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## Ajmal Kasab's family is yet to return to Faridkot village in Pakistan's Punjab

QASWAR ABBAS | November 16, 2012 | 18:00



Villagers pass by the house of Kasab in Faridkot in Pakistan's Punjab province.

Nothing sets Faridkot apart from any other village in Pakistan's impoverished southern Punjab province. The population of 3,000, mostly poor farmers, live in crude brick houses. Its name, after revered Sufi saint Baba Farid, is common enough to allow the hamlet maintain its anonymity. It all changed in December 2008 when the village, 80 km south of Multan, rocketed to infamy. After

Kasab's family was tracked down by journalists. "I was in denial for the first couple of days, saying to myself it couldn't have been my son... Now I have accepted it as the truth. I have seen the picture in newspapers. This is my son Ajmal," said Amir Shahban Kasab, as he broke down in his courtyard talking to the Dawn newspaper after his son's arrest in Mumbai. More embarrassment followed, when former prime minister Nawaz Sharif not only confirmed Kasab was from the village, but attacked Zardari's government for hiding the truth and placing a security cordon around Faridkot.



Villagers pass by the house of Kasab in Faridkot in Pakistan's Punjab Province.

During my first visit to Faridkot in 2007, for an altogether more mundane reason of attending a wedding, I found the villagers friendly and hospitable. By the time of my second visit, in December 2008, the atmosphere had changed. The angry villagers drove me away. "We don't know who Ajmal Kasab is," a villager insisted. There was no sign of his family.

Four years on, I drove to the Depalpur Press Club, where I was to meet photographer Hasnain Akhtar who would accompany me to the village. Hasnain was frightened and worried. He refused to go, but offered his camera. "Just reimburse me if something happens to it," he said as an afterthought.

I went on a dusty, unpaved road, past herds of water buffaloes and goats, and groups of children playing cricket. This was where Kasab lived for nearly 14 years. I knocked on the blue wooden door of the two-room mud and brick structure in the hope that four years on, his family may have returned. Kasab's uncle, Abdul Ghafoor Kasab, 51, answered. Standing at 5'10", the healthy, bearded man instantly recognised me and wondered out aloud why I was back. Four years ago, Ghafoor had informed that Kasab's family lived in the house for 20 years. Today, his response was terse. "I have nothing to share with you," he said in chaste Punjabi. "Ajmal is my sister's son, but I know nothing about his past and don't want to discuss his future," Ghafoor said. He advised me to leave the village as soon as possible, and slammed his door shut.

At a grocery shop 200 feet from the Kasab home, a few salwar-clad men stood by, but as soon as I asked them about the Kasabs, they melted away.



Ajmal Amir Kasab.

"Amir Shahban Kasab, 56, took his family away to an unknown destination," said Sultan Mahmood, 61, the grocer. Kasab's father was a vendor who sold samosas and pakoras from a handcart in the village. But after Kasab was caught in Mumbai, the family, including his younger sister Suraiyya and younger brother Munir, vanished. "We haven't heard from them in four years, Mahmood said.

Later that afternoon, I went to a tea stall in the heart of village, with rope *charpoys* strewn around. I sat next to the elderly Allah Ditta, a teacher in the Government Primary School, Faridkot. He was softspoken, wore a neat *salwar kameez* and, unlike most locals, spoke fluent Urdu. He looked around furtively and spoke in whispers. Kasab was his student in Class V, Ditta told me. He had recognised him from the 26/11 TV footage. Kasab had run away from home at 14, only to return home briefly before 26/11. By then, it was known that he had drifted into a life of crime in Lahore and had been trained as a *fidayeen* by the Lashkar-e-Toiba.

"It's hard to believe this boy could become a mass murderer," Ditta said. When he was 12, Ditta whispered, Kasab had seen a close relative of his get shot in the head by a stray bullet in celebratory gunfire. "As a result, Ajmal was scared of even toy guns," Ditta said, with not a shred of irony in describing a terrorist whose ak-47-toting photo had come to symbolise global terror.

Four years after Mumbai, Faridkot's infamy may have been sealed, but the Kasab family has managed to disappear into the anonymity of survival.

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