in Punjab to do something but

nothing was done. Undeterred by the inaction, Sant Balbir Singh, also known by his nickname Eco Baba, took matters into his own hands, literally.

In early 2000, Sant Balbir Singh started an environmental campaign on his own initiative to educate the communities that lived near the river on the importance of the river. As people became more aware, the pollution lessened. He then started to gather volunteers, mostly children from neighbouring villages to start clearing up the water hyacinth and rubbish from the water. Being a man who was true to his word, he joined his volunteers, knee deep,

clearing rubbish and water hyacinth together with his volunteers.

Due to their effort, clean, fresh water started to fill Kali Bein again. Water was now flowing, and the **ecosystem** of fish and other aquatic life came back to the river. As the river flourished once more, the local government started taking notice of his efforts to clean the river and started to pay attention to its conservation.

Sant Balbir did not stop there. To ensure that the river would continue to remain clean for many years to come, he planted many trees and built many bathing stairs along the river. These not only helped to strengthen



Sant Balbir cleaning the river with fellow volunteers.



Sant Balbir talking about his work.

the riverbank but also allowed the people who lived near the river to enjoy the river that they had helped to **conserve** .

Unfortunately, a few years after the river was cleaned up, disaster struck. Sewerage waste from several villages started to spill into the river again. As a result, aquatic life died and the river once again became polluted. **Undeterred** by this, Sant Balbir developed an underground sewerage system. This system, developed together with the combined efforts of volunteers from many villages, would channel and treat solid waste from sewage ponds safely. The product from this was to be used for agriculture

and irrigation purposes, as opposed to funnelling them into the river.

Recently, the Sant Avtar Singh Yadgari Technical Research Centre, an institute under the guidance of Sant Balbir had a new breakthrough. They came up with a machine that can treat solid waste such as glass, iron and plastic from waste without harming the environment. The best feature of this machine is that it can be produced at a very low cost, allowing governments and small towns to have cleaner environments. This **initiative** is a testament of Sant Balbir's commitment to the environment and for the long-term benefit of the community. In addition to



Kali Bein river today.

the river's amenities and the institute, Sant Balbir has also built many schools and colleges for the benefit of the locals in the area.

The amazing story of Sant Balbir's efforts to revive Kali Bein is extraordinary, especially his approach on the issue. It is clear that he wanted more than just a clean river as he also took

into consideration the long-term benefits to the local people by providing them with much needed education. He wanted to ensure that the next generation of villagers would be able to sustain themselves and the community. It is this sort of forward thinking that we must employ when developing solutions for any problem.

LEVEL: **B2**

desecration (n) - treatment with no respect

conserve (v) - to use or manage (natural resources) wisely;
preserve; save

ecosystem (n) - a system involving the natural surroundings/
environment

initiative (n) - one's personal, responsible decision

undeterred (a) - not losing hope, refusing to be stopped