

Cdr (R) Firoz Shah

(The second principal of Cadet College, Petaro: 1965-1972)

By Kazi Zulkader Siddiqui (671/Latif)

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If you were asked to identify one unforgettable personality of the 1965-72 era of Petaro, the answer would be none other than its principal Cdr (R) Firoz Shah. "Commander Sahib" (we always called him that, as if there was, or is, no other commander) had a profound effect on our lives.

The "Commander" to us was much greater than any general. In retrospect, even though he is of a normal height and stature, Commander Sahib appeared to be a towering figure during those good old days. In sufistic parlance, the Commander was Petaro and Petaro was the Commander, though never the twain shall meet again.



Cdr. (r) Firoz Shah presenting his report at a parents' day celebration in late 1960s

His dynamism, his energy, his patience, and love for the college and its students were simply remarkable. However, he had a soft corner for sports and sportsmen. After all, it was through his efforts and leadership that the college won the ICCST consecutively for four years. He brought about the "Famous Forties".

During a discussion with him a few years ago, Commander Sahib pensively remarked that real education can be had only "in the field". That is what Petaro truly aimed at, by providing that balance between studies and physical training and sports.

Born in 1913 near Chakwal, Cdr (R) Firoz Shah has had a very fulfilling career. He graduated from the Punjab University, Kitchener's College, Nowgong (in undivided India), and later from the Royal Navy College in London.

Having joined the Royal Navy in 1938, Commander Sahib became a de facto member of the Pakistan Navy in 1947. After a meritorious service, 1965 brought about his retirement. Commander Sahib had served as the Director of Education in Pakistan Navy for 12 years.

Thus, when he retired, the Board of Governors of Cadet College Petaro chose the able Commander to relieve Col J.H.H. Coombes as the principal of the college in 1965. Commander Sahib ruled over Petaro for seven years until his retirement in 1972.

The year 1997 marked the silver jubilee year of Commander Sahib's retirement from Petaro - and in fact from active service. Retirement, however, does not necessarily mean a withdrawal from life. In contradistinction to an ascetic life, Commander Sahib has had a fulfilling two and a half decades of activity at his native village Baghanwala (Jhelum district), as he engaged in farming and social activities, including performing magisterial duties, establishing a primary girls school, provision of electricity and a roads infrastructure to the village and the adjacent localities.

Having lived in Islamabad for many years after his retirement, Commander Sahib moved to Karachi, currently residing in DHA Phase 1 with his son's family. In recent years, Commander Sahib has been facing some medical problems due to his age. May the Almighty keep him going with physical and mental strength and lessen his ailments.

Let us go back to his days at Petaro. I asked Commander Sahib to recall some of the achievements of his tenure at Petaro. I was surprised to see the extensive list.

- Provision of Sui gas to Petaro;
- Installation of a 35mm movie projector as educational aid (despite restrictions by the government on imports);
- College expansion as the number of students increased from 350 to 600. Seventh class was introduced on an experimental basis for Sindhis. Two new houses (Iqbal and Qasim) were built;
- Pre-medical stream: The Board of Governors permitted introduction of pre-medical classes at the intermediate level;
- A Flying Club was started with the patronage of PAF who provided a glider and necessary staff;
- The "President's Shield" donated by late President Ayub Khan which used to be given to the college winning the ICCST (Inter Cadet Colleges Sports Tournament). Petaro won the shield and the championship for four consecutive years (1968-71), gaining the right to keep the shield permanently;
- Selection into Services Academies increased dramatically as a result of special training introduced;
- Other improvements: Boundary wall, main gate, tennis courts, two squash courts, expansion of riding club, shooting range, grassy hockey field, extension of dining hall, trees along all roads, orchards, agriculture farm, Guest House for visiting parents and VIPs, etc;
- Staff Welfare: Increase in staff, additional House Masters, allowances sanction, courses for higher qualifications in the UK, staff club improvements, additional housing, staff sons permitted to join college;
- Colony Welfare: Sui gas connections at Rs5 per month, subsidy on food, transport for colony children attending schools in Hyderabad, Welfare Fund.



*Mrs And Cdr Firoz Shah, shortly before
Commander Sahib joined Petaro in 1965*

The year of the silver jubilee of his retirement from Petaro was quite a difficult year for Commander Sahib. As it is said, behind every great man, there is a great woman. Or if I may rephrase it, great women prod their consorts to become great men.

Well, the great woman in Commander Sahib's life is now the all-encompassing memory for him. After a fulfilling life, she parted company with him to return to the Lord in 1996. May the Almighty shower His Mercy on her!



*The late Mrs Sughra
Firoz Shah, who "played
her motherly role" during her
years at Petaro*

We Petarians pray to Him for Commander Sahib's health and a long life, guiding us as he always did.

Prof Syed Shaida Azim

(The third principal of Cadet College, Petaro: 1972-1975)

By Kazi Zulkader Siddiqui (671/Latif)



Great men and women create great institutions. It is these very giants whose vision provides the momentum for these institutions to flourish and grow despite the ups and downs of time and clime. Such were the giants who built a great educational institution in the desert belt of Sindh along the Indus which is called Cadet College, Petaro.

Undeniably, among the leaders of those visionary personalities was Syed Shaida Azim, the first Senior House Master and the first Vice-Principal of the college, who later rose to become the third principal of that great institution.

Azim Sahib has always been a thoroughbred professor. If you ever get a chance to meet him, you will immediately recognise what I mean. His speech, his demeanour, his expressions, his emotions, his fatherly approaches, his intellectualism, and his empathetic glances all point towards this fact.

My earliest memories of Azim Sahib date back to 1965. Every senior cadet would point out with awe that it was an honour to become a student of Azim Sahib's. I too used to yearn for the day when I would get into Class XI and become one of those fortunate boys to have sat at his feet in order to acquire pearls of wisdom. If you have met Azim

Sahib, you will no doubt agree with me that he must have had a scholarly disposition right from the day he was born.

Azim Sahib was born in Lucknow in the year 1917. He acquired his early education at home, which was centered around the Noble Qur'an. He started his formal schooling from class VI at St Joseph's School, Lucknow, where he studied for three years. He then completed his matriculation from Islamia High School and intermediate from Govt Jubilee College.

He acquired his MA (Maths) from Lucknow University in 1942 and a second MA in English from Bombay University in 1946. As expected, Azim Sahib was always the best student in his class right from his schooldays. Although he seems to have had a keen love for mathematics, Azim Sahib ended up becoming an English professor at Petaro. Let us trace through his career.

Shortly after acquiring his MA in English from Bombay University, Azim Sahib landed his first job as a teacher of mathematics and English in the princely state of Junagadh. As usual, he excelled and established a position of respect in the field of education in that tiny state ruled by Muslims.

Barely had he established his credentials that all hell broke loose. The creation of Pakistan in August 1947 created problems for the Muslims of subcontinent in the Hindu dominated regions. Along with millions of other Muslims, Azim Sahib joined the hordes that migrated to the newly-born Muslim state of Pakistan.

Arriving in Karachi in October 1947, he realised that he could not remain jobless. Bolton Market sounded like the right place to be. Getting a copy of the Pakistan Times of the day he found an ad in the paper for a mathematics and English teacher for a college in Gujrat, Punjab. Within two months, he was selected and he moved to Gujrat to join Zamindar College as a Senior Lecturer. Over the years, he rose up to become the Vice Principal of that institution.

The next move in his career took place in 1954, when he was selected as Senior Lecturer and House Master at Cadet College Hasanabdal. It was a difficult decision for Azim Sahib. He already had a respectable position at Zamindar College. However, this was an opportunity that he could not miss. The four years he spent at Hasanabdal were crucial in forming the stepping stone towards his ultimate move to Petaro.

In 1958, the Petaro position was advertised. Out of 24 short-listed candidates, a 15-member panel of senior educationists from all over Pakistan finally chose Azim Sahib. It was an honour for the institution, and the institution would eventually honour him as well. Thus, on 7th March, 1958, Syed Shaida Azim moved to Mirpurkhas to become the Senior House Master and Vice-Principal of Cadet College Petaro. It may be noted that the college was still in Mirpurkhas at that time. It moved to its present campus a year and a half later.

During the couple of hours or so I spent with Azim Sahib recently, he kept on reminiscing about so many incidents and relationships. Due to limitations of space, I am reporting only a few of these:

A couple of weeks after Azim Sahib joined the college, Col J.H.H. Coombes joined Petaro as its Principal. His first major task was to find a permanent home for the college. Col Coombes selected the Petaro site because of the Second World War hangars and the airfield. However, he did not realise that the main problem would be water since the old pipelines were not usable. People used to walk 2 miles to get water from the river. Therefore, at the first instance the pipeline was repaired and a pumping station built.

The cornerstone of the college was laid on 16th of January, 1959 by Habibur Rehman, the Federal Minister for Education. The country was already under Martial Law. This was an advantage for Petaro. Under the army regime, the contractors worked very hard and the construction was completed within months.

By summer of 1959, the Jinnah-Liaquat Houses block and the administration building were complete. So were the Principal's house and senior staff bungalows. Col Coombes was in the UK for summer vacations. In his absence, the college moved lock, stock and barrel to the new campus on 26th of July, 1959 under the mantle of Azim Sahib. This was despite the fact that roofs were leaking and there were zillions of other problems.

Today Petaro is like an oasis. In those days, people would ask as to why such an impossible site was chosen. Life was tough at Petaro. Azim Sahib quotes one of the earliest student's remarks who said: "Sir the *gard* (dust) is always *urring* (flying)". It was difficult to get boys to join Petaro under those circumstances.

The college was willing to accept almost any boy. He recalls that in an early interview, Col Coombes asked a candidate that if two oranges cost a rupee, how many would he get for three. The answer given was 5. The candidate was still considered.

Many a time, parents would come to the college to take back their sons due to the tough conditions. The teachers would go to their homes to coax them back. He recalls an incident about one famous son of a famous landlord of Mirpurkhas, who agreed to come back to the college. However, when they neared the college, the boy decided that he wanted to go to Hyderabad to watch a movie.

He volunteered to come back the next day. The unthinkable happened. The college administration agreed. In those days, the college used to be able to get 30 new students a year with great difficulty. The times have changed. It is now very difficult to get your son admitted to this prestigious institution. We must give our thanks to those early stalwarts who worked hard to make all this happen.

Ironically, Azim Sahib's relationship with Col Coombes was an estranged one. I suppose it is difficult to get two able administrators into one room. Col Coombes seems to have felt threatened by his able deputy as long as he remained the principal. The relationship remained tense.

Despite this tension, Col Coombes was full of praise for Azim Sahib. While discussing the staff members, the colonel once remarked to his wife: "Which one of them is better than Mr Azim?" At another instance, the colonel was full of praise for Mr Azim when addressing a visiting delegation from the British Council saying, "If you want to see English language taught at its best, go to Mr Azim's class".

The delegation did likewise and reported, "This is the best way how English should be taught. It was functional English, it was grammar, it was text. Everything was going on at the same time and the boys were so keenly interested, the delegation wished they had a movie camera with them."

The colonel did discover a little too late that his only true friend in the college was none other than "Shaida". At the farewell dinner, Azim Sahib praised the colonel profusely in an extempore speech, highlighting only his achievements. At midnight, the colonel sent a note to him saying, "Dear Shaida! Thank you very much for your very kind words - so full of compliments. No credits did I deserve! I wanted to weep."

Azim Sahib is full of praise for Cdr Firoz Shah's tenure as well. Although the sports competitions between the cadet colleges were started by the colonel, it was during the

Commander's Sahib's period that Petaro won. In the early days, Petaro cut a very sorry figure and lost in all the competitions.

However, the colonel usually got his way because he was British. He once invited Ayub Khan for Parent's Day, but didn't invite the governor, who was furious. The next time they met, the governor said, "I don't want to see your face." He then turned back laughing and said, "You can get anything you want". This was Brit power.

Azim Sahib continued as Vice-Principal of the college until March 1972, when Cdr Firoz Shah was forcibly retired from his position by Z.A. Bhutto. Azim Sahib is categorical in his judgment about the Commander. "He was innocent," he says unequivocally. "The charges against the Commander and his forced retirement were totally uncalled for." Who can be a better judge than Azim Sahib? This also demonstrates his straightforwardness, simplicity, tenderness and a lack of malice towards any and every one.

Azim Sahib is full of praise for Cdr Firoz Shah's capabilities and contributions. In his words, "The Commander was a very good man." He recalls that academic achievements peaked during his tenure, and the college attained the maximum number of positions in the Board.

The Bhutto government's decisions created unions at Petaro for the first time, leading to student activities demanding the Commander's resignation. When the Commander retired, these very same miscreants wanted him back. This speaks volumes of the Commander's capabilities.

Azim Sahib was the Principal of the college for a period of three years until the summer of 1975 when he took his retirement despite the fact that the Board of Governors requested him to extend his tenure. Problems with the Bhutto regime prompted him to refuse any extension.

Many people look at retirement as a probationary period for preparing to meet the Lord in afterlife. For Azim Sahib, that preparation could happen only through active public service as an educationist. After all, he had been an educator par excellence throughout his life.

Thus, barely a few days after retirement in 1975, he joined the Pakistan Marine Academy as Senior Lecturer teaching Mathematics (once again) and English. He continued in this position until 1991.

In the meantime, Azim Sahib was given another challenge during his superannuating years, and while he was still in active service at the Marine Academy. In 1982, the administration of Pakistan Steel Mills requested him to become Adviser Education to regulate the educational activities of the employees and their children.

He did so with reluctance since this would have meant a lot more undesirable strain on his regulated life. During a period of seven years there (1982-89), Azim Sahib was instrumental in the creation and setting up of Cadet College Steel Mills within a few months. The college became functional in September 1982. While the Martial Law helped in building Cadet College Petaro in a short time, this college was built without such a military infrastructure. He was instrumental in developing another 12 educational institutions at the Steel Mills during this same period.

Azim Sahib is always in demand. No sooner had he left the Marine Academy in 1991, the Delhi Mercantile Society got hold of him, and virtually forced him to become the principal of their school in Karachi, a position he continued to hold until recently. His students from every school and age have revered Azim Sahib.

He recalls that when the late Capt (PN) S.I. Malik (later commodore) was the Principal at Petaro, he sent Mr Kaleem (Admin Officer) to personally invite Azim Sahib to come to Petaro and preside over a declamation contest. The invitation letter was signed, "Your most obedient pupil from Hasanabdal."

A car was sent to Karachi to bring Azim Sahib with full honours to Petaro. Upon arrival, he was requested to sit in the Principal's chair once again, which he did rather reluctantly. When asked how he felt, Azim Sahib said: "I feel very light with no responsibilities." Indeed, it is a reminder for every principal of Cadet College in the future that the seat is loaded with responsibilities. Not every one is made of the mettle to discharge those responsibilities with justice, honour, love, integrity, honesty, strong leadership, and a proper sense of direction.

When I asked Azim Sahib to list out his achievements at Petaro, he seemed to be at a loss for words. Is it because what others would look at as achievements are considered as simple work in the normal course of duty by him? Or is it that he would like to avoid talking about these out of humility before the Lord?

Whatever it is, all I could get him to state was that the college flourished in academics while he was the principal. He led the college through a difficult turbulent period after the fall of East Pakistan, and maintained the discipline that seems to have broken down all over the country.

I would like to remind our readers of one other interesting Petarian personality who had a close affinity for Azim Sahib. This was the late Syed Maqsood Ali, our English teacher at Petaro. Maqsood Sahib was also Azim Sahib's teacher in Lucknow. It is indeed an honour for those of us Petarians who studied under Maqsood Sahib.

Probably the most unforgettable story that Maqsood Sahib used to narrate was about the 2 tigers he shot with one bullet. None of us believed him, and we would have a great laugh over his insistence. While he was at Petaro, he used to wear very thick eyeglasses, and used to have great difficulty in seeing beyond his nose.

Lastly, I would also like to bring back the memory of the first Mrs Azim, who expired in a car accident near Hyderabad while we were at Petaro in early 1966. She was buried outside the perimeter wall of the college. She will remain a part of Petaro forever.

Azim Sahib then married again in the late-1960s. His second wife expired on March 6, 2005. May Allah have Mercy on both his wives and grant them place in the *Jannatul Firdaus*.

That in brief is Azim Sahib. I encourage every single Petarian to visit our noble teacher, vice principal and principal, and experience a man who has devoted his life to education and service to this nation. On behalf of all Petarians, I salute Azim Sahib. We also pray for his health. May Allah grant him the strength and the capability to keep on striving for the betterment of this *ummat* as he always has!

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