

INDIAN FREEDOM FIGHTERS IN CENTRAL ASIA (1914-1939)

The people of subcontinent considered national freedom precious asset and at the out set of British imperialism in India they embarked on a voyage to get back their cherished freedom. Their aim was one and that was freedom, but people with different bent of mind used different means to achieve that goal, some opted for constitutional means others for outright arm and struggle against imperialism. On the eve of First World War, the Muslims of British India were at the horns of dilemma; on the one hand British rulers sought their help in the war while on the other their co-religionists Turks were in the opposite camp along with Germany against Britain. The entry of Turkey in the War in November 1914 on the side of Germany roused a widespread Pan-Islamic and nationalist sentiments among the millions of Muslims in South Asia including Afghanistan.

The Sultan of Turkey, who was the successor of *Khalifa* and the head of Islamic world in the eyes of orthodox Muslims, wrote a letter to the Amir of Afghanistan asking him to proclaim a crusade against the imperialists and not to refrain from announcing a Holy War (*Jihad*) against Britain and instigating the frontier tribes against (British) India.¹ This news reached the subcontinent that the Sultan had declared war and that he had also asserted that this war was a *Jihad*. The famous Egyptian Pan-Islamist, Abdul Aziz Shawesh was appointed by the committee of Union and Progress to work against the Allies. He was in touch with Maulana Mohammad Ali, Maulana Zafar Ali Khan and Imam ud-Din of Calcutta. Maulana Mohammad -ul-Hasan was also thinking of the possibilities of organizing

rebellion in the sub-continent to help the Turks. He had an apt pupil in Maulana Ubaidullah Sindhi who was almost a born revolutionary. In Dehli Maulana Ubaidullah Sindhi organized the Nazarat-ul-Maarif with the help of Hakim Ajmal Khan and Nawab Wiqar-ul-Mulk. The institution was established to popularize Islamic teaching among the Muslim youth coming under the influence of British India's secular education. Here he was also able to write two pamphlets stressing the importance of World Muslim solidarity. In these pamphlets he also advocated a plan of action to the effect that there should be an invasion of the subcontinent from outside followed by a rebellion against the British inside.²

Maulana Ubaidullah Sindhi had been working in close cooperation with Maulana Mohamud-ul-Hasan who thought that the work could best be carried out by going to some Muslim country and therefore he decided to go to Hijaz and asked Maulana Ubaidullah Sidhi to go to Afghanistan which had become a centre of German, Turkish and Indian rebel activities. Besides; he made efforts to activate the *Mujahid* camp on the Frontier and sent his trusted emissaries to the area for bringing about unity among the tribes and removed their misunderstanding about the Mujahideen. He was able to achieve to a considerable degree because he had his pupils in the area who were trusted by the local population. Haji Sahib of Turangzai was also persuaded to move from the British settled areas into the tribal territory.³ There were two main camps of Mujahideen in the Frontier and Tribal areas. Many Muslim freedom fighters visited these camps:

1. Asmast Camp: Asmast was a small village in Bunnar area of Swat near Swabi.. When Syed Ahmad Shaheed and Shah Ismail Shaheed lost their lives at Balakot in 1831 against the Sikhs their disciples Maulana Valayat Ali and Inayat Ali organized the Mujahideen and made Bunnar area the centre of their activities. Zafar Hassan Aibek in his *Aap Beeti* says that he reached Asmast on 8th February 1915. On 11th February Rais-ul-Mujahideen at Asmast Maulana Abdul Karim died and was succeeded by his nephew Niamatullah.⁴

2. Chamarkand Camp: Chamarkand is a small village near Afghan border in Muhmand area. At the end of 19th century Najmudeen Akhonzada alias Haday Mulla (British called him Mad Mulla) made Chamarkand his base. Haday Mullah was a disciple of Syed Ahmad Shaheed. He fought Jihad against the British throughout his life.⁵ Shakh-i-Chamarkand was the successor of Haday Mulla. In Chamarkand Maulana Mohammad Ali Qusoori met three great freedom fighters, Turangzai Haji Sahib, Shandakay Mulla and Mulla Sahib Habara.⁶ Mulvi Abdur Rahim alias Mulvi Bashir organized Mujahideen in the Frontier and Tribal areas against the British.⁷ The Indian revolutionaries abroad had been carrying on anti British activities in England, France and U.S.A. since 1905. With the beginning of the First World War, most of them joined hands with Germany to overthrow the British rule in India. An Indian National Party was formed in Berlin with the help of German foreign Office and schemes were made for action from the Middle East and Far East for the overthrow of the Imperial rule in India. Two prominent revolutionaries, Raja Mahendra Pratap and Maulvi Barkatullah, accompanied Von Hentig's mission to win the support of Afghanistan and make it a springboard against British. Mahendra Pratap and other Indian revolutionaries were aware of the fact that Afghanistan could not openly join their side in the ordinary circumstances without the help of money, arms, ammunition and troops. Germany and other countries were approached for help. These revolutionaries even tried to bring Germany and Russia together against the British. They formed the first provisional government of India in Kabul on first December 1915.⁸

Mahendra Pratap gave the following names of Ministers and other active members of the Provisional Government:

1. Mahendra Pratap
President
2. Maulana Barkatullah
Premier
3. Maulana Ubaidullah Sindhi
Home Minister

4. Maulvi Mohammad Bashir
War Minister
5. Champa Kraman Pillai
Foreign Minister
6. Shamsheer Singh aliases Mathura Singh
Minister
7. Khuda Bakhsh Plenipotentiaries
8. Mohammad Ali Qusoori

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9. Rahmat ali Zakariya

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10. Zafar Hasan
11. Allah Nawaz
12. Harnam Singh
13. Gujar Singh alias Kala Singh
14. Abdul Aziz
15. Abdul Bari

Amir Habibullah Khan did not want to attack India. He made it clear to the Turco-German-Indian mission that unless the Turkish or German army reached Afghanistan, the declaration of war against Russia and Britain would be unwise. But he reiterated that he would declare war against the British on the very day the vanguard of their army entered the frontiers of Afghanistan. He knew it very well that it was not possible as the Russian and the British forces had already blocked all the roads leading to Afghanistan and the attack of British army on Iraq was merely to check the advance of German and Turkish forces.⁹ Maulana Ubaidullah Sindhi says that British requisitioned the services of a holy man, Hazrat Chahar Bagh, who persuaded the Amir to postpone the attack on the British India.¹⁰

The Silk letter conspiracy (*Tahreek-e-Reshmi-Rumal*) also reveals the efforts of freedom fighters in Afghanistan for the liberation of India from the clutches of British imperialism. The following are the main points of the sedition (Rowlatt)

Committee Report about the Silk letter conspiracy. In August 1916, the plot known to Government as the "Silk Letter case" was discovered. This was a project hatched in India with the object of destroying the British Rule by means of an attack on North West Frontier, supplemented by a Mohammadan rising in the country. For execution of this Plan Maulana Ubaidullah Sindhi crossed the North West Frontier early in August 1915 with three companions Abdullah, Fateh Mohammad and Mohammad Ali. Maulana Mahmud Hasan, head-Maulvi in the school of Deoband also agreed with Ubaidullah Sindhi. On September 18, 1915 Mahmud Hasan alongwith Muhammad Mian and other friends followed Ubaidullah's example by leaving India, not however for the north, but for Hijaz. In Kabul, Ubaidullah Sindhi met Turko-German Mission with whom he fraternized and after sometime he was joined by his Deoband friend Maulvi Mohammad Mian Ansari. This man had accompanied Maulana Mahmaud Hasan to Arabia and returned in 1916 with a declaration of *Jihad* received by the Maulana from the hand of Ghalib Pasha the then Turkish Military Governor of Hijaz. While on his way Maulana Mohammad Mian distributed the copies of this document known as "Ghalib Nama" both in India and the Frontier Tribes.¹¹

The Provisional government also proposed to form an alliance with the Turkish Government and in order to accomplish this object Maulana Ubaidullah Sindhi addressed a letter to his old friend, Maulana Mahmud Hasan. This together with another letter dated the 8th Ramazan (9th July 1916) written by Mohammad Mian Ansari, he forwarded under a covering note addressed to Sheikh Abdul Rahim of Hyderabad Sindh, a person who had since absconded. Sheikh Abdul Rahim was requested in the note to send on the enclosures through the hand of some reliable *Hajj* (Pilgrim) to Mahmud Hassan at Mecca, or even to convey it himself if no trustworthy messengers were available. We have ourselves seen the letters to Mahmud Hassan, which came into British hands. They are neatly and clearly written on yellow silk. Mohammad Mian's letter mentioned the previous arrival of the Germans, Turks and turkish mission, the return of the Germans, the staying on of the Turks but without work, the

run away students, the circulation of Ghalib Nama, the provisional government and the projected formation of the "Army of God". This army was to draw recruits from India and to bring about an alliance among Islamic rulers. Mahmud Hassan was to convey all these particulars to the Ottoman Government. Maulana Ubaidullah's letter contained a tabular statement of the "Army of God". Its headquarters were to be at Medina and Mahmud Hassan himself was to be General in Chief. Secondary headquarters under local generals were to be established at Constantinople, Tehran, and Kabul. The general at Kabul would be Maulana Ubaidullah himself. The table contains the names of three patrons, 12 field marshals, and many other high Military officers.¹² In December 1916 Maulana Mahmud Hassan and four of his companions, Maulana Hussain Ahmad Madani, Maulana Uzair Gul, Maulana Hakim Musarrat Hussain, and Mulana Wahid Ahmad fell into British hands. They were now prisoners of war interned in a British possession. Ghalib Pasha was also a prisoner of war. The report concludes that the facts narrated establish clearly the anxiety of some Muslim fanatics to provoke first sedition and then rebellion in India.¹³

In "Tahreek-Reshmi-Rumal" Maulana Hussain Ahmad Madani says that Ubaidullah Sindhi selected Sheikh Abdul Haq for taking the silken handkerchief to India.¹⁴ The letters did not reach Mahmud Hussain. These letters came into British hands. Zafar Hassan Aibek says that the letter was either passed on to the government by Sheikh Abdul Haq and Rab Nawaz Khan or if it is believed that the letter had been delivered to Sheikh Abdul Rahim and the British Army recovered it from him, the secret must have been disclosed to the government by the aforesaid persons.¹⁵

The revolutionaries therefore, did not succeed in their mission due to the Pro-British attitude of Amir Habibullah when Amir Amunullah became the Amir of Afghanistan he took keen interest in the activities of the Provisional Government. The Indian revolutionaries played an important role in the Third Anglo-Afghan War. During the reign of Amanullah, the government of Afghanistan had sent a mission to Russia under

the leadership of Mohammad Wali Khan for establishing political contacts with the Bolshevik Government. Maulana Sindhi also sent his nephew, Aziz Ahmad, with the deputation who later on joined the University of Asiatic Toilers at Moscow for studies. Maulana Sindhi sent Khushi Mohammad to Russia in the beginning of 1920 when the conditions there had completely changed in consequence of the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. The Government of the Czar had been displaced and the alliance with the British Government was terminated Russia had now become an adversary of the British Government.¹⁶ In March 1919 at the eighth Congress of the Russian Communist Party, Bukharin said "if we propound the solution of the right of self determination for the colonies, the Hottentots, the Negroes, the Indians etc, we lose nothing by it. On the contrary we gain; for the national gain as a whole will damage foreign imperialism. The most outright nationalist movement, for example that of the Hindus, is only water for our mill, since it contributes to the destruction of English imperialism."¹⁷ Later in 1919 at a second All-Russian Congress of communist organizations of the East, Lenin said "the socialist revolution will not be only or chiefly a struggle of the revolutionary proletarians in each country against its bourgeoisie-no, it will be a struggle of all colonies and countries oppressed by imperialism, of all dependent countries, against international imperialism."¹⁸

The leaders of Comintern and the Eastern peoples found common cause in a common hatred, based on different though not incompatible grounds of English imperialism. What united them was, first and foremost, prospect of a joint campaign against a common enemy.¹⁹ A body calling itself "the Indian revolutionary organization in Turkistan" sent a petition to the first congress of the peoples of the east at Baku on September 1, 1920, from Tashkent asking for help for the oppressed 315 millions of the people of India but asking that "this help should be granted without any interference in the domestic or religious life of those who await liberation from the yoke of capitalism and imperialism".²⁰ E.H. Carr says that the Indians were turning not towards the communism of Moscow but towards the political strength of Moscow and on the other hand, the Comintern was

not immune from a temptation to regard the peoples of the east as pieces on the chessboard of the diplomatic war with the Britain and her allies (Entente).²¹

The aim of Maulana Sindhi's life was the service of Islam. In a letter to Iqbal Shadai Maulana Sindhi says, "The objective of Maulana Abul Kalam Azad is to fulfil the injunctions of the holy Quran for the achievement of this objective Maulana Azad is cooperating with Hindus. I have the same goal in my mind and to achieve it I cooperate with the Russians (Bolsheviks)".²² Maulana Ubaidullah Sindhi wanted to establish contacts with that government to get their assistance for the Indian freedom movement. For this purpose he sent Khushi Mohammad to Tashkent, where the Bolshevik government had established an Eastern University for training the Asians for propaganda against the Imperialist powers and to propagate Bolshevik ideas among them. The office incharge of the Indian section was a Bengali Hindu, namely M.H.Roy. Khushi Mohammad first met him and then went to Moscow, where he contacted some leaders of the Comintern (communist International). Here, Khushi Mohammad studied communist literature and he became a member of the communist party. He then returned to Kabul. He had been directed to remain in touch with the Russian Embassy of Kabul and take money from it when Maulana Ubaidullah Sindhi needed it for his mission.²³

M.N. Roy, a young Indian revolutionary, reached Moscow at the time of second congress of the Communist International in 1920. He made a plan with the Bolshevik leaders in Russia for the liberation of India. He left for Tashkent immediately after the third anniversary of the October Revolution with two train loads of arms (Pistols, rifles, machine guns, hand grenades, light artillery etc), money (gold coins, bullion and pond and rupee notes), dismantled aeroplanes and the complete outfit of an air battalion; the personnel for the latter and the staff of a military training school.²⁴ From Tashkent all this material and men were to be transported to Afghanistan where M.N. Roy was to raise, equip and train an army of Indian liberation, to be recruited from those Indian Muslims who,

responding to a call of the Khilafat committee, had left India for Afghanistan. This army, with the mercenary support of the tribesman, was to acquire the operational bases in the tribal territory for the purpose of establishing a revolutionary government in India. Roy was of the opinion that if the revolutionary government proclaimed and enforced a programme of social reforms, workers and masses would enthusiastically support the new regime, with the result that the vested interests and the imperialist power would go down in defeat. But the establishment of the advance base in Kabul and operational bases on the Indian frontier presupposed consent and active cooperation of the Afghan government. When contacted, Kabul proposed that arms and money should be deposited with the Afghan diplomatic mission at Tashkent to be delivered to M.N.Roy in the proper place and at the proper time. M.N. Roy says that it was a tricky proposal and a clever move to acquire some Russian arms and gold. Moscow saw through the trick, it did not fall into the trap. The plan to build a base in Afghanistan for Indian army liberation had to be abandoned.²⁵

This failure of the plan did not dampen M.N.Roy's enthusiasm; for he started giving political and military training to about 125 *Muhajireen* (Indian Muslim emigrants who had come to Soviet Central Asia on their way to Turkey) in the Indian Military school that he opened in Tashkent, he also organized the Indian communist Party at Tashkent and started making contacts with the leaders of the Indian liberation movement.²⁶ The Anglo-Soviet Trade Agreement of March 1921 compelled M.N.Roy to leave Tashkent for Moscow. Due to this agreement Britain succeeded in curtailing the activities of Indian revolutionaries in Central Asia. In Afghanistan, Amanullah signed a treaty with Britain on November 22, 1921. Because of this treaty anti-British revolutionaries like Mahendra Pratap, Ubaidullah and Mohammad Barakatullah left Afghanistan.²⁷ In these circumstances Maulana Ubaidullah Sindhi along with his party of nine companions said good-bye to Kabul and set out for a journey to Russia on Sunday the 15th October 1922. The party included Zafar Hassan Abek, Khushi Mohammad, Iqbal Shadai,

Umar Zafar Masud, Abdul Rashid, Abdul Aziz. Sevanath Bannerji (a Bengali Hindu teacher of Mathematics at Habibiah School Kabul, joined the party as an adventurer).²⁸

This paper highlights the activities of Indian Muslims who migrated to Afghanistan and then to Central Asia to get support for the Indian freedom. The First World War started between the developed countries of Europe basically on the disagreement on who should exploit how much of the natural and human resources of the backward Afro-Asian countries. Though technically the political rivalry between Tsarist Russia and British India, popularly known as the Great Game, had ended in 1907 settlement but the Bolshevik revolution in Russia had turned things upside down so far that understanding between the two great powers was concerned. Indian migrants during their stay in Afghanistan, Central Asia and Moscow passed through several ups and downs which influenced their thought-processes to a considerable extent. The effort to create an alliance between Germany, Afghanistan and Ottomaon Empire against Britain did not materialize, the institution of Khilafat was abolished in Turkey but their struggle and sacrifices highlighted hitherto one neglected point, which was successfully utilized in the Indian freedom struggle later on, the Soviet factor that is the emergence of the Soviet Union as great power and its tactful and shrewd policy of support to the people of the colonies against imperialism. The Second World War also weakened all colonial powers. The British decision-makers realized that the game had changed and it will be highly unlikely to contain Indian freedom movement supported by their Ideological rival i.e. USSR. They knew very well that some people may be enslaved for sometime but all people can not be enslaved for all the time and the time has come to leave the subcontinent without bloodshed and honour intact.

Notes and References

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