

Two Martyred Pandits: Sharada & Annada Charan

KANAK DAS GUPTA

In the wake of the 'Mountbatten Plan' on June 3, 1947, which set the date of independence for August 14 of the same year, British India was slated to be divided into two dominions: Hindu-majority India and Muslim-majority Pakistan. Sir Cyril Radcliffe was swiftly tasked with drawing the borders of these entities. However, when he obliged, the exercise ended up severing the limbs and soul of the nation. In erstwhile Punjab, there was mostly an exchange of people across the two borders, but it was not the same for Bengal. While large groups of Hindu families migrated to India after partition, some remained in the former East Pakistan because they felt rooted in their motherland.

This sense of pride and patriotism were major reasons why one such joint family, generationally known as the 'Pandits,' owing to their expertise as Sanskrit scholars and renowned astrologers, continued to reside in their homeland which is now Bangladesh. This family, consisting of the scholarly brothers Pandit Sharada Charan and Pandit Annada Charan, resided in the village of Gharua, situated near the town of Moulvibazar in what was once the South Sylhet sub-division.

They lived in their ancestral joint property and continued to reside in the same ancestral home, maintaining a joint family arrangement. While Iresh and Srish migrated to India for work, Sharada Charan and Annada Charan along with Naresh remained and resided in their ancestral property with their immediate families. Subsequently, as Naresh Pandit managed to flee from the former Pakistani army, Pandit Sharada Charan and Annada Charan were martyred during the Liberation War of 1971. However, their memory has been lost in collective amnesia over time.

These two brothers were not only scholars but also educators serving people of the village and its adjacent parts. Their residential space also housed a varied collection of books with rare copies of manuscripts in a library (burnt down by the Pak-army as well) in search of which many intellectuals of that time used to frequent this 'Pandit household' and held regular discourse circles. Syed Mujtaba Ali, the well-known novelist, is believed to be one of those intellectuals who visited this household on his holidays. The house these brothers resided in is still renowned in the area and referred to as 'Pandit Bari' literally meaning the abode of the scholars which probably prompted their brutal assassination in the summer of 1971.

On May 12, 1971, the Pakistani army, aided by the Razakars, ambushed the home of these scholarly brothers. They mercilessly gunned down Sharada Charan, aged 90 at the time, and his brother Annada Charan, aged 85, and subsequently set the entire house ablaze. Binodini Devi, Annada Charan's wife, witnessed these horrific killings and sought refuge in the bushes surrounding the house. The remaining members of the household fled as far as they could, watching their home engulfed in flames from a distance. The next morning, in the neighboring village of Barohal, the family members reunited and decided to return to their ancestral property.

Upon arrival, they found the partially burnt corpses of their loved ones being torn apart by wild dogs. With the help of neighbors, they wrapped the bodies in rugs and proceeded to immerse them in the Manu River. However, due to the ongoing war, they were unable to perform the last rites, and the traumatic events left Binodini Devi clinically deranged. These savage murders remain etched in my family's memory as one of the most horrific episodes in our history, filled with terror and trauma.

Last year, we established the "Shoheed Pandit Sharada & Annada Memorial Foundation" not only to honor our



Pandit Sarada Charan : Born 1881 - Death 1971



Pandit Annada Charan : Born 1887 - Death 1971

SOURCE: NB DAS GUPTA

ancestors but also to contribute to education, healthcare, and the promotion of art and culture in society. The foundation's objective is to support underprivileged students by covering their educational expenses, providing stipends, and awarding scholarships annually.

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Rao Farman Ali and 1971



MUNTASSIR MAMOON

The following is an excerpt from Muntassir Mamoon's book *Sei Sab Pakistani* (1999), currently under translation. The present excerpt features the interview of General Rao Farman Ali, who was in charge of civil administration in East Pakistan during the tumultuous year of 1971. He remains one of the prime accused for his alleged role in the abduction and massacre of Bengali intellectuals in Dhaka on the night of 15-16 December. The killing of pro-liberation intellectuals through hand-picked death squads, consisting of Al-Shams and Al-Badar members, in the dying hours of the 1971 liberation war remains one of the most harrowing episodes in the history of human genocide. In February 1998, historian Muntassir Mamoon, along with Mohiuddin Ahmed, founder-director of the University Press Limited (UPL), traveled to Pakistan and spoke to the key Pakistani personnel operating in the years leading to the 1971 conflict. The interviews and the circumstances surrounding them found their way into a book, and *Sei Sab Pakistani* was published in 1999. The interview is translated by Dr. Sagar Taranga Mandal into English.

We were returning via Fazlul Haque Avenue. Islamabad had three roads named after A.K. Fazlul Haque, Khwaja Nazimuddin, and Suhrawardy. While on the move, I was thinking about our most important interview of the Pakistan tour later in the day. Two names were chiefly associated with the 1971 genocide in Bangladesh: General Niazi and General Rao Farman Ali. We had not been able to meet Niazi yet. But Farman had agreed to talk to us, had even consented for the entire interview to be videoed. The interview was a first of its kind in twenty-five years. Farman Ali lived in Rawalpindi.

After the lunch, lying down, I flipped through Rao Farman Ali's autobiography. It was published in English with the title "How Pakistan Got Divided." I had it translated by a former student of our Department, Shah Ahmad Reza. Mohiuddin bhai published it from UPL. On reading the book, it occurred to me that of all the erstwhile military officers in East Pakistan, Rao Farman Ali was the most clever and cool-headed man. Even after the debacle of 1971, he was held in esteem in Pakistan, and, at one point, even took on the responsibilities of a Minister of State. Upon reading Farman Ali's autobiography, it would appear that he knew nothing about what happened in Bangladesh in 1971. He had nothing to do with any of the activities of the armed forces. He was responsible for civil administration—that he had good terms with Sheikh Sahib, and so forth. I had the feeling that he would not say more than what he had set down in his book. But we still had a mind to try. We started for Rawalpindi in the evening with a videographer.

Rawalpindi evolved as an army cantonment. A small town. It didn't take more than half an hour to reach Rawalpindi if the car was driven fast along the extensive, broad roads of Islamabad. Man-made forests flanked both sides of the road. Tall, green grass covered the side-way. It had blooming white daisies. Thicket of yellow flowers in places. It was silent and still all around. Rawalpindi stood at the end of the sweeping roads. It looked dismal. Like Karachi or Lahore, much of the place was given to residential areas for army officers. Those that had been given to them at a token price for the service to the nation. Farman was an old-era officer. So, he had obtained plot at a customary place only. By the time we tracked down Khurshid Alam Road in the defense residential area, the daylight had waned.

Rao Farman Ali had a one-storied neat little house. At the front was a strip of green

lawn. Beds of seasonal flowers were all around. The surroundings had been made bright their explosion of colors. The sentry went and informed of our arrival. Out came Rao Farman Ali.

To tell the truth, I was a little disappointed on seeing Rao Farman Ali. I had the impression of a stoutly built military officer with an unfeeling smile and cruel eyes. But before me stood a spare man, bent down with age. Like a retired school or college teacher. Weighed down by life. Rao Farman Ali graciously welcomed us inside. He said that he was sick—suffering from age-related ailments. But we had come from afar, and so he wanted to talk to us.

I was regarding the drawing room. It was elegantly furnished. A Chinese scroll was hanging at one end. We told Farman Ali of our objective. He said he was familiar with the matter and had no objection to talking about it. I was watching Farman Ali. This man—it was said—was involved in the liquidation of our intellectuals. One of the planners of the genocide. I was sitting next to him. The retribution that I had professed against them all along and what was also my heart's desire—I sat silently suppressing them. I couldn't tell what Farman was thinking. He was talking softly. The voice and the manner of speech did not resemble a soldier but that of a tired professor. After setting everything up, the videographer said, 'Ready.'

'General Rao Farman Ali,' asked Mohiuddin bhai, 'How did you get involved with the affair of Bangladesh?'

'I first went to East Pakistan in the year 1967. I came back once shortly before Yahya Khan assumed power. But since I had knowledge of the region, I was again sent back to East Pakistan. At the time, General Muzaffaruddin was the GOC and the Governor-in-charge. I worked as a civil affairs law administrator. But I want to clearly state that I had no involvement with the last phase of the military rule.'

'What does this mean?' Asked Mohiuddin bhai.

'It means,' replied Farman, 'There are many branches under military law. Civil affairs was my responsibility. I used to examine the files that came down to me from the Secretariat and pass them to the Governor for approval. Occasionally, I made inquiries. Literally, I had no power except this.'

'Which area of the national security did you look after?' Mohiuddin bhai asked again.

'I actually looked after the political side. Let me give one example,' spoke Farman, 'Political parties were banned in Ayub Khan's time. Students took the lead in these circumstances. I became busy with these students at this point.'

'What was the manner of the engagement like?' I asked.

'The job was to bring the students to our side by winning over their minds. The same applied to the laborers as well. Actually, then, trouble brewed both across the student and the labor front. I kept working to resolve those.'

'Whom do you think was responsible for this?' Asked Mohiuddin bhai.

'The problem was a complex one,' said Farman, 'And to this was added student politics. Students seized control of the Dhaka University. The police were barred from entering there. There happened to be a tall tree close by the University. We used to climb up the tree and inspect the situation five times a day. The students were on the loose.'

'So, you were in quite an important post,' I said. 'Actually, your association with General Yahya might be the reason indeed for the post being conferred.'

Farman replied before I could finish my sentence, 'No, I wasn't close to Yahya in that sense. I never took alcohol in life. And, also I belonged to the junior cadre. Of course, I received quick promotions.'

'Reason for this?' Asked Mohiuddin bhai. 'The reason is hard work,' replied Farman,

'While doing this job, I came across a thousand men. I knew every politician. Surely, afterwards, the situation changed...'

'You had spoken about that in your book,' I said.

'No, really?' Exclaimed Farman. 'I had felt the East Pakistanis were demanding much more than they were entitled to.'

'Are you talking about economic disparity?' Asked Mohiuddin bhai.

'No, I don't understand economics,' replied Farman. 'As a brigadier, I had no knowledge of the true state of the economy.'

'It makes you into a man from military culture,' Mohiuddin bhai added, 'You don't care for the majority.'

'Look, I at least realized that the East Pakistanis were a majority,' replied Farman. 'Surely, in the beginning, it didn't occur to me. Later, in the course of encountering the situation, many of my perceptions underwent change. Once while inaugurating a bank branch at the cantonment, I had said that the East Pakistanis were being influenced by the Hindus. I didn't know that a Hindu leader was seated there. I was yet to understand then that they remain merged with the very society itself.'

'The matter is a practical truth,' I remarked. 'It becomes obvious on merely reading any history book.'

'I studied,' replied Farman Ali like a scholar, 'That Muslim peasants agitated against the British...had read in books.'

'So far as I remember,' I said, 'In your book you wrote that history is a predetermined matter. That in '69 you saw a poster depicting a dhoti-clad man, stick in hand...'

'I am yet to come that far,' said Farman. 'At the time in East Pakistan, hatred was being propagated against West Pakistan.'

'My question was,' I said, 'You saw a cane in the hands of a dhoti-clad man, but the majority in Bangladesh do not wear a dhoti. Why say majority, there is hardly any custom of dhoti at all! There is of lungi. The prejudice lay in this difference between dhoti and lungi. Wearing dhoti would mean the person is a Hindu. My point being, whether a prevalent practice or an old belief amongst you—Hindus were seen as influencing the Bangali Muslims. And a Hindu ought to be an Indian—right?'

'You have said it correctly,' Farman agreed vigorously.

'But the matter is clear,' added Mohiuddin bhai, 'That the army was influenced by pre-existing ideas.'

'No, not correct,' said Farman. 'We still believe that the Hindus swayed the mind and manner of the East Pakistanis.'

'In your book you wrote,' I said, 'That Tajuddin Ahmed was the son of a Hindu family. That is, you heard something like that.'

'No, not exactly that,' replied Farman Ali. 'Tajuddin was an anti-Pakistani. Mujib wasn't. Khondaker, too, was not an anti-Pakistani.'

'It means Tajuddin was a pro-Bangaladeshi, a supporter of Bangalis?' I asked.

'No, the matter is slightly different. You could be a pro-Bangali. All Bangalis could be so. But what I want to say is that he wanted to break Pakistan.'

'In '47, it was the Bengalis who brought about Pakistan. If the Hindus had influence there, why did the Bangalis want Pakistan?' Mohiuddin bhai asked.

'It was what I was trying to say,' spoke Farman Ali. 'What really happened that 95 out of 100 Muslims of East Bengal voted in favor of Pakistan? It was East Pakistan which created Pakistan. It should have safeguarded Pakistan as well.'

[Read the full interview online]

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