

Paldi

The village of Paldi (District Hoshiarpur, Punjab, India) is situated at the base of the low hill range of the Siwalik mountains at the foothills of the Himalayas, off the Hoshiarpur – Chandigarh trunk road, about 25 miles south of Hoshiarpur, about 3 miles east from Mahilpur and about 9 miles north from Garshankar.

The village was founded by a single family (head of the family was a certain Shri Bhagwati who had four sons) from a nearby village of Daroli Kalan (established by Baba Mati Dev, grandson of Biram Dev Minhas, a Rajput commander from Jammu area with the first Moghal emperor, Babar) in the fifteenth or sixteenth century. Shri Bhagwati was given possession of 207 hectares of land in what is Paldi as an ordinary grant in return for his services to the local ruler at the time. Some of his descendants continue living on this land and form the main population (the 1991 census gave the population of the village as 1,045) group in the village.

One son of the village by the name of Sardar Nagina Singh went into civil engineering contracting and prospered exceptionally well. He provided employment to some families from the village in his business. His extended family became very influential in running the village affairs. He used his wealth to build huge houses for himself, his sons' and brothers' families and bought land in Bhogpur. He had lavish weddings for his children, which still remain the talk of the village. He also contributed money for charitable work including financing the building of a high school in 1922-23 in the village and providing for the running costs of it for many years. The school was recognised by the Education Board and is well known in the area for its academic and sports records. Presently, it is run by the village committee with a government grant. Unfortunately, the business did not survive into the twilight of his life. But he was a practising Sikh to the end.

There were other sons of the village who started transportation and restaurant businesses in Bombay and Calcutta and did well but their success was on a much smaller scale compared to Sardar Nagina Singh. Same could be said of families who had smaller businesses in the village – brick making, flour/cotton milling/timber machine, etc.

From the end of the 19th century, the village has been a great source of emigration to many parts of the world but mainly Canada, Great Britain and Malaya/Singapore. This included descendants of Sardar Nagina Singh and his extended family. The reason for this was economic. With the rising population, the landholdings with divisions were becoming smaller. Smaller holdings could not sustain large families. Family members were therefore looking for opportunities outside Paldi, firstly in India and then abroad to improve their living conditions.

The son of the village who made the greatest mark in business overseas was Sardar Mayo Singh. He went to Canada in 1906 when he was still in his teens. Some of his relatives had arrived there before him. In 1912, they were all working at the Fernridge Lumber Company in Rosedale, Vancouver, British Columbia. Three years later the mill failed and thirty five ex-employees among whom Sardar Mayo Singh and his relatives were in the majority, purchased it and ran it as Cheam Lumber Company. When the plant's timber supply was exhausted in 1917, they bought Marcum Lumber Company near New Westminster. When this venture came to the end of its timber supply, Mayo Singh found private reserves in the Esquimalt and Nanaimo Railway Belt between Duncan and Lake Cowichan on Vancouver Island and to exploit them the group set up a new sawmill with Sardar Kapoor Singh of Khrodhi Village (Which is next door to Paldi in the Punjab) as an additional partner responsible for book-

keeping and general management. The place where the sawmill was located was originally known as Mayo Siding but as the business prospered, the name of the place was changed to Paldi, after the Paldi in the Punjab. By 1937, business had expanded so much that Paldi was home to 100 families and 150 single men, which included members of the extended family of Sardar Mayo Singh and other village folks from the Punjab Paldi and Japanese, Chinese, Indian and white Canadian workers. Paldi BC had its own store, a Sikh Temple, a Buddhist Temple, a School, a generator for electricity, a well for water, large houses for Sardar Mayo Singh and Sardar Kapoor Singh, bunk houses for single men and houses for families all connected by boardwalks. As Sardar Mayo Singh looked after his workers well, his fame spread and he was the preferred employer in the area and the business went from strength to strength. With time, he was able to buy out all the share holders including Sardar Kapoor Singh who started for himself on the mainland in Vancouver. Sardar Mayo Singh died in 1955 when the business was taken over by his sons. But in business, they were not as shrewd as their father and the sawmill gradually failed. Paldi BC therefore contracted and at present only the Sikh Temple and a few scattered houses stand where once a vibrant multicultural logging and mill community existed.

In Canada Sardar Mayo Singh is remembered for not only his business success but also his civic activities and his efforts in getting voting rights for Indian Canadians. In the 1999 survey, his name was included (number 25) among the 100 most influential people who shaped British Columbia.

In Paldi, Punjab, the money he and his extended family sent was used for modernising Paldi by building various facilities including a modern hospital at Paldi Adda which is now run by the government and extensions to the college in Mahilpur where most of the young men from Paldi would go to do their higher studies. However one son of Paldi who was the first successful university graduate from the village received his education not from this college but from DAV College Jalandhar. He was Sardar Chanan Singh son of Sardar Puran Singh who obtained an upper second class BA degree majoring in English and Persian in 1943. In 1947, he emigrated permanently to Kenya where he was a languages (English, Punjabi and Urdu) teacher at a premier high school then known as Duke of Gloucester School, Nairobi. He was a very popular teacher in the Nairobi circles and his former students included doctors, dentists, architects, engineers and lawyers. He died suddenly in 1964, following a massive heart attack. He fought successfully for the teaching of Punjabi at O level standard in high schools in Kenya. Prior to that Sikhs had to learn Urdu or Gujrati.

Children of the hard working emigrants from Paldi in overseas countries have become successful in various fields – medicine, dentistry, engineering, transportation, teaching, law, pharmacy, etc. Paldi, Punjab is now seeing the return of a few of these emigrants for retirement resulting in the construction of new homes with modern facilities: the houses have electricity, water supply, their own cesspits and mod-cons like AC, fridges, TVs etc. However, this has not brought happiness to the village. This is because emigration resulted in up to 80% of the families going abroad and the old people exceed the number of young people. In spite of the smaller numbers, the number of Sikh temples in the village has grown from one to four. The Paldi Adda has expanded greatly. There are various types of shops varying from tea stall to cycle repair and tailoring. There are two banks, a modern hospital and a high school. All this is indicative of the money flowing into the village from overseas.

Fortunes of Paldi BC have also changed recently. One of the descendants of Sardar Mayo Singh, Mark Saroya has plans to redevelop it. Plans include new infrastructure, housing units

and a mall type area. But who the newcomers would be to the Paldi of tomorrow, nobody knows. Change is the name of progress as they say.

Selected photographs of Paldi, Punjab are included below.