

## NRI's rise to the call of their motherland

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This is a follow-up on "A silent movement", which has dug its feet in Punjab. Readers would recall that the media in general and The Tribune in particular had informed them about the beautiful story of a wretched, neglected village, Kharaudi, having been turned into a role-model village for the entire country by the efforts of devoted NRIs of the same village.

Kharaudi has not only proved to be a source of motivation but also an unprecedented example of the saying "Where there is a will there is a way". Many sons of this soil had immigrated to various parts of the world and achieved enviable and admirable positions. Their love for their motherland and specially their village would often bring them back home. Only, the home-coming, was never a pleasant experience — stagnant water in the filthy streets, power cuts, no school and only diseases greeted them.

Back to their civilised world, they would bemoan about the plight of their village. It was this agony, which one day beckoned these NRI sons of Kharaudi to sit down and resolve the fate of their village.

These Kharaudians rose to the call of their mother in an unprecedented manner. Within no time, Rs 50 lakh was collected and out of it nearly Rs 20 lakh was donated by the families of Dr R S Bassi and Dr Gurdev Singh Gill. Thus was born the Village-life Improvement Board (VLIB). While, Dr Bassi was chosen as the Chairperson of the Board, Dr Gill and Dr Sukhdev Singh Bassi were elected as president and treasurer, respectively.

Dr Bassi is a Harvard graduate in finance and business administration. He had risen to the position of Vice-Chancellor of Alaska Pacific University. Dr Gill, on the other hand, had left India in 1949 after completing his high school. He studied medicine in Canada and became the first doctor of Indian origin to start private practice. But he soon got involved in community work and was awarded the 'Order of the British Columbia'.

With Rs 50 lakh in their pockets, these NRIs, driven with a passion to develop their neglected village, approached the then Chief Minister, Parkash Singh Badal. Though he promised them a matching grant for fulfilling their dreams, they were aghast at the rampant corruption down the line, where in, BDOs, SDOs and engineers were hand in glove in looting the state. "The estimates these people prepared were beyond our liberal costing. For instance, for replacing broken PVC pipes of water supply, these officials gave an estimate of Rs 8 lakh. We found it to be too high and went ahead with our own effort. We completed the work at a cost of Rs 1.50 lakh. Similarly, for laying the sewerage line in the village, we were given an estimate of Rs 22 lakh. We again found it to be exaggerated and went ahead with our own and succeeded in completing not only the sewerage line but also the connections to 200 houses in mere Rs 11 lakh", disclosed Dr Gill.

Aware and enlightened, they resolved to keep Punjab government's red-tapism at bay. "We told them in no uncertain terms that it is up to the government to trust or



Dr R.S. Bassi



Dr G.S. Gill

not to trust us with the matching grant but we shall work on our conditions. We would not allow any joint account with the government for the corrupt government employees to slap red-tapism on us", recalls Dr Gurdev Singh Gill.

Dr Gill and Dr Bassi began working on the project titled, "Nurture Your Roots" in September 1999. Within three years the village was transformed beyond recognition. Today, it has concrete streets connecting each house. The sewerage line flows through the village with a concrete cover on it. Each house has an outlet into it. Unlike most of our state government's half-baked ideas of engineering, the sewerage water has not been allowed to pollute at its final disposal point. They made sure that the sewerage water treatment plant was included in the project.

The resounding success of Kharaudi as a super model village is being replicated by these very NRIs. Besides Ujjal Dosanj, the then Premier of British Columbia, the present Minister of Natural Resources of Canada, Harbans Singh Dhaliwal, have visited Kharaudi. The VLIB is hopeful that the present Premier of British Columbia will also come forward to give a matching grant for uplifting the other villages in Punjab. They have already 10 more villages: two in Sangrur, one in Patiala, five in Hoshiarpur, one in Kapurthala and one in Jalandhar. "The response to our projects by Capt. Amarinder Singh is overwhelming. We had a meeting with him and he has sanctioned Rs 6 crore for the proposed development of 10 additional villages over a period of two years. But I must say that this Chief Minister believes in results. For, he has already ordered Rs 3 crore to be released to us within this fiscal year, which means before the end of March. This also means that we shall be able to implement our project much faster", said a beaming Dr Gill.

There is yet another heartening development, thanks to the efforts of Dr Gurdev Singh Gill and Dr Raghbir Singh Bassi. The Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), a government organisation, has also in principle agreed to give matching grants to improve the fate of Punjab's villages. Interestingly, the CIDA has already released \$ 58,000 for village Behrampur in mandi Ahmedgarh. One of the aims of the CIDA is to work overseas and give grants for development and poverty alleviation. Taking a lead from the NRIs of Kharaudi, Anantpal Singh, who had immigrated from Behrampur, has also given \$50,000 to the VLIB for the development of his native village.