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Punjab: Of Bangay village and its famous son, the revolutionary hero Bhagat Singh

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The district administration Faisalabad (Punjab, Pakistan) plans to save the remains of Bhagat Singh's birthplace and develop his entire village.

Not many people would know that barely thirteen miles southeast of Faisalabad in Punjab lies the village where the revolutionary hero Bhagat Singh was born and raised in the early years of the twentieth century.

That he was an icon of struggle against foreign imperialism and a revolutionary who fought for justice, equality and rights of the downtrodden is kind of a contested narrative in the part that came to be called Pakistan after the partition. There are very few people who know of and understand his role in the freedom movement. Others don't because it is not acknowledged in the communalised history syllabus taught in schools in this country. He is not acknowledged as part of the collective heritage of our anti-colonial struggle because he was a 'Sikh'.

It should not be too difficult to miss the irony because the freedom fighter called himself an atheist and a socialist. The man who rejected religion, any religion, is punished for being born into it. What is more ironic is that a majority of young people got to know of him through the much-watched Amir Khan film *Rang De Basanti*.

In the early part of the twentieth century, after he was hanged in 1931 at the age of 24 in Lahore, it was still possible to call him Shaheed Bhagat Singh.

The village Bangay, formally called Chak 105 GB, is in the news again. Apart from being Singh's birthplace, a significant record of his early years is lying in a small dilapidated room in his house. Recently, the district administration of Faisalabad, in a plan to preserve the history of the region, announced to preserve the buildings that have a historical significance. The District Coordination Officer (DCO) of Faisalabad, Noorul Amin Mengal, who visited the house of Bhagat Singh some weeks ago, declared the preservation plans and his intention to pool in resources for the development of the entire village.

"When our family came to know that this house belonged to Bhagat Singh, we were too keen to have it and preserve many of his things. We have tried to keep safe many belongings of Bhagat Singh's family," Muhammad Iqbal Virk says.

"The district administration has constituted the Lyallpur Heritage Foundation. It will conduct researches and take steps to preserve the heritage of the area. There are plans to declare the native villages of Sir Ganga Ram and Bhagat Singh, both located in the same district, as heritage sites," says Mengal.

They have short-listed around 45 historical buildings for preservation and restoration. "We will try to

evolve a strategy after proper consultations. We will try to name some places and roads after these historic figures," he says.

Bangay is a typical village of central Punjab, with streets as wide as 80 feet designed on the pattern of canal colonies by the British colonisers. Surrounded by wheat and sugarcane fields, the village itself comprises muddy, unpaved bazaars and streets and grassy patches that look more like dirty ponds. Relaxed villagers sit outside their houses and small shops and one sees all types of cattle and other farm animals roaming the streets.

A majority of the population is not highly educated; a part of it is involved in pottery-making with hands and the village is known for its pots.

The belongings of Bhagat Singh include a spinning wheel used by his mother, a big size copper-made paraat (tray), two wooden trunks and a very heavy closet of steel. These are still lying in the two rooms of his now almost restructured house.

Muhammad Iqbal Virk, 70, by profession an advocate, owns the house. He claims that his grandfather was allotted this house after the partition. "When our family came to know that this house belonged to Bhagat Singh, we were too keen to have it and preserve many of his things. We have tried to keep safe many belongings of Bhagat Singh's family," he says.

The British after founding the city of Lyallpur in 1880 urged the Sikh farmers to migrate from other parts of Punjab to cultivate this barren land. Bhagat Singh's family was one of those agriculturists who came from Jullandhar. "It was a two-kanal house with 16 rooms. The wooden doors connect one room to the other and there's a courtyard. Bhagat Singh and his elder brother are said to have also planted a tree of Bairi in that courtyard which we decided not to cut," says Virk.

Underneath the Bairi, Virk has placed a plaque showing the dates of birth and death (by hanging) of that hero of the independence movement.

Virk is happy with the announcement that the village will be preserved. "We should keep our history alive. We urge the government to set up a school of a high standard in the village, widen the roads and recognise our town with the name of that hero," says Virk.

He would like the government to turn it into a model village "with a museum or complex that preserves Bhagat Singh's belongings". He calls for revival of festivities to commemorate Singh.

Virk also arranges an annual Bhagat Singh Free Eye Camp close to the annual celebrations of Baba Guru Nanak, the time when thousands of Sikhs visit Nankana Sahib. "Many Sikhs come to the village and take the soil of the courtyard and leaves of the Bairi as relics to pay tribute to Bhagat Singh," he says.

As I roam around in the streets, I get some interesting bits of information from the villagers. One small Sikh temple and three excavated old water wells from pre-partition time have gradually been turned into mosques and shrines. The place where in old times people used to arrange Bhagat Singh Mela has become a popular shrine where the urs of a local Pir called Sangal Shah (a man who used to carry steel chains around his neck) now attracts scores twice a year.

Today, the village boasts of at least seven mosques and three shrines.

The structure of the almost century old primary school where Bhagat Singh studied is in shambles. Without a proper boundary wall and a huge ground turned into a filthy pond, the building looks like a haunted place. The collapsing building, however, is still standing with girders (supporting beams) with the sign "Steel of England" still visible.

The companions and childhood friends of Bhagat Singh have all passed away. "One Abdul Haq died a

few years ago who always stood up and recalled the “good old times” when anyone asked him about Bhagat Singh,” says Muhammad Sharif, a 50-year-old resident of the village.

A little more than a year ago, DCO Mengal while serving in Lahore had issued a notification naming the roundabout in Shadman after Bhagat Singh. This is precisely the spot (as part of the old jail) where he is said to have been hanged. The renaming had been a long standing demand of the intellectuals and other members of the civil society. Soon after the announcement, some religious groups known for their anti-India stance became active in opposing the move, urging the government to name it after Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). With Jamaat-ud-Dawa (JuD) leading the opposition, these groups started protesting against the renaming and ultimately moved the court. The matter is still pending before the high court.

Most of the villagers are not aware of this controversy. “Bhagat Singh was a revolutionary freedom fighter and his struggle should not be put under the carpet on the basis of religion,” says Irfan Ahmad, a political activist who lives in the area. “He was a leader of all freedom fighters. There should not be objections while preserving this bright side of the diversified history of our region.”

Ahmed says there is a complete forgetfulness regarding the independence struggle from the British “as certain religious elements want to erase these bare facts and memories from our minds”.

During former General Pervez Musharraf’s regime, then Punjab governor Khalid Maqbool, a retired army general, had also directed the local authorities to do some research and make plans to preserve Bhagat Singh’s house and his family’s belongings. The plan did not see the light of the day.

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P.S.

* The News on Sunday, February 9, 2014:

http://tns.thenews.com.pk/bangay-famous-son/#.Uv_tZ_3EtJR

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