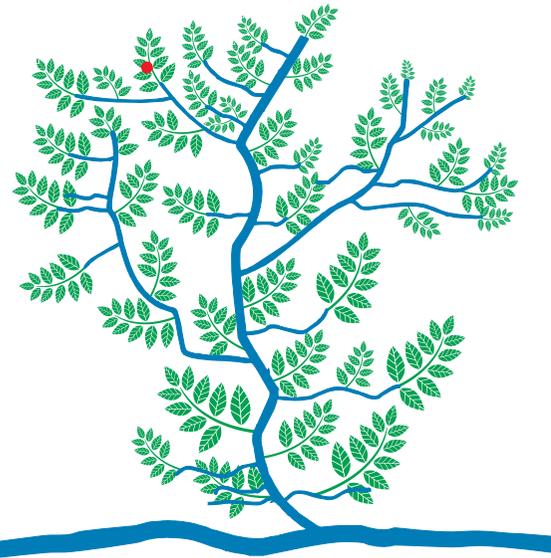


*A valiant attempt to bring  
a sacred river back to life*

## **Paondhoi River**

**CLEAN-UP MISSION:  
A COMMUNITY DRIVEN,  
GOVERNMENT BACKED EFFORT**

# SAHARANPUR



The Paondhoi originates in Sankalapuri village and flows through the city of Saharanpur before meeting the Dhamola River at the outskirts of the city. Legend has it that Baba Lal Das, an ascetic who lived in Saharanpur nearly 300 years ago, practised daily ritual bath in the holy Ganges in Haridwar before accepting any meals. Goddess Ganga, pleased with his devotion, granted his wish by appearing as a stream adjacent to his hut. This stream came to be known as Paondhoi Ganga wherein Baba Lal Das could bathe without the need to travel to Haridwar. Since then, locals have revered the river and the temple of Baba Lal Dass.

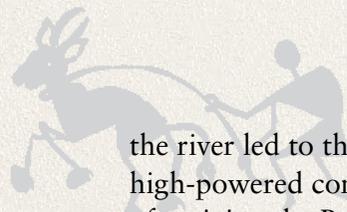
*Paondhoi River Clean-Up **Mission**  
is a joint effort of **citizens** and  
**government** officials to **clean**  
the **sacred river** with a longer term  
**vision** of developing a river front.*

Every year during Ramlila, the scene where Ram, Lakshman and Sita cross the river while returning from Lanka used to be enacted with a symbolic boat pulled across the river as thousands gathered on banks of the river to witness the spectacle. This tradition was discontinued for over 35 years because the river became unfit for this holy ritual. It was only when the river was cleaned in 2010 through the efforts of Paondhoi Bachao Samiti that the annual ceremony was restarted.

### **Non-political movement based on social support**

Reviving the Paondhoi needed the combined efforts of district administration as well as the city residents; a hugely successful clean-up drive was led by the presiding District Magistrate (DM) Alok Kumar in 2010. A meeting held at the Collectorate office on 12<sup>th</sup> May 2010 to deliberate the revival of





the river led to the decision to constitute a high-powered committee for the sole purpose of reviving the Paondhoi River. In order to empower the committee to direct government departments for action, it was decided that the DM would be the Chairperson and Nodal Officer of the “Paondhoi Bachao Samiti” supported by Additional District Magistrate - Administration (ADM-A) as Secretary. Paondhoi Bachao Samiti comprised of equal representation from government specifically district and city administration as well as members from civil society. It was a unique and collaborative effort which had no special budgets allocated. However, existing resources available with Nagar Nigam were to be used for the clean-up drive. It was also agreed that financial support would be requested from the public as and when required.

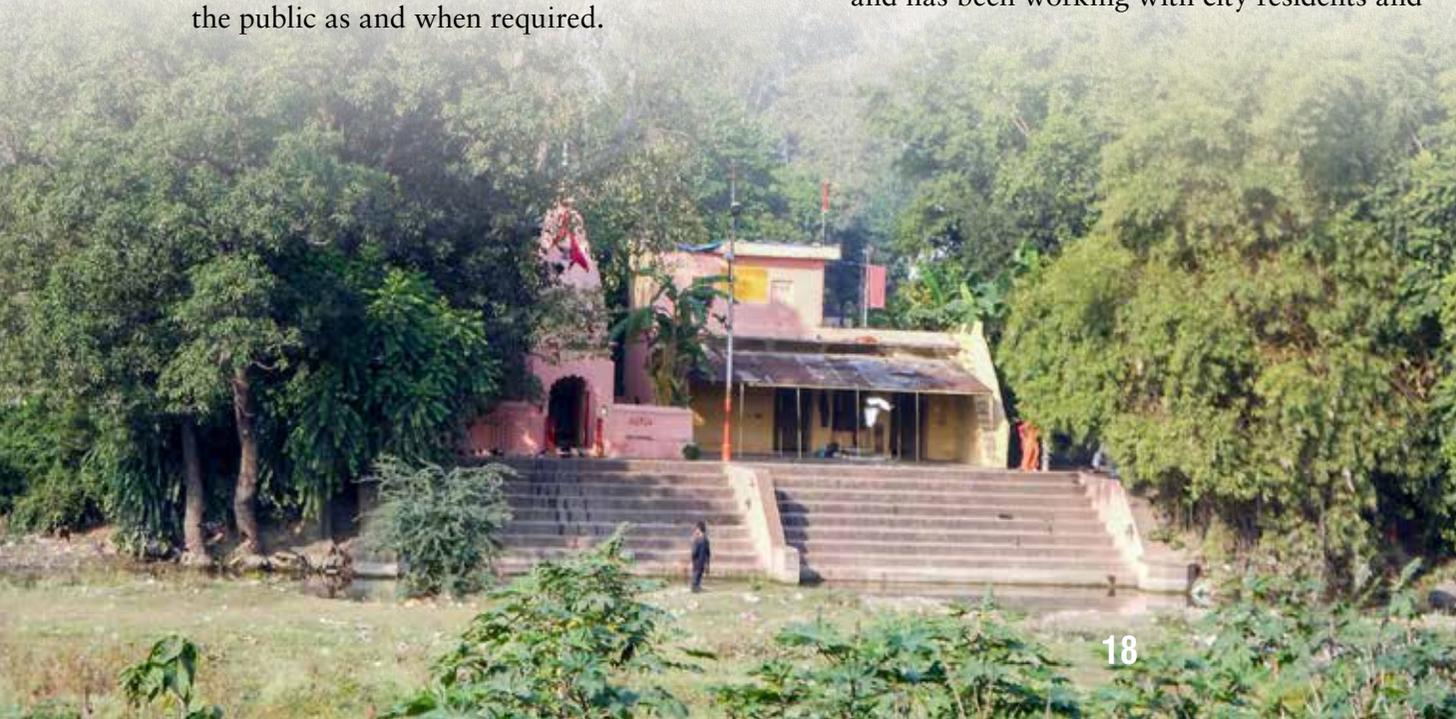
The cleaning drive began the very next morning at the Dhobi Ghat with the arrival of District Magistrate supported by his staff and other members of the Paondhoi Bachao Samiti. Even Samiti members were inspired by the DM’s personal attempt of using a shovel for cleaning by stepping into the river filled with knee-deep silt. Every day at 4 pm, members of the Samiti assembled at the Secretary’s office to chalk out a plan for the following day and assign responsibilities to different members.

Dr. S.K. Upadhyay, a retired Botany professor & HoD provided a scientific perspective to the clean-up drive apart from being the treasurer of Paondhoi Bachao Samiti. A retired Geography Professor, Dr P.K. Sharma served as the Deputy Secretary of the Samiti and has been working with city residents and



*“We have seen the sacred river turn into a drain with an overflow of industrial effluents, sewage and garbage. Everyone knows the problem but passes the buck, expecting others to take the lead. Recent efforts to clean the river have revived our hopes to see the Paondhoi restored to its original glory.”*

*Ajay Sharma,  
Shopkeeper on the banks of the Paondhoi*



*“The problems of the Paondhoi River call for cooperation from various government departments such as the Jal Nigam, Nagar Nigam, Pollution Control Board and Saharanpur Development Authority besides support from the general public. People who have led the movement have been emotionally attached to the campaign. Strong leadership and commitment will be required to make further progress on the Paondhoi’s revival.”*

*Sushant Singhal, Member, Paondhoi Bachao Samiti*



villagers living along the Paondhoi River, raising awareness and taking the legal route for swifter action if required. This movement turned into a huge media campaign which included coverage by local journalists, creation of a website, and distribution of brochures as well as organizing street plays all in an attempt to encourage public participation with spiritual leaders also providing support. It was as if an entire city had woken up to revive the river and was ready to partner with the Nagar Nigam in strengthening their efforts. More than 10,000 truckloads of silt, sludge and other solid waste was removed from the river bed over the next few months.

### **Past attempts and the future**

The Paondhoi Bachao Samiti movement wasn't the first attempt to revive the Paondhoi, previous attempts have been made

as early as 2007 with the Indian Industries Association, Saharanpur Chapter spending more than one lakh rupees on river cleaning. In 2009, activists and conservationists led by Sushant Singhal (later inducted as a member of the Paondhoi Bachao Samiti) had prepared an action plan which was shared with the residents of Saharanpur to seek their support. Some of the proposed short term actions included setting up of Nigrani Samiti or neighbourhood watch committees and diverting the open drains into sewer systems along with a longer term vision of waterfront development. A large part of the action plan was subsequently incorporated into the agenda and vision for the Paondhoi Bachao Samiti. At present, the river is being cleaned twice a year – once before monsoon to avoid flooding and another drive is conducted before the Dussehra festival. These efforts are being undertaken with the resources of the Ramlila committee, Saharanpur.

## Way Forward

- This is an example of how river rejuvenation efforts can grow into an inspiring environmental movement bringing citizens and administrators together at the city/district level.
- While short term actions such as cleanup of solid waste from the river can be undertaken, medium to longer term plans should be based upon studies and research conducted on the river.
- As long as sources of pollution, be it solid waste or sewage are not eliminated, the impact of a cleanup drive can only be limited.

*Dr. Veena Khanduri, Executive Secretary, India Water Partnership (IWP)*