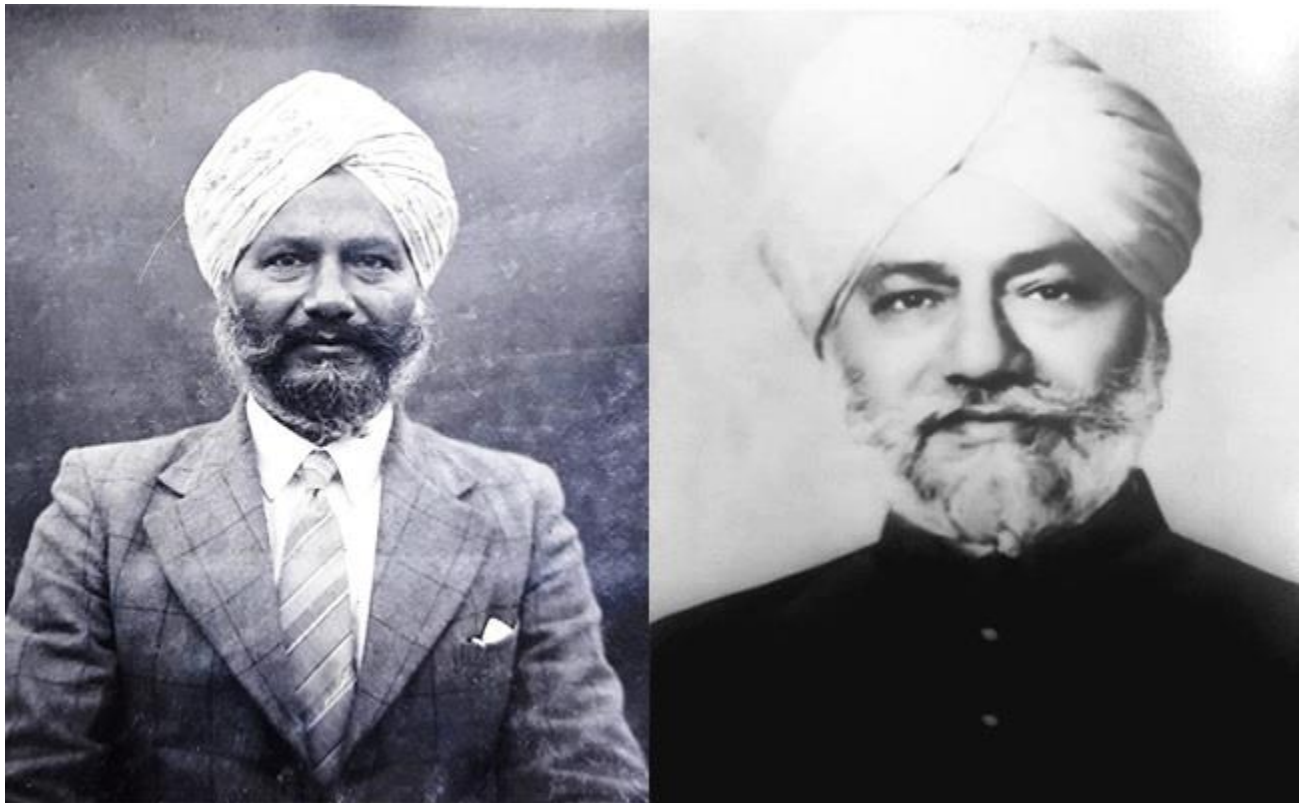


# Principal Tara Singh Randhawa

(Father of Engineering Education in Punjab)

*He rose from the grassroots level of Rural Punjab where education was not given any importance in farming communities during early twentieth century. He was a teetotaler and believed in the motto "simple living and high thinking".*



**Principal Tara Singh Randhawa**

*(Left: After his return from London in 1940, Right: His Portrait in 1970)*

By: Hardev Singh Virk

Tara Singh was born in village Thetharke, inhabited by Jat Sikh Randhawas in the vicinity of Dera Baba Nanak, presently on the border of Pakistan in

District Gurdaspur on 1st Feb., 1899. His family was not rich but of moderate means. His father Bagh Singh owned a few acres of land in the village but he was keen to educate his son. Tara Singh received his primary education in Government Primary School, Dharamkot Randhawa. He passed his Matriculation examination from Government High School at Dera Baba Nanak in the First division and securing First position in the district. At that time, Gurdaspur district was so backward in education that he had to travel to Amritsar for appearing in Matriculation examination. It was his first trip to Amritsar and first experience of train travel.

He joined Khalsa College, Amritsar as a science student and passed F.Sc. (Intermediate in Science) in 1918 securing First division. Encouraged by his Science teachers, he joined Thomson College of Engineering, Roorkee (1847-1949), one of the oldest in Asia, and completed a dual degree course in Mechanical and Electrical Engineering in 1921 with Honours in both. He brought laurels to his family, the Sikh community and his home state Punjab by standing FIRST in the Thomson College. This College was upgraded to University of Roorkee in 1949 and then to Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) in 2001. He joined N-W Railway as Apprentice Engineer for practical training of two years to complete the requirement of his engineering degree.

Tara Singh was highly qualified for any job in the engineering services of British India but he preferred to join teaching profession. He joined as Vice-Principal of Victoria Diamond Jubilee Hindu Technical Institute, Lahore in 1923 and taught there for 3 years. It may be of interest to know that this Technical Institute was first of its kind set up for commercial and industrial development of Punjab in June 1897, coinciding with the Golden Jubilee celebrations of Queen Victoria in India. Its inaugural address was delivered by Professor Ruchi Ram Sahni, himself a brilliant Scientist in area of Chemistry and a great promoter of Science in Punjab, on 21st June, 1897. When Puran Singh returned from Tokyo University after his training in

Pharmaceutical Chemistry in 1904, he was made its Principal but he left to join FRI (Forest Research Institute), Dehradun in 1906.

Tara Singh joined as Lecturer in Maclagan Engineering College of Lahore in 1926. This college was founded by Sir Edward Douglas Maclagan, the Governor of Punjab in 1923 under the name Mughalpura Technical College, which was renamed as Maclagan Engineering College in 1925, to commemorate the services of the Governor to Punjab. After Partition of India, it gave birth to two institutions; University of Engineering and Technology, Lahore in Pakistan and Punjab Engineering College, Chandigarh, now a deemed university of Indian Punjab.

Tara Singh started his long innings in engineering education in Punjab after joining this premier institution. He was among the founding members of its teaching faculty and perhaps the first Indian and a Sikh to teach in this college. He started as Lecturer in Mechanical engineering department but shifted to Electrical engineering after two years where he continued to teach for next twelve years. In 1937, he was sanctioned study leave and he joined London University. He passed B.Sc. (Hons.) in Civil Engineering from London University and returned to join as Assistant Professor of Civil engineering in this college in 1940. He was promoted as Professor of Civil engineering in 1944.



Tara Singh with his vintage car in London University (1938)

As a biographer of Tara Singh, I fail to comprehend why he changed his field from Mechanical/ Electrical to Civil engineering. Why he did not opt for higher studies to Master/ Doctorate level in his chosen profession? The only reason which comes to my mind must be some obligation of his study leave for which he had to opt for Civil engineering. Perhaps, Tara Singh wanted to make a hat trick by completing a full-fledged course in Civil engineering in London. He is a rarest of the rare teachers who was qualified to teach all

three branches of engineering in India. After his return to Punjab, he continued to teach Civil engineering till the last before his retirement. He was a popular teacher in Theory of Structures and Strength of Materials in Civil engineering education in India.

After partition of India, Maclagan College, renamed as Punjab Engineering College, was temporarily shifted to Roorkee in United Provinces (UP) on the campus of Thomson College of engineering. It was shifted to Chandigarh, the new capitol of Punjab, in 1955. Tara Singh remained as Professor and Head of Civil Engineering and Vice-Principal of this college for seven years from 1948 – 1954. He was promoted as Principal when the College shifted to its new campus in Chandigarh in 1955. He retired as Principal on 31st May, 1956.

Punjab and Bengal were the only two states which were divided during Partition of India in 1947. After Partition, east Punjab joined India and west part became Pakistan. For the development of Indian Punjab, new Universities and Engineering Colleges were created. Guru Nanak Engineering College (GNEC), Ludhiana and Thapar College of Engineering and Technology (TIET), Patiala were both founded in 1956. The foundation stone of GNEC was laid by Dr. Rajindra Prasad, the first President of India on 8th April, 1956. Nankana Sahib Educational Trust (NSET) was set up to run this College. The land for this College was donated by the Panchayat of Gill village and the present Campus is located in the Gill Park.

NSET was in the lookout for a suitable Principal of GNEC. What a coincidence? Tara Singh retired on 31st May 1956 from Punjab Engineering College, Chandigarh and joined as Principal of GNEC on 1st June, 1956 without enjoying a single day of retirement. He was a stalwart of engineering education in Punjab and hence the best choice for this Sikh institution. He started from a scratch and built this institution with full zeal

and dedication into a global institute of engineering education. He served as Principal for 14 years and retired on 30th June, 1970. After his retirement, he was appointed as Director of GNEC but he left after three months.



**The latest Aerial View of GNDEC Campus main Buildings (2024)**

GNEC is one of the premier institutions of Northern India. It caters to the needs of rural areas of Punjab and the Sikh community. The admission rules allowed 70 percent reservation quota for students who had passed their primary, middle or high school examination from rural areas of Punjab. As a minority institution, it has 50% reservation for the Sikh community. In the beginning, it was affiliated to Punjab University, Chandigarh but presently, it is affiliated to Punjab Technical University (PTU) Jalandhar. It is the first engineering college of Punjab which has been conferred the Autonomous Status by University Grants Commission, New Delhi since 2012.

In 1956, there was lack of highly trained engineering faculty in Punjab. Principal Tara Singh took special care in recruitment of faculty. He was heading a private institution but always took decisions on merit without bothering about political interference which was rampant in Punjab. Teaching standards were so high that most of the Toppers of Punjab University in Engineering disciplines belonged to GNEC. This college was known for its discipline. Principal Tara Singh was a strict disciplinarian; he used to check the entry of students and teachers as his daily routine. Punctuality of teachers was an order of the day. I served GNEC for two years (1963-65) in Applied Physics Department and can vouchsafe for the integrity, honesty of purpose and discipline maintained by the Principal.

Tara Singh expired in 1992 at the ripe old age of 93. He left behind two sons, late Er. Prahlad Singh retired as Chief Engineer from department of Irrigation in Punjab. The younger, Gurcharan Singh Randhawa, retired as Comptroller Punjab Agriculture University, Ludhiana. His daughter, Parkash Kaur was married to late Er. Parshan Singh Dhesi, retired as Managing Director, Punjab Tubewell Corporation.

Tara Singh left behind a rich legacy in the shape of GNEC and its students who are serving all over the globe. The GENCO Alumni Association has its Chapters all over North America and Europe. GNEC graduates (Genconians) have found success in a variety of diverse fields including cultural, political, public and private sectors in India and abroad.

Principal Tara Singh can be rightly called the Father of Engineering Education in Punjab. He rose from the grassroots level of Rural Punjab where education was not given any importance in farming communities during early twentieth century. He was a teetotaler and believed in the motto "simple living and high thinking". He always took interest in the education of poor students. He believed that the real function of a teacher is not so much in imparting

knowledge as in inspiring the pupil and instilling a spirit to learn. He was a real Role Model of students of rural Punjab in engineering education.

**Acknowledgement:** I am grateful to Sardar Gurchran Singh Randhawa (Ludhiana), son of Principal Tara Singh for providing the salient features of life history of his father. I owe my thanks to Dr. Surinder Kaur Randhawa, d-in-law of Tara Singh and Doctor Rupri Virk of San Jose, California, for the supply of Photos of her grandfather. Dr Jaswant Singh Bhatti, an old colleague of GNEC and active member of GENCO motivated me for this write up.



(Scholar and scientist Hardev Singh Virk retired from Amritsar-based Guru Nanak Dev University in 2002 after serving as Founder Head Physics Department and Dean Academics. Ex-Professor of Eminence, Punjabi University, Patiala. He is the present Visiting Professor at SGGS World University, Fatehgarh Sahib (Punjab), India).

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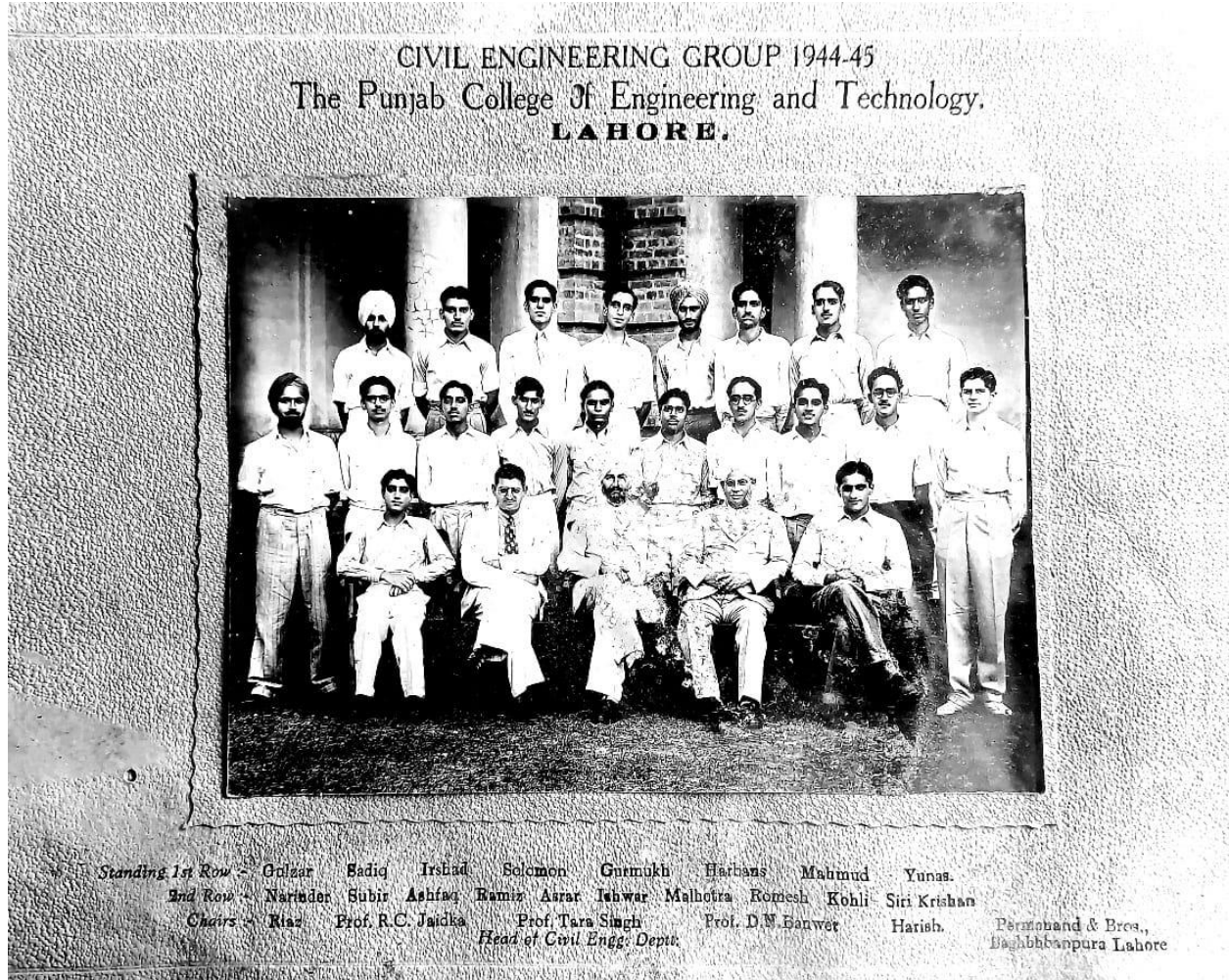
And here is a  
Special Feature now

**Following Rare Photographs are  
collected by**

**Manjit Randhawa (1973-M) from dear Harinder Singh Randhawa  
grandson of  
Principal Tara Singh ji.**



# Picture No. 1



Prof. Tara Singh ji

as

**Head of Civil Engg Deptt at**

**The Punjab College of Engineering & Technology**

**LAHORE**

**in**

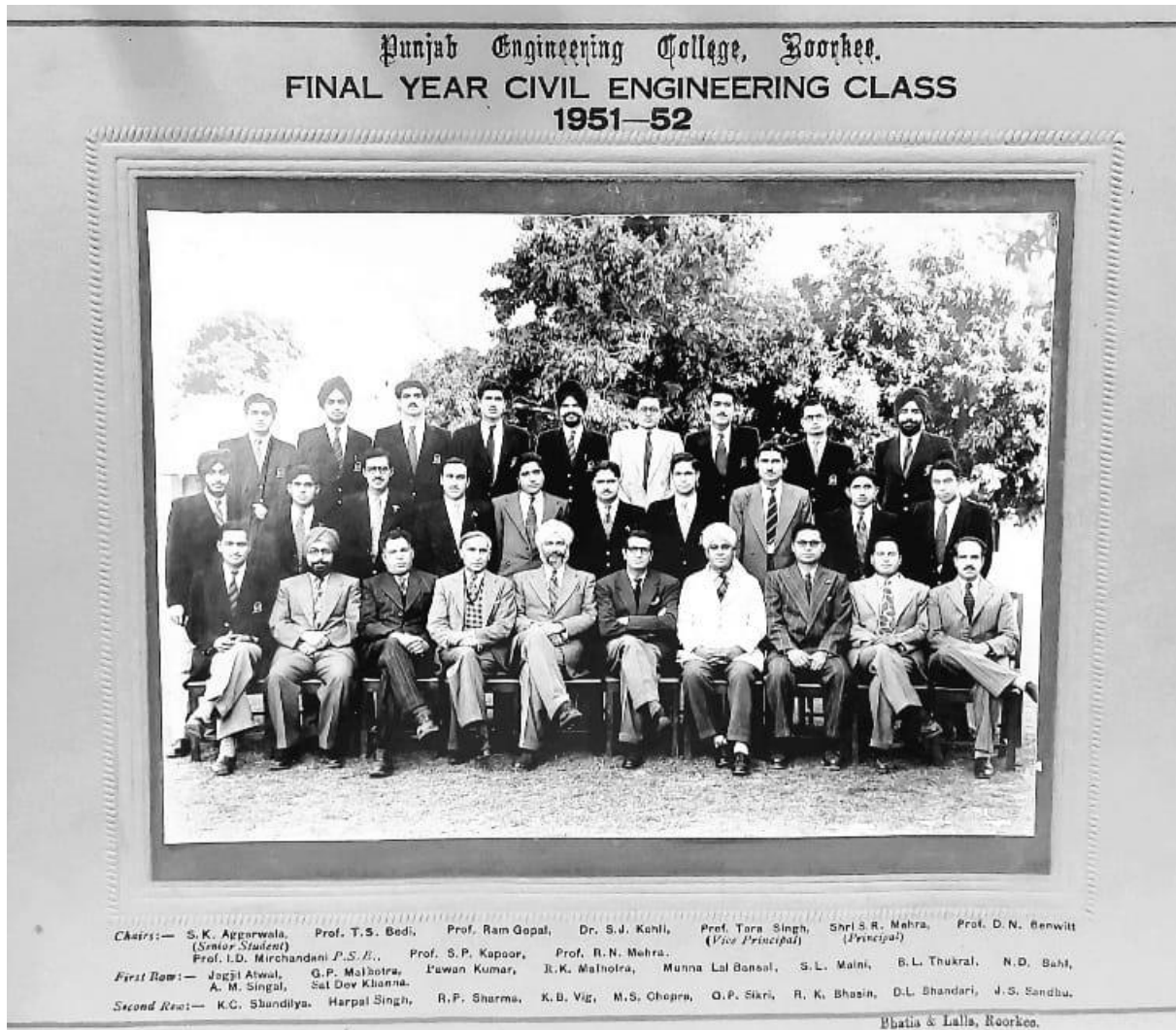
**1945**

## Picture No. 2



Prof. Tara Singh ji with  
his colleagues and friends for a Special Photograph at a  
**LAHORE STUDIO**  
in  
**1946**

## Picture No. 3



Prof. Tara Singh ji

as a

**Vice Principal at**

**Punjab Engineering College**

**Roorkee**

**in**

**1952**