

Seechewal's MOMENT OF TRUTH

The holy man is now an officer of the government. How will that change him?

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The moment of truth may soon arrive for Baba Balbir Singh Seechewal. The austere man who hesitates to call himself a sant and speaks a language simple enough for rustic villagers to understand his mission has been made a member of the Punjab Pollution Control Board, an agency of the state government which has not only singularly failed to make a meaningful intervention in the domain it was meant to keep a watch over but has also become a den of corruption.

In a move many think is aimed at co-opting a rather lone but effective voice of dissent and to bring him into the establishment fold, the Prakash Singh Badal government has made Seechewal a PPCB member. Seechewal has accepted, though it is clear that more often than not, his efforts at working with the government on any venture have met with frustrating results and he has little faith in the honest will of the government to make a difference.

To those around him, Seechewal has said that he will neither change his stance nor his working style. But the state's powers at spreading the net wide and providing justifications for status quo are immense, and the religious baba famous for cleaning up the Kali Bein will be watched closely. It is to be seen whether he too soon sees the great merits of schemes like Nanhi Chhanv and is used to further the agenda of the House of Badals or whether he retains his capacity of not mincing words.

Incidentally, Seechewal's induction into the PPCB almost coincided with the passage of the SEZ bill that ensures that the pollution control authorities will have no role to play in the industrial units' functioning inside the special zones.

How the debate about environment is twisted and pulled out of context was clear from the very first statement that S P Oswal, a prominent industrialist also made a member of the PPCB as industry representative, made to the media. Taking the cliched line of environment versus development, Oswal said there was no conflict of interest as the "society has to progress and also safeguard its environment." What such statements obfuscate is the reality that the debate is between development and development, not environment and development. The real debate is about whose development? Of those who consider the natural resources as a thing to be devoured or those who have learnt to live with the planet?

The PPCB is singularly failed to even put a semblance of regulation

of sewage. About 70 per cent of the water pollution in Punjab is caused by sewage which not only pollutes drains and river water but also affects the ground water in towns and cities. Municipal authorities have completely failed and there is no proper disposal system for treating municipal sewage.

Many sewage treatment plants are hanging fire for want of funds, including the ones that Prakash Singh Badal promised Seechewal in Doaba.

The Pollution Control Board is often a bribe extracting agency for any industry, and with the industry responsible for much pollution, the bribe money runs into hundreds of crores. With the PPCB having identified more than 6,200 water-polluting and 3,500 air-polluting industries as polluting, the signals are too mixed to make any sense for the industry to put the house in order.

In what kind of a situation can a government allow thousands of polluting units to continue to run even as it knows they are causing immense and often irreversible harm? There are arguments aplenty to keep the status quo. The government cannot suddenly shut down the polluting units as it would lead to unemployment, heavy losses to state, even social unrest. The industry needs time to fix the problem. And when all else fails, the standard "We need monitoring stations for all kinds of pollutants" is bandied about.

Baba Seechewal has so far continued to make a simple argument about the dirty brackish water of Sutlej and the much clearer water of Beas. He places two bottles on the table and asks the simple question, "Which way do we want to

choose for our future generations?" Most know the answer. The sad part is that the industry knows the answer too, and perhaps better than most. One way will keep the resources safe for future generations. The other will make some people richer and the future poor.

It chooses the latter. The profit motive succeeds. It is here that Baba Seechewal will have to understand and engage with the larger notions of the debate about environment. It isn't about cleanliness as much of the debate marking the kali Bein project came to be seen as. It is about who owns the resources.

It is about what kind of agriculture we want to carry on. It is about corporatisation of the resources. It is about corporatisation of the agriculture. It is about why Punjab is being pushed into paddy. It is about why GM foods are finding acceptability with the government. It is about the entire model of economy. It is about neo-liberal notions of development. It is about the linear short sighted path that the successive governments are putting Punjab on to.

It is this government that has made Seechewal a part of the plans to control pollution. It does the government



- High levels of ground water contamination in the north Indian state of Punjab are causing DNA to mutate in people, according to a study.
- Poisonous pesticides and heavy metals have entered the food chain. Result: congenital deformities, cancer and kidney damage
- All vehicles of Punjab Vidhan Sabha are without any mandatory pollution certificates.
- All Punjab Roadways buses are without any 'pollution in control' certificates.
- Punjab State Council for Science and Technology report says rapid industrialization and agricultural practices have heavily polluted the fresh water resources of Punjab, both in physio-chemical and biological terms.



- The use of chemical pesticides in the country has increased by more than seventeen times since 1955. The state of Punjab is one of the highest user of these pesticides especially after the ushering in of green revolution. Though the state has only 1.5% landmass of the country, it consumes about 17% of pesticides used in India.

- The Sutlej river stretch from Ludhiana to Harike is the most polluted. Two municipal corporations (Ludhiana and Jalandhar) and 27 municipal councils and notified area committees are discharging municipal wastes into the river.

a lot of credit. What it will do for Baba Seechewal and those who have so far admired his spirit, will, functioning style, wit, and honesty of purpose, is still to be seen.



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