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*The interpretation of our reality through patterns not our own, serves only to make us ever more unknown, ever less free, ever more solitary.* -GABRIEL GARCIA MARQUEZ

**SNAPSHOT**  
ALIM AL RAZI

**MAILBOX**  
starweekendtds@gmail.com

## How many were murdered at Salanaga?

This is a response to Md Shahnawaz Khan Chandan's article on the Salanaga Massacre of 1922, which came out in The Daily Star on January 25. I am familiar with the incident and went through the Government of Bengal's confidential files and police report on the incident. I was fortunate enough to interview the late Maulana Abdur Rashid Tarkabagish (1899-1986)—who was friends with my father and uncle—in May 1983 at his Wari residence off Rankin Street. Twenty-three-year-old Tarkabagish was an influential person in his locality and beyond. He was actually the main mobiliser of mass support for the Khilafat Non-Cooperation Movement (1920-1922) in and around Sirajganj.

As police records reveal (also corroborated by the Maulana) there was a gathering of Bengali Muslim villagers—mainly peasants—at the Salanga Hat on 27 January 1922, at the fag end of the Khilafat Movement. Although the Movement was for the restoration of the Ottoman Khilafat (caliphate) since the British and the Allied forces had fought against the Ottoman Empire during World War I, the Khilafat Movement was simultaneously (or mainly) an anti-British non-cooperation movement for Swaraj or self-rule for India. MK Gandhi was the main leader of the Movement, along with many prominent leaders from India. Although

most prominent leaders of the Movement were from Northwest India, the movement was quite powerful in East Bengal, possibly only second to the United Provinces (UP) in popularity and intensity. Muslim religious and secular leaders played a very significant role in the Movement. The Deoband-educated Maulana Tarkabagish—the scion of a local Pir Sahib—was among the young stalwarts of the Movement, under the leadership of Maulana Bhashani and

Ismail Hossain Siraji, who also came from Sirajganj.

Contrary to the accounts of Shahnawaz Khan Chandan, on that fateful day, a handful of Bengali Muslim peasants and shopkeepers got killed at the hands of the police. It is difficult to determine how many policemen went to maintain "law and order" at the Salanga Hat on that particular day. Forty armed policemen with rifles were involved in shooting down more than 4,000 agitators is not

credible.

Even if forty armed policemen had gone there to disperse the agitators—who were unarmed, non-violent followers of Gandhi's Khilafat and Non-Cooperation Movement—they could not have killed more than 4,000 people with forty "303 Enfield rifles", which are manual, bolt-loading rifles with five-bullet magazines, not automatic rifles.

Again, the "forty armed policemen" would not have carried more than two or three magazines each, that is not more than fifteen rounds of ammunition each! How could they have killed more than 4,000 people with around 600 rounds of ammunition? By the way, on April 13 1919, Brigadier Dyer took more than one company of Indian Army troops (Baluch, Gurkha, Sikh, and Rajput) armed with machine guns, and killed 379 people (British version) or more than 1,000 people (public version) at the Jallianwalla Bagh. And we know, the Jallianwalla Bagh Massacre is a very well-known part of our history.

Since history is very important in moulding our culture, heritage, past, present, and future, we should avoid narrating and writing it in a manner that can mislead the posterity.

**Taj Hashmi**  
Adjunct Professor, Criminal Justice  
Austin Peay State University, Tennessee

