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Silken Handkerchief Letters Conspiracy: Maulana Mahmudul Hasan

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Abstract- Silken Handkerchief Letters Conspiracy, as dubbed by the British, was a movement of India's freedom struggle in the second decade of the twentieth century. It was started by Ulema of Deoband particularly Shaikhul Hind Maulana Mahmudul Hasan. Maulana Obaidullah Sindhi was another most important leader of this movement. This movement was a plan to attack on British India and oust the British from the Indian subcontinent for which he launched a programme to train volunteers from among his disciples in India and abroad. He mobilized the support of the governments of foreign Muslim powers, especially Afghanistan and Turkey. He also planned to get support of the Germany and Russia to overthrow the British rule from India. In order to materialize the programme into reality, a planned conspiracy against the British was started in 1913, but somehow it could not become successful. This movement gained strength during the First World War, when the British Government in India was busy in the war efforts. In August 1916, some letters written on silk fell into the hands of the Punjab CID of the British Government of India. These letters were containing the details of forming an army (*Hizbollah* or Party of Allah) and getting the support of the governments of Turkey and Afghanistan. Consequently, Maulana Mahmudul Hasan was arrested and deported to Malta Island.

Keywords: Silk Letter; Maulana Mahmudul Hasan; Maulana Obaidullah Sindhi; Deoband; Malta.

I. Introduction

The role of the Muslims and more particularly, the roles of the Ulema (Muslim Theologians) in the freedom movement were constantly ignored in the writings of history of the freedom movement. Excepting some of the Urdu books no stress has ever been given to their participation of the freedom struggle. Generally, their nationalist activities were dubbed as pan-Islamic and correlated their national efforts with the Islam and Islamic countries rather than Indian nationalism. This work is a humble effort to highlight the nationalistic works of Indian Ulema who sacrificed their lives and property for the sake of their motherland. Through this paper, it has been tried to prove that most of the Indian Ulema devoted

their whole life for the Indian freedom struggle. Maulana Mahmudul Hasan and Maulana Obaidullah Sindhi worked the same efforts of Indian independence as Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose had launched his military attacks two decades later during the Second World War.

From the very beginning of his life Maulana Mahmudul Hasan was bitterly against the British rule in India. He considered the British as responsible of deteriorating positions of the Muslims in India. He learnt the lessons from the failure of 1857 and wanted to uproot the British hegemony by another planned revolution and military attack with the foreign countries assistance. Maulana Mahmudul Hasan not only actively engaged in this effort but openly invited all his colleagues of Deoband madrasa to follow the same. By reminding the aims of Maulana Qasim Nanautavi behind the establishment of Darul Uloom Deoband, he told to his colleagues and students, “Had the honourable teacher (Hazrat Nanautavi) established this madrasa for teaching and learning, for educating and being educated only? The madrasa was established before me. As far as I know this institution was established after the failure of the revolt of 1857 so that there might be feuded a centre under the influence of which people might be prepared to make good the failure of 1857.”¹

Under the guidance of Maulana Mahmudul Hasan, the Deoband School was coloured in national passion and along with education, the service to the nation was also their primary duty. In 1904 Sir James D. Latouche, the Governor of U.P., came to see Darul Uloom Deoband. During his visit, he talked with the teachers and students, asked about their native-places and inquired about their aim and object in seeking knowledge. The students said that their ideal was the revival of religion and service to the country and the community.²

This was the period when Indian Muslims were helplessly wandering how to restore their lost prestige and which way to follow. Feeling the mentality and position of the Indian Muslims and the world-wide issue of Turkey, Maulana Mahmudul Hasan prepared an action plan of revolution and military attack with the support of the foreign powers. He formed this idea in the beginning of his practical life, but he could not translate it into action due to the lack of the followers against the British. Maulana Mahmudul Hasan became successful, to some extent, in creating a band of followers in 1913, when the national activities of Indian National Congress were suspended, and the Turkey was busy in the Balkan Wars. In spite of these favourable situations, the intensive movement could not be launched without any foreign support. Fortunately, the First World War provided him a fair opportunity when Turkey also joined the war against the British. Maulana Mahmudul Hasan found it a fair chance to get support of Turkey and Afghanistan and the Muslim youths of India. Through his activities, he increased the troubles of the English and gave some strength to Turkey.³

During this period, the British Government in India was busy in the war efforts and there was also a political peace in those days in India except a few second rates movements. During these periods of tranquility, the plan of military attack on British India began to be activated. The British in their reports had called this movement as Silken Letter Conspiracy managed by the Ulema of Deoband. It was so called by the British as some letters, written on yellow silken clothes, related to this movement, were fallen into the hands of the Punjab Government police in August 1916. After the investigations, it was found that the letters were written by Maulana Obaidullah Sindhi and Maulana Mohammad Mian Mansoor Ansari⁴ from Kabul in Afghanistan to Maulana Mahmudul Hasan then in Hijaz.⁵ The British Government, firstly, considered Maulana Sindhi as the mastermind of this conspiracy and soon a thorough investigation was started over the matter and found that an anti-Government nexus was working under Maulana Mahmudul Hasan of Deoband School. During the investigations on the lines of the letter, many suspects were arrested and imprisoned in India. About the Silk Letter episode Justice Rowlatt in his Sedition Committee Report writes, “In August 1916 the plot known to Government as the “Silk Letters” case was discovered. This was a project hatched in India with the object of destroying

British rule by means of an attack on the North-West Frontier, supplemented by a Mohammadan rising in this country.”⁶

II. Early Life and Career of Maulana Mahmudul Hasan

Maulana Mahmudul Hasan (1851-1920) was born in 1851 in Bareilly in Uttar Pradesh to a renowned scholar Maulana Zulfiqar Ali. His father Maulana Zulfiqar Ali was serving in the Education Department as Inspector of School under East India Company in that region. During the Rebellion of 1857, he was with his father in Meerut. Maulana Mahmudul Hasan received the traditional Islamic learning and Arabic and Urdu languages and went to Darul Uloom Deoband when it was newly established in 1866. He was the first student of that institution, and it is said that it was, first of all, Maulana Mahmudul Hasan, who opened the book before the teacher. After completing his basic studies in 1869-70, he was taught Hadith (Islamic Traditions) by Maulana Qasim Nanautawi and graduated in 1873. In 1874, Maulana Mahmudul Hasan was appointed as fourth teacher in Darul Uloom Deoband and promoted as Principal in 1890.⁷

The Political life of Maulana Mahmudul Hasan was full of the struggle and sacrifices. He wanted the freedom of India by forcefully ousting the British. For that purpose, he launched a long schemed movement to which the British called as Silk Letter Conspiracy. This movement was a plan to start an armed revolution against the British rule as well as the military attack on British India. In order to achieve his goal Maulana Mahmudul Hasan launched a programme to train volunteers from among his disciples in India and abroad. Before the beginning of the First World War, Maulana Mahmudul Hasan wanted to initiate the war of freedom by setting up an outfit called Hezbollah or Army of God. However, the war of liberation could not be launched without arms, ammunitions and foreign support. Therefore, he planned to secure support from outside India. He sent Maulana Obaidullah Sindhi to Kabul with a special mission and Maulana Mohammad Mian Mansoor Ansari to the independent tribes of the Frontier area to mobilize them to promote *Jihad* and war against the British rule.⁸

Maulana Mahmudul Hasan himself traveled to Hijaz (Saudi Arabia) in September 1915 to secure the Turkish support for his plan. In Hijaz, he met the Turkish Governor, Ghalib Pasha and obtained his signature on a war declaration. From Hijaz, Maulana Mahmudul Hasan wanted to go to the Frontier areas or Yeghistan. However, due to the leakage of silk letters, the plan of Jihad was exposed, and he was arrested as a war prisoner at Mecca along with Maulana Husain Ahmad Madani, Maulana Ozair Gul, Hakim Nusrat Husain and Maulana Waheed Ahmad. He was imprisoned at Malta where he remained for over three years until his release in 1920.⁹

After reaching Bombay, Maulana Mahmudul Hasan was told that now he was free along with his companions and there were no restrictions upon him. The Khilafat Committee of Bombay gave him a grand welcome. He went Deoband via Delhi where a glorious welcome was accorded to him. In the months of October-November 1920, Maulana Mahmudul Hasan seriously fell ill. In spite of his illness, Maulana supported the Khilafat cause and helped to establish the first national university at Aligarh, which later shifted to New Delhi and came to be known as Jamia Millia Islamia in New Delhi. During these times he was seriously ill and on 30 November 1920, his condition became hopeless and Maulana Mahmudul Hasan died in the evening of the same day.¹⁰

The last words of Maulana Mahmudul Hasan, before his death, were undoubtedly a preaching to his disciples to continue the war against the British. His last words were, “I have no sorrow for my death; what I am sorry for is that I am dying on bed. I had a desire to die in the battlefield in the cause of Allah proclaiming His Message of Truth and being cut into pieces in that crime.”¹¹

III. Life and Career of Maulana Obaidullah Sindhi

Maulana Obaidullah Sindhi (1872-1944) was one of the most active and prominent members of the faction of Indian Freedom Movement led by Ulema chiefly from Islamic School of Deoband. He was born to Ram Singh and Prem Kaur, a Sikh family of Sialkot. His early name was Boota Singh. Impressed by the truthfulness of Islam through reading, he embraced Islam during his student career itself in August 1887. The study of some Islamic books *Tuhfatul Hind*, *Ahwalul Akhirah* and *Taqwiatul Iman* by Maulana Obaidullah Sindhi was solely responsible for his conversion. After becoming a Muslim, he went to Sindh and from Sindh, he went to Deoband and enrolled in the Darul Uloom in 1888. At Deoband, he was associated with many noted Islamic scholars of that time such as Maulana Rasheed Ahmad Gangohi and Maulana Mahmudul Hasan.¹²

About his inclination of nationalism and his revolutionary programmes, Maulana Sindhi himself writes in his diary, "In the course my studies I had an occasion to read the biography of Maulana Mohammad Ismail Shaheed and developed a spiritual affiliation with him. At Deoband I also gained intimate knowledge of several events of the rising of 1857. Maulana Abdul Karim had narrated me an eye-witness account of the fall of Delhi..... Inspired by the letters of Maulana Shaheed I chalked out a political programme which was Islamic as well as revolutionary."¹³

Maulana Obaidullah Sindhi wanted to make the Deoband Darul Uloom a centre of national organization, politically of which the first step was the establishment of the *Jamiatul Ansar*. Meanwhile a serious chasm in certain academic matters appeared between him and some teachers of the Darul Uloom, and so he had to leave Deoband. Eventually, Maulana Mahmudul Hasan sent him to Delhi where he established an institution under the name of *Nazaratul Maarif al-Qurania*. This organisation was patronized, besides Maulana Mahmudul Hasan, by powerful personalities like Hakim Ajmal Khan and Nawab Waqarul Mulk. Maulana Mahmudul Hasan sent Maulana Sindhi to Afghanistan in 1915 because he thought that it was impossible to drive away the English from India without men and weapons. Maulana Mahmudul Hasan made the free zone of Yeghistan the centre of this movement. Maulana Mahmudul Hasan thought that this territory would help to meet out the necessities of his movement, which was co called as Silk Letter Movement.¹⁴

After a brief period of his stay in Kabul, Maulana Obaidullah Sindhi began to work on the planned strategy. He founded a Congress Committee in Kabul and affiliated it to the Indian National Congress. This was the first Congress Committee outside the British dominions. Along with this, he mobilised an army which he had named "*Hizbollah*" (Allah's Army). He also joined the newly formed Provisional Government of Independent India as Home Minister.¹⁵

Justice Rowlatt mentions a quote about him as described by a person known to Maulana Sindhi, "He was an extraordinary man for drawing up schemes, so that one would imagine he was ruler of a great empire, but when there was real work to be done he was lazy and indifferent about doing anything himself."¹⁶

Maulana Obaidullah Sindhi remained in Afghanistan until the end of the war. These times he was passing his times in exile as the leakage of the Silken Letters confirmed his involvement in the conspiracy against the British. In connection of those conspiracies, the British government issued an order for his exile. In these situations, it was better for him to stay in Kabul. After his stay in Kabul for seven years, he went to Moscow and from there to Turkey, where he stayed for two years in Istanbul. In 1925, Maulana Sindhi went to Mecca where he spent about fourteen years until 1938, learning and pondering over the philosophy of Islam. In 1937 the first Congress Government in UP withdrew the ban on him. As soon as the ban was lifted, Maulana Sindhi reached Deoband in 1939. He passed the last days of his life in Jamia

Millia Islamia, New Delhi. Maulana Obaidullah Sindhi expired on 21st August, 1944 in Deenpur village of the Bahawalpur state, where he had settled down at the fag-end of his life.¹⁷

IV. Beginning of the Movement

Maulana Mahmudul Hasan prepared a military plan, which he had chalked out to put an end to the British power in India. It was a well-organised plan with ramifications reaching outside the country also. The whole plan, in a nutshell, was to take help from Germany, Turkey and Afghanistan, and then declare war against the English through the independent tribesmen on the north-western border of India and simultaneously start a rebellion inside the country itself.

Maulana Mahmudul Hasan intended to give his plan a practical shape in 1913, but it could not become successful due to the lack of foreign support, activists, means and resources. This movement gained a momentum at the beginning of the First World War, when the Turkish Government joined the war against the British. On the pretext of Indian freedom and Turkish turmoil Maulana Mahmudul Hasan became successful in arraying Muslim youths against the British.

Maulana Mahmudul Hasan thought that it was impossible to expel the English from India without using force and violence. Maulana Mahmudul Hasan regarded Yeghistan a safe centre for revolution and get weapons and valorous militiamen. Since the youths of autonomous tribes of this area were fighting for a long time, he found it an opportunity to unite them and engage them in *Jihad*. In India, the time was also favourable for a military movement because the British Government was busy in the war efforts. In his work of military action plan Maulana Mahmudul Hasan was assisted by many of his associates such as Maulana Obaidullah Sindhi, Maulana Mohammad Miyan Anbathvi alias Mansoor Ansari, Maulana Husain Ahmad Madani, etc. Justice Rowlatt in his Sedition Committee Report says that Maulana Obaidullah Sindhi was behind all the conspiracies against the British Government. He says that while his stay in Deoband School, Maulana Obaidullah Sindhi wished to spread over India a pan-Islamic and anti-British movement. Rowlatt further says that Maulana Sindhi infected some of the staff and students with his own militant and anti-British ideas, and the principal person whom he influenced was Maulana Mahmudul Hassan, who had long been Head Maulvi in the school. Nevertheless, his plans were thwarted by the Manager and Committee, who dismissed him and some of his chief associates.¹⁸ However, refuting the claims of Justice Rowlatt, Maulana Sindhi gives credit of the military planning or beginning of this movement to Maulana Mahmudul Hasan. Maulana Sindhi writes in his diary that in 1909 Maulana Mahmudul Hasan had called him to Deoband and asked him to stay there and work for his organization *Jamiat-ul-Ansar*. Maulana Mohammad Sadiq Sindhi, Maulana Abu Mohammad Lahori and Maulvi Ahmad Ali helped him to work in this organization. After his work for four years, he shifted to Delhi and worked for *Nizarat-ul-Maarif* which was established in 1914.¹⁹

Regarding his stay in Delhi, Justice Rowlatt says that Maulana Obaidullah Sindhi had started a school in Delhi, and had put two books into circulation preaching militant fanaticism to Indian Mohammadans and impressing on them the supreme duty of *Jihad*. Rowlatt continued to say that the common object of this man and his friends, including the Maulana Mahmudul Hasan was to promote a great Muslim attack on India, which should synchronize with a Muslim rebellion.²⁰

Maulana Obaidullah writes in his diary that Maulana Mahmudul Hasan, Hakim Ajmal Khan and Nawab Waqarul Mulk were patrons of the organization *Nizarat-ul-Maarif* opened in Delhi in 1914. Maulana Mahmudul Hasan instructed him to stay in touch with youth power while living in Delhi. He further says that Maulana Mahmudul Hasan also came to Delhi and introduced him to Dr. Muktar Ansari and took him to Maulana Abul Kalam Azad and Maulana Mohammad Ali.²¹

Justice Rowlatt reports that after departure of Maulana Sindhi from Deoband to Delhi, he frequently used to visit Maulana Mahmudul Hassan at his residence at Deoband. Rowlatt also reports that secret meetings were held at the Maulana Mahmudul Hasan's house and men from the Frontier areas were also received to attend the meetings.²²

Maulana Mahmudul Hasan ordered Maulana Obaidullah to leave Delhi for Kabul. About the departure of Maulana Obaidullah Sindhi to Kabul, Maulana Mohammad Miyan quotes the words the Maulana Sindhi as follows:²³

"In 1333 (1915), I went to Kabul on the order of Hadhrat Shaikhul Hind. I was not told any detailed programme therefore my conscience was not ready for this migration, but it was compulsory to obey him. By the grace of Allah, later the path was clear. I informed the political group of Delhi that I was leaving for Kabul. They also appointed me as their representative but they as well could not specify any reasonable programme. Having reached Kabul I came to know that the output of fifty years' efforts of the Jama'at which was represented by Shaikhul Hind lay before me in unorganized form ready to obey. It needed a servant of Shaikhul Hind like me. Now, I took pride in this migration and selection of Hadhrat Shaikhul Hind."

Maulana Sindhi himself writes that the organization which was working in Kabul at the instruction of Maulana Mahmudul Hasan was active from 50 years i.e. from 1865. This was the time when Maulana Abdullah, a successor of Hadhrat Maulana Wilayat Ali, was the leader of the Ulama of Sadiqpur. Maulana Abdullah continued as the leader until November 1902 while in India, the members of this group were charged under conspiracy cases. It means Maulana Mahmudul Hasan had close association with Ulema of Sadiqpur, who were working under his instructions. All these times Shaikhul Hind instructed his followers to establish Islamic institutions consisting Ulema and Maulvis, which could be the tool against the British Government in India. This was the initial planning of Maulana Mahmudul Hasan, and this had a good connection with his academic taste and engagements.²⁴

V. Progress of the Movement

The Turkish involvement in the First World War created sympathy for Turkey not only in India, but all over the World. The Turkish declaration of *Fatwa of Jihad* against the British also mobilized the Muslim masses against the British. Maulana Mahmudul Hasan fully utilized the situation by organizing a liberation army to fight against the British. They called this army as *Hizbollah* or Army of Allah. For instigating and executing this plan, Maulana Mahmudul Hasan sent Maulana Obaidullah Sindhi to Kabul by crossing North-West Frontier early in August 1915 with his three companions, Abdullah, Fateh Mohammad and Mohammad Ali. He was there to get support of the Afghan ruler and Muslim youths of the Frontier area.²⁵

Maulana Obaidullah Sindhi reached Kabul on 15th August 1915, and met the *Mujahideen* party or freedom fighters and other revolutionaries in Afghanistan. Maulana Sindhi found that many nationalists were already active in Kabul, which had later formed a Provisional Government of Independent India in Kabul to overthrow of British power on 1st December 1915. Raja Mahendra Pratap²⁶ was the President of the Government, Barkatullah²⁷ as the Prime Minister of the newly formed government. Initially, Maulana Sindhi could not support it as he believed that Raja Mahendra Pratap Singh was a Hindu Mahasabha activist and had formed the Provisional Government most probably on the instructions of Lala Lajpat Rai with the Hindu tinge ideology. However, after fully satisfying himself Maulana Sindhi joined the Government as Home Minister. The Provisional Government dispatched missions to Russia, Japan and Turkey and Maulana Obaidullah Sindhi actively took part in the planning and organizing these missions. He also founded a group named *Junood-e-Rabbaniyah* (Divine Army). Maulana Sindhi spent seven years in the Afghan capital Kabul plotting an armed action against the British.²⁸

In 1915, Maulana Mahmudul Hasan sent his another lieutenant Maulana Abul Kalam Azad to Peshawar, who arranged Maulana Saifur Rahman to cross the border into Afghanistan and prepare the Muslim youths for war volunteers. Meanwhile, some students of Government College Lahore also crossed the border into Afghanistan. One of the leading students of Lahore College revolutionaries who crossed the border of Afghanistan was Zafar Hasan Aibek, the nephew of Maulana Jaafar Thanesari. In his autobiography, Zafar Hasan Aibek has fully admired the revolutionary work of Maulana Sindhi in different countries like Afghanistan, Turkey and Russia. The students of Lahore Government College were inspired by the writings of Maulana Abul Kalam Azad. Maulana Azad played a leading role in persuading these Lahore College students to help Maulana Sindhi in his fight against the British. Maulana Abul Kalam Azad was active in the Silk Letter Movement until his arrest in 1916.²⁹

In the next month of the departure of Maulana Obaidullah Sindhi, Maulana Mahmudul Hasan also left India for Hijaz on 18th September 1915. He was accompanied with Maulana Mohammad Miyan Mansoor Ansari and some of his other associates. Maulana Mahmudul Hasan reached Mecca (Hijaz tract of Arabia) on October 9, 1915 and met the Turkish Governor and Commander-in-Chief Ghalib Pasha. On his request, the powerful Governor Ghalib Pasha agreed to extend support against the British Government. In order to publicize his support among Muslims of the Indian sub-continent, he wrote a long letter exhorting the general public to continue with their struggle, assuring them of his government's open support in the future. The whole documents of agreement and his letter to the Indian Frontier Muslims are known as "*Ghalibnama*". The letter of Ghalib Pasha as quoted by Rowlatt in his Report was as follows:³⁰

"The Mohammadans in Asia, Europe and Africa adorned themselves with all sorts of arms and rushed to join the *Jihad* in the path of God. Thanks to Almighty God that the Turkish Army and the *Mujahidin* have overcome the enemies of Islam. . . . Oh Moslems, therefore attack the tyrannical Christian government under whose bondage you are. . . Hasten to put all your efforts, with strong resolution, to strangle the enemy to death and show your hatred and enmity for them. It may also be known to you that Maulvi Mahmud Hassan Effendi (formerly at the Deoband Madrasa, India) came to us and sought our counsel. We agreed with him in this respect and gave him necessary instructions. You should trust him if he comes to you and help him with men, money and whatever he requires."

Maulana Mahmudul Hasan handed over the copies of the document "*Ghalibnama*" to one of his companion Maulana Mohammad Miyan Mansoor Ansari and instructed him to go back to India via Kabul and Frontier areas and distribute the copies of *Ghalibnama* among the Muslims of these respected areas. Maulana Ansari returned from Mecca in 1916 and distributed the copies of the declaration of *Jihad* or *Ghalibnama* both in India and among the Frontier tribes. He also met Maulana Obaidullah Sindhi in Kabul and both dispatched letters to Maulana Mahmudul Hasan about a secret plan of ousting British from India. As these letters were written on yellow silken clothes, the British named this movement as Silken Handkerchief Conspiracy.³¹

VI. Silken Letters

Maulana Obaidullah Sindhi kept negotiation with Habibullah Khan, king of Afghanistan in support of his goal. Maulana Sindhi proposed to the Afghan king that he could declare war against Britain for the sake of Turkey and Islam. However, the king was afraid of enmity with the British and placed the Maulana Sindhi and his associates in the state of detention. German Mission failing to achieve their goal also left Afghanistan early in 1916. In this situation of hopelessness, Maulana Sindhi as minister of the Provisional Government started writing different heads of the countries to wage war against the British and support the Turkish Government in this hour of crisis.³²

In the series of persuasion and writings to different heads of the countries, Maulana Sindhi wrote letters urging them to declare war against the British in support of India and Turkey. Maulana Sindhi wrote letters to both the Governor of Russian Turkistan and Czar of Russia inviting Russia to throw over her alliance with Great Britain and assist in the overthrow of British rule in India. These letters were duly signed by Raja Mahendra Pratap, the President of the Provisional Government. The letters were somehow fallen into British hands. The letter to the Czar was written on a gold plate.³³

Maulana Obaidullah Sindhi through his Provisional Government also wrote a letter on 9th July 1916 addressing to Maulana Mahmudul Hasan. The letter was also signed by Raja Mahendra Pratap as President of the Provisional Government. In this letter, he proposed to form an alliance with the Turkish Government. According to the Report of Justice Rowlatt, Maulana Sindhi's letter contained a tabular statement of the "Army of God." About this Army of God or *Hizbollah*, Maulana Sindhi advised that its headquarter was to be at Madina, and Maulana Mahmudul Hassan was to be the General-in-Chief. The secondary headquarters under local generals were to be established at Constantinople, Tehran and Kabul. The General in Kabul was to be Maulana Obaidulla himself. The table contained the names of three patrons, 12 Field Marshals, and many other high military officers. Of the Lahore students, one was to be a Major-General, one a Colonel, and six Lieutenant-Colonels.³⁴

In the same time on 9th July 1916 Maulana Mohammad Miyan Mansoor Ansari also wrote a letter to Maulana Mahmudul Hasan about the mission of liberating India. Justice Rowlatt reports that Maulana Ansari in his letter mentioned the details of previous arrival of the German and Turkish missions, the return of the Germans, the staying of the Turks, the runaway students, the circulation of the *Ghalibnama*, the Provisional Government, and the projected formation of an Army of God. This army was to draw recruits from India and to bring about an alliance among Islamic rulers. Maulana Mahmudul Hassan was advised to convey all these particulars to the Ottoman Government.³⁵

Both the letters of Maulana Sindhi and Maulana Ansari were neatly and clearly written on the yellow silken handkerchief to escape detection by Afghan and British intelligence. Maulana Sindhi handed it over to Shaikh Abdul Haq, a newly convert to Islam, with a covering note addressed to Shaikh Abdur Rahim Sindhi³⁶. Shaikh Abdur Rahim was requested in the note to send on the enclosures by the hand of some reliable *Haji* (pilgrim) to Maulana Mahmudul Hassan in Mecca, or even to convey them himself if no trustworthy messenger were obtainable. It is said that Shaikh Abdul Haq was a servant of Allah Nawaz Khan. Although he was wholly trustworthy, but somehow he handed over the letter to Khan Bahadur Rab Nawaz Khan, the Honorary Magistrate of Multan and father of Allah Nawaz Khan, instead of Shaikh Abdur Rahim. Rab Nawaz passed these letters to the British Commissioner in Multan and from there it reached to Michael O'Dwyer, the Lieutenant-Governor of Punjab.³⁷

At that time when the silken letters were leaked to the British, Maulana Mahmudul Hasan was in Mecca and after performing Hajj he went Madina to meet the Turkish diplomats Anwar Pasha and Jamal Pasha. Maulana Mahmudul Hasan returned Mecca after meeting the Turkish diplomats. Anwar Pasha too wrote a letter of appeal for the Muslims of India, appreciating their constant struggle against the British tyranny. The wordings of the letter were similar to the *Ghalibnama*, assuring the material support of the Usmani Khilafat to the Muslims of India in their struggle against the British. Meanwhile, the British Government in India was hunting for the conspirators related to the Silken Letter Conspiracy. They approached Sharif Hussain of Hijaz, who had recently betrayed the Turks and allied with the English. As a result, Sharif detained Maulana Mahmudul Hasan and four of his companions, including Maulana Husain Ahmad Madani, Maulana Ozair Gul, Hakim Nusrat Husain and Maulana Waheed Ahmad and deported them to Jeddah on 19 December 1916. From there the English took them on 22 February 1917 and took them to Egypt and then imprisoned them in Malta Island in the Mediterranean Sea. Maulana Obaidullah Sindhi and Maulana Mohammad Miyan Mansoor Ansari had to pass a very long time of their

lives in exile. After completing three years and seven-months imprisonment in Malta, they were brought to Bombay and released on 8 June 1920.³⁸

VII. Role of the Afghanistan Government

The Afghanistan Government under King Habibullah Khan was having pro-British leanings and not actually wanted to do anything, which could create strife between Afghan and British relations. However, there was another group of nationalist Afghans, who were having a bitter anti-British feeling and ready to wage war against the British. They supported the Indian nationalist group to form a Provisional Government in Kabul on 1st December 1915. This Government comprised of an ardent Hindu Raja Mahendra Pratap as President, the American Ghadar Party member Barkatullah as Prime Minister and a Deobandi Sindhi as Home Minister.³⁹

The non-cooperation of King Habibullah Khan on the matter of military attack on British Government in India was a serious concern for Maulana Obaidullah Sindhi and his nationalist group. The arrest and deportation of Maulana Mahmudul Hasan in December 1916 was another setback to the mission of Indian nationalists in Kabul to which Maulana Sindhi described as worse than death. However, Maulana Sindhi did not lose heart and continued his goal of liberating India from the clutches of the English. Meanwhile, King Habibullah Khan was assassinated in February 1919. The new King Amanullah Khan was the third son of Habibullah Khan. He was a nationalist Afghan and wanted to free the all parts of Afghanistan from the influence of Great Britain. At that time, Britain still exercised an important influence on Afghan affairs. After assuming the power King Amanullah Khan showed his readiness to wage war against the British by invading India with assistance of Indian nationalists.⁴⁰ This was the tough time for the British in India as most of the Indian army was still posting at the stations where the First World War was fought. The rest of the army was busy in controlling the public unrest over Rowlatt Act. The Khilafat question, occupation of the Muslim sacred places and Jallianwala Bagh massacre further worsened the position of the British in India. In order to materialize the scheme, King Amanullah Khan ordered his army to take the position along the Indian border. King instructed Maulana Obaidullah Sindhi to prepare the ground in India so that his army would meet with welcome. Maulana Sindhi circulated his address to Indian people, "Brave Indians! Courageous Countrymen,Gallant deeds done for the noble cause of liberty." He also informed to his countrymen that their government in exile had taken all necessary steps in seeking outside help to liberate them from the iron clutches of the English and to establish indigenous government. Maulana Sindhi also provoked the Indians that it was their duty to murder the English wherever they found them, cut the telegraph lines, destroy the railway lines and the railway bridges and assist the liberating armies in all respects.⁴¹

The long-awaited result of the Silken Letter Conspiracy was the beginning of the Third Anglo-Afghan War on 8th May, 1919. The Kabul forces, including Indian freedom fighters under King Amanullah Khan attacked and occupied the border town Bagh on 3rd May 1919. On the instructions of Maulana Sindhi, it was also decided for an uprising against the British Government in Frontier areas, including Peshawar on 8th May 1919. The British also declared war against Afghanistan on 6th May 1919 and placed high security in Frontier area to quell any possible uprising. The British force quickly pushed back the Afghan invaders on 11th May and entered Afghanistan. They also bombed Jalalabad and Kabul through air attacks. The fighting was troublesome on both sides as the Afghan army was ineffective and unaware of the air attacks; the British Indian army was also exhausted from the heavy demands of First World War. Eventually, the British became victorious and King Amanullah Khan started negotiations for peace leaving the Indian freedom fighters in embarrassing situations. Nevertheless, the month-long war gained the Afghans the conduct of their own foreign affairs. A peace treaty recognizing the independence of Afghanistan was signed at Rawalpindi on 8th August, 1919.⁴²

VIII. End of the Silken Letter Movement

The leakage of silken letters and arrest of its leader Maulana Mahmudul Hasan caused a death blow to the Silk Letter Movement. However, Maulana Obaidullah Sindhi continued the mission of his cherished teacher with the help of some of his associates and Provisional Indian Government. He tried his level best, but he always missed the experienced advice and able guidance of Maulana Mahmudul Hasan in his absence.

Silken Letters Movement met a further jolt when America sided with the English. The conditions changed suddenly, and the victory was replaced by defeat. This Movement practically paralysed in June 1916 when Sharif Husain revolted against the Turks and inflicted harm by every means upon Turkish strength in favour of the English. He spread hatred among the Turks and the Arabs to an extent that the Arab army men began defecting from the Turkish army and started killing and plundering the Turks in Syria, Palestine, Iraq etc.⁴³

The defeat of Afghanistan and peace treaty signed by the King Amanullah Khan, led the tragic end the Silk Letter Movement. The Indian freedom fighters helped the Afghan King and his army in every possible way and fought shoulder to shoulder and lost their valuable lives. However, the Afghan King didn't care the demands of their allies and not even a single term was included within the treaty regarding the genuine problems of the Indian freedom fighters or independence of India. It was a death blow for the Provisional Indian Government in Kabul and dream of Maulana Mahmudul Hasan and Maulana Sindhi to obtain Indian independence with the Afghan help.

The Ulema and other Indian Muslims did not lose their hope and regrouped themselves for another movement against the British. Fortunately, after the peace treaty of the First World War a pro-Ottoman hysteria developed among the Indian Muslims who created further hatred for the British. The Khilafat question further mobilized the Indian Muslims, including the Ulema like Maulana Mahmudul Hasan, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, etc. They started Khilafat Movement to save the Khalifa and Turkey and religious places of all over Ottoman Empire. In this movement the Hindu nationalists, including Mahatma Gandhi supported for the Khilafat cause.⁴⁴

Following the Islamic theory of Muslim universalism, the Indian Ulema decreed that Muslims should not live in a slave country, and they should perform *Hijrat* (migration) to the Islamic nation. Hoping the assistance of Afghan King Amanullah Khan's help, it was decided to migrate into Afghanistan. Thousands of Muslims sold their property and started migrating to Afghanistan. However, King Amanullah Khan refused to permit Indian migrants to enter his dominion. Thousands of Muslim migrants were pushed back from the border and robbed by the Afghan tribesmen. The migrants returned back broken hearted and in homeless positions.⁴⁵

IX. Conclusions

The movement Silk Letter Conspiracy was a movement to mobilize and unite all the Muslim population of India for freedom of their country and manage an outside military attack on the British Government and force them to free the Indian sub-continent. This movement was started by Deobandi Ulema led by Maulana Mahmudul Hasan, who sacrificed their lives and belongings in the process of freedom of their motherland. Undoubtedly, they had the Islamic leanings in their movement yet they were fully cooperated by their Hindu brethren working in Kabul and Frontier areas. These Deobandi Ulema also tried their level best to bring their Hindu brethren closer to them. They joined the activities of Raja Mahendra Pratap of Hathras and formed a Provisional Government in Kabul.

This was the first time when Hindu hardliners and Muslim orthodoxy join hands and came on one platform for the cause of the nation or independence of India. Both the leaders worked together for four

years for the freedom of their homeland. The Prime Minister of this Provisional Government Barkatullah was also having close relations with the Hindu nationalist leaders. He was also a member of the American Ghadar Party. They all cordially worked together with the only common aim of achieving the independence of India.

The Ulema during their Silk Letter Movement suffered a lot and lost both men and money, but their efforts were spoiled when their army met a crushing defeat in the Third Anglo-Afghan War. The signing of the treaty by King Amanullah Khan and totally avoiding the claims of their ally Indian fighters, was the final death blow for this movement. This episode of Afghani betrayal perhaps, to some extent, deviated the Ulema from their belief of Islamic theory of universalism. The question of Khilafat once again awakened the Muslims of India, but they were again deluded by the King Amanullah Khan on the *Hijrat* (migration) issue. However, this movement of Khilafat couldn't dim most probably due to the profound national enthusiasm.

The author is very much sure that the Khilafat was only a pretext to mobilize the Indian Muslims against the British rule. The Indian Ulema were perhaps aware of the inactivity and illusion of the Khilafat issue. Above all these movements created a national enthusiasm among the Indian Muslims for the freedom movement. The Silk Letter Conspiracy was also a nomenclature of the British authorities, but it was a long schemed movement of purely national character for attacking British India from the Afghan military assistance. Unfortunately, due to the military superiority of the British Government, the Indian *Mujahideen* or freedom fighters could not meet the formal success.

References

1. Sayyid Maboob Rizvi, *History of The Dar al-Ulum Deoband*, Vol. I, (Eng. Trans. Murtaz Husain F. Quraishi, *Tarikhe Darul Uloom Deoband*) Deoband, 1980, p. 30, *Ibid*, p. 162
2. Maulana Mohammad Miyan, *Silken Letters Movement*, (Eng. Trans. Mohammadullah Qasmi), New Delhi, 2012, p. 47
3. Maulana Muhammad Mian Mansoor Ansari was Maulana Muhammad Qasim Nanautavi's daughter's son and Maulana Abdullah Ansari's eldest son. His native-place was Anbetha but he received primary education at Gulaothi, where his father was a head teacher. He was graduated from the Darul Uloom Deoband in 1903. In 1909 when *Jamiatul Ansar* was established at Deoband, he was appointed its deputy director along with Maulana Obaidullah Sindhi. Maulana Ansari remained in the company of Maulana Mahmudul Hasan in his last pilgrimage journey in 1915. He carried the letter written by Ghalib Pasha, addressed to the people of India and the north-west independent tribes for taking part in the movement for the independence of India. Since Maulana Mansoor Ansari had already left for Yeghistan, he escaped arrest at the time of the Maulana Mahmudul Hasan's arrest in Mecca. His real name was Mohammad Mian but in order to save himself from the British police, when he came to India with the *Ghalibnama*, he kept the alias Mansoor Ansari and later on became famous by this alias itself. Among the bunch of letters known as "Silken Letters" in the political annals of India, one was from the pen of Maulana Mansoor Ansari also; it was written on a yellow silk cloth. After Maulana Mahmudul Hasan's arrest in Mecca, he went to Afghanistan and settled down there permanently. Bachcha Saqqa, after coming to power, had exiled him from Afghanistan. During the brief reign of this usurper, the Maulana went to Russia for some months. When Nadir Shah defeated Bachcha Saqqa and became ruler of Afghanistan, he called the Maulana back. In the last phase of his life, he took abode in Jalalabad, which is a famous town in Afghanistan. He died in January 11, 1946 in Jalalabad. (Sayyid Maboob Rizvi, *History of The Dar al-Ulum Deoband*, Vol. II, (Eng. Trans. Murtaz Husain F. Quraishi, *Tarikhe Darul Uloom Deoband*) Deoband, 1981, pp. 62-63)
4. *Silken Letters Movement*, p. 44
5. Rowlatt, S.A.T., *Report: Sedition Committee 1918*, Calcutta, 1918, p. 175

6. Badr Azimabadi, *Great Personalities in Islam*, New Delhi, 2005, p. 296, see also *History of The Dar al-Ulum Deoband*, Vol. I, p. 138&155 and *History of The Dar al-Ulum Deoband*, Vol. II, pp. 19-20
7. Ayesha Jalal, *Partisans of Allah: Jihad in South Asia*, Harvard University Press, 2009, pp. 202&206
8. *History of The Dar al-Ulum Deoband*, Vol. II, p. 21, see also *History of The Dar al-Ulum Deoband*, Vol. I, p. 192
9. *History of The Dar al-Ulum Deoband*, Vol. I, pp. 198-200
10. *Great Personalities in Islam*, pp. 297-98
11. *Ibid*, pp. 339-341, see also *History of The Dar al-Ulum Deoband*, Vol. II, p. 43
12. *Ibid*, pp. 341-342
13. *History of The Dar al-Ulum Deoband*, Vol. II, p. 44 *Ibid*
14. Rowlatt, p. 176
15. *History of The Dar al-Ulum Deoband*, Vol. I, pp. 227-228, see also *History of The Dar al-Ulum Deoband*, Vol. II, p. 45
16. Rowlatt, p. 176
17. *Silken Letters Movement*, p. 44,
18. Rowlatt, p. 176
19. *Ibid*, p. 45
20. Rowlatt, p. 176
21. *Silken Letters Movement*, p. 45
22. *Ibid*, pp. 46-47
23. Rowlatt, p. 175
24. Raja Mahendra Pratap of Hathras Principality was a man of good family and eccentric character, who, at the end of 1914, was granted a passport to travel in Italy, Switzerland and France. He went straight to Geneva and met the freedom fighter Lala Hardayal. Lala Hardayal introduced him to the German Consul. He had then proceeded to Berlin and had thence been dispatched on a special mission, having apparently impressed the Germans with an excellent idea of his importance. (Rowlatt, p. 176)
25. Barkatullah was a son of a servant of the Bhopal State. He was a revolutionary nationalist and had visited England, America and Japan. In Japan, he was appointed Professor of Hindustani at Tokyo. He had there edited a bitter anti-British paper called "*The Islamic Fraternity*," which was suppressed by the Japanese authorities. He had later been dismissed from his appointment. He then went to America and with the assistance of his friend Krishna Verma, he met some of his American Ghadar Party friends. He also joined the American Ghadar Party. From there he had travelled to Kabul via Berlin, where he joined the Provisional Government in Kabul as Prime Minister. (Rowlatt, p. 177)
26. Rowlatt, pp. 176-77, see also *Silken Letters Movement*, p. 48
27. *Partisans of Allah*, p. 206
28. Rowlatt, pp. 176&178
29. *Ibid*, p. 176
30. *Partisans of Allah*, p. 208

31. Rowlatt, p. 177, *Ibid*
32. Shaikh Abdur Rahim Sindhi was elder brother of Acharya Kirplani. Having converted to Islam, he spent his entire life in preaching the religion and took part in political activities. He died in Sarhind. One of his relative Shaikh Abdul Majeed Sindhi was also converted to Islam. Shaikh Abdur Rahim Sindhi underwent imprisonment and troubles unceasingly after embracing Islam. (*Silken Letters Movement*, p. 48)
33. Rowlatt, p. 177, see also *Silken Letters Movement*, p. 49, and *History of The Dar al-Ulum Deoband*, Vol. I, p. 192
34. *Silken Letters Movement*, p. 50, see also *Partisans of Allah*, p. 208, Rowlatt, p. 178, and *History of The Dar al-Ulum Deoband*, Vol. II, p. 21
35. Rowlatt, pp. 176-177
36. *Partisans of Allah*, p. 208
37. *Ibid*, pp. 209-210
38. Eric Goldstein, *Wars and Peace Treaties: 1816 to 1991*, Oxford, 2005, pp. 79-80, see also *Partisans of Allah*, p. 210
39. *Silken Letters Movement*, p. 62
40. *Partisans of Allah*, p. 211
41. *Ibid*, p. 210

