

OFFTRACK: HOSHIARPUR, PUNJAB

The Dollar Look

NRIs change the face of their ancestral villages, not just their homes

By Ramesh Vinayak

Palatial houses with tin-coated dish antennas and fancy water tanks against a rural backdrop are nothing new. Neither is the possibility of the Indian diaspora nurturing such pictures of prosperity. A steady flow of remittances from NRIs over the years has turned several old homes into new, drastically transforming the lives of those whom they left behind. In some villages, entire rows of houses stand as monuments of expatriate largesse, defying the stagnation and squalor of their surroundings.



THE PRODIGAL SONS: Gill and Basi (right) are nurturing their roots

It is this paradox that struck two NRIs on one of their visits to native Kharoudi in Hoshiarpur district of Punjab some years ago. At an age when nostalgia drives most first-generation immigrants to undertake periodic trips, Gurdev Singh Gill, a 71-year-old physician from Vancouver, and Alaska-based Raghbir Singh Basi, 74, made an exception. They planned a winter sojourn with a different purpose: to change the face of the village itself.

Cowdung litter, muddy roads, no lights, overflowing drains—the amenities and infrastructure that Kharoudi had were a mockery on the much-touted opulence of many of its residents. Today, thanks to an innovative programme initiated by Gill and Basi, there has been a complete turnaround. The village landscape wears a "dollar look" and includes concrete and solar-lit streets, an underground sewerage, a sewage-treatment plant, three parks and a village square with a 20-ft clock tower.

In what has proved to be an effective model of development, the Kharoudi Lifestyle Improvement Project adopts the multiplicity approach—a judicious mix of western and indigenous inputs at all levels from technology transfer to decision-making. "Our strategy," explains Basi, who retired as professor of economic development administration at Alaska Pacific University, "has been to create stakeholders among the locals and the NRIs for the common cause." The Rs 1-crore project began in 1999 with sanitation as its focus. Almost immediately it received a boost when the then chief minister Parkash Singh Badal promised a "dollar-for-dollar" matching grant. A board comprising NRIs and representatives from the panchayat was also constituted to monitor the progress of the project.

Since NRI donations were crucial for take-off, Gill and Basi networked extensively with their family members and other Indians in Britain, Canada and the US. A windfall of

Canadian \$12,000 (Rs 3.7 lakh) came at a fund-raiser party at Vancouver where some 400 expatriates turned up. Those contributing Rs 1 lakh or more were promised an inscription of their names on a "pillar of appreciation" in the village square. So far, the pillar carries the names of 30 NRIs, including Gill and Basi.

Impressed by the NRIs' zeal, the district administration provided the necessary back-up for the implementation of the project. The locals too pitched in with labour and machinery. While the panchayat was involved in the execution, the project funds were kept out of its ambit in a bid to prevent corruption. As a result, the project was not only completed on time but also at a cost lesser than envisaged.

Getting things in place, however, was only part of the task at hand. Conscious that upkeep of the infrastructure was the key to its utility, the board kept aside a corpus of Rs 10 lakh for the purpose. "It has been a dream come true," says sarpanch Ram Das. "Now even the air in the village smells differently." Among the other visible spin-offs has been the obliteration of open drains which has meant a fall in the number of mosquitoes and the incidence of malaria. With the sanitation work completed, the new focus is on education. Already, five rooms have been added to the village primary school which will soon get computers.

Enthused by the sea change in Kharoudi, neighbouring villages too are embarking on similar projects. Recently, Union Minister for Rural Development Shanta Kumar spoke of how the Kharoudi experience should be replicated elsewhere. Herb Dhaliwal, minister of natural resources in Canada, has in fact agreed to fund a massive plan to improve 10 villages in Punjab. The projects will be funded by the Canadian International Development Agency, the Punjab Government and a group of NRIs. With funding not a problem-Behrampur in Ludhiana district has already got a grant of \$50,000 (Rs 24 lakh) for a start-up project-it won't be long before more Kharoudis spring up across Punjab. "But ultimately, it's not the dollars that matter," clarifies Basi. It's the "can-do spirit" that does.