

## An Analysis of the Work of Mulana Ubaid Ullah Sindhi

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### Abstract

Ubaidullah was born on 10 March 1872 in the Uppal Khatri family in the district of Sialkot. His father passed away four months before the birth of Ubaidullah. His grandfather took the responsibility for his look after that took a very long time. After their grandfather's passing away, he was taken by his mother to his maternal grandfather's home. Buta Singh Uppal converted to Islam at the age of 15 years and chose "Ubaidullah Sindhi" as his new name. Later he was admitted to Darul Uloom Deoband, where he was related to other noted Islamic researchers of the time. Maulana Sindhi got back to the Darul Uloom Deoband in 1909 and step by step elaborated himself in the Pan-Islamic movement. During World War I, he was among the heads of the Deoband School. Ubaidullah had arrived at Kabul during the battle to energize the Afghan Amir Habibullah Khan. He joined the Provisional Government of India shaped in Kabul in December 1915 and stayed in Afghanistan until the end of World War I and afterward left for Russia. He spent two years in Turkey and afterward arrived at Hijaz (Saudi Arabia) where he went through around 14 years of learning and considering the way of thinking of Islam particularly in the light of Shah Waliullah Dehlawi's. In his initial profession, he was a Pan-Islamic scholar. Nonetheless, after he investigated Shah Waliullah's works, Ubaidullah Sindhi arose as a non-Pan-Islamic thinker. Ubaidullah Sindhi was an extraordinary political dissident of India. The main objectives of this study are to examine the early life and education of Maulana Ubaidullah Sindhi, to study his concept of pan Islamism, and to analyze his work and philosophy.

**Keywords:** Ubaidullah Sindhi, Pan Islamism, Deoband School of Thought, Buta Sing Uppal, Silk Letter Movement, Socialism

### Historical Background

Maulana Ubaidullah Sindhi, formerly known as Buta Sing Uppal, was born in Sialkot (Pakistan) on 10 March 1872 (Rizvi, 1886). His father died four months before Ubaidullah was born, and the child was raised for two years by his paternal grandfather. After their paternal grandfather's death, he was taken by his mother to his maternal grandfather's house. Buta Singh was entrusted to the care of his uncle when his maternal grandfather died (Halepota, 1982). Buta Singh converted to Islam at age 15 and chose "Ubaidullah Sindhi" as his new name. He was enrolled in the Darul Uloom Deoband, where he was associated with other noted Islamic scholars of the time. According to Zaman (2012), in Darul Uloom Deoband, he led the Silk Letter Movement, which started during World War 1<sup>st</sup> in support of the Islamic World against

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British colonialism in India. He struggled for an exploitation-free society in India. He remained the home minister of the first provincial Government of India established in Afghanistan. Maulana was a life member of Jamia Millia Islamia, a central university in New Delhi, India. He served Jamia Millia Islamia for a long period. A boy's hostel in Dr. Zakir Husain Hall in Jamia Millia Islamia has been named after him. Maulana had reached Kabul during the war to rally the Afghan Amir, Habibullah Khan for revolution in British India with German support. He joined the Provisional Government of India formed in Kabul in December 1915. He spent two years in Turkey and then reached Hijaz (Saudi Arabia) where he spent about 14 years learning and pondering over the philosophy of Islam, especially in the light of Shah Waliullah Dehlawi's. In his early career, he was a Pan-Islamic thinker. However, after he studied Shah Waliullah's works, Ubaidullah Sindhi emerged as a non-Pan-Islamic scholar. He was one of the most active and prominent members of the Indian Freedom Movement. He was also a great freedom fighter of India. The main objectives of this study are to examine the early life and education of Maulana Ubaidullah Sindhi, to study his concept of pan Islamism, and to analyze his work and philosophy.

Reetz (1982) stated that the only political philosopher of any considerable caliber to come directly in contact with Russian communism at an early stage was Maulana Sindhi. According to the daily Dawn (2008, August 23), Maulana Ubaidullah Sindhi migrated to Afghanistan during the Khilafat movement and formed a transition government with Mahendra Pratap Singh, who left for Russia when the king of Afghanistan came under pressure from the British to expel the members of his government. During his stay in Russia, he was not impressed by the communist ideas but after the Russian revolution, he says that Communism is not a natural law system but it is a reaction to oppression, the natural law is offered by Islam. In Moscow, he met Lenin and discussed with him the strategies to fight British colonialism. Maulana Ubaidullah Sindhi strongly supported the communist movement. Many ulemas accepted socialism as an essential part of Islamic teachings. Maulana Hasrat Mohani and Maulana Ubaidullah Sindhi supported the communist movement in India (subcontinent). Allama Iqbal also paid a rich tribute to socialism in his khizar-i-Rah which he wrote after the decline of Ottoman power in Turkey and on the eve of the Russian Revolution. He also paid rich tribute to Marx. He also wrote an interesting poem, Lenin Khuda Ke Huzur Mein. He said that Islam not

only showed deep sympathy for the poor and downtrodden but also condemned strongly concentration of wealth in several hands.

Fischer (1965) is of the opinion that Maulana Ubaidullah Sindhi was a great political, religious and revolutionary scholar of the sub-continent. He presented a limitless contributions to the independence of Muslims. He visited a number of places for motivating Muslims in order to tell them about their basic rights. He raised his voice against the British government and tried his best for uniting Muslims of the world. He also worked for an organization which was known as “Jamiat-ul-Ansar”. Apart from this, he did so many other works which were in favor of Muslims. He was also fond of seeking knowledge. That is why he sought knowledge not only in his birth place but also in well-known Islamic institutions like Dar ul Uloom Deoband.

Jäschke, (1964) mentioned that “Sindhi rose in prominence in India’s nationalist imagination for his role in the ‘Silk Letters Conspiracy’. At the desire of Hasan, he had written letters to the governor of Russian Turkistan and the Czar asking them to join forces with Turkey and declare war on the British. The letters provided minute details of the proposed organizational structure of an army called Hezbollah and how to recruit Indians for it. Ubaidullah Sindhi was struggling for an exploitation free society in India. So he has a prominent status in India due to his freedom activities for India. Ubaidullah Sindhi was a political activist of the Indian independence movement and one of its vigorous leaders. Maulana struggled for the independence of British India and gradually involved himself in the Pan-Islamic movement. During World War I, he was among the leaders of the Deoband School.

### **Conversion to Islam**

When he was at school, a Hindu friend gave him the book Tufatul Hind to read. After reading this book and some other books like Taqwiyatul Eeman and Ahwaal ul Aakhira, Ubaidullah started taking interest in Islam. In 1887, the year of his conversion, he moved from Punjab to the Sindh area where he was taken as a student by Hafiz Muhammad Siddique. He subsequently studied at Deen Pur village under Maulana Ghulam Muhammad. In 1888, Ubaidullah was admitted to Darul Uloom Deoband. He took lessons in Sahih al-Bukhari and

Tirmidhi from Maulana Nazeer Husain Dehalvi and read logic and philosophy with Maulana Ahmad Hasan Cawnpuri (The daily Dawn, 2011, July 8).

In 1891, Ubaidullah graduated from the Deoband School. He left for the Sukkur area in Sindh province and started teaching in Amrote Shareef under Maulana Taj Mohammad Amrothi. Ubaidullah married the daughter of Maulana Azeemullah Khan, a teacher at Islamiyah High School. In 1901, Ubaidullah established the Darul Irshaad in Goth Peer Jhanda village in Sindh. In 1909, at the request of Mahmud Al Hasan, he returned to Deoband School in Uttar Pradesh where he achieved much for the students of Jamiatul Ansaar. Ubaidullah was now very active in covert anti-British propaganda activities. Ubaidullah moved his work to Delhi at Mahmud al Hasan's request. In Delhi, he worked with Hakim Ajmal Khan and Dr. Ansari. In 1912, he established a madrassah, Nazzaaratul Ma'arif, which was successful in propagating Islam among the people.

### **Attempt to Involve Afghanistan's Ruler**

Through Tehrek e Reshmi Rumal and the Provisional Government of India with the onset of World War I in 1914, efforts were made by the Darul Uloom Deoband for the freedom of India. Mahmud al Hasan, left India to seek the help of Galib Pasha, the Turkish governor of Hijaz. Ubaidullah proceeded to Kabul to seek Emir Habibullah's support. Initial plans were to raise an Islamic army (Hizb Allah) headquartered at Madina. Maulana Hasan was to be the General-in-chief of this army. Some of Ubaidullah's students went to Kabul to explore things before Ubaidullah arrived there. While in Kabul, Ubaidullah came to the conclusion to focus on the Indian Freedom Movement. Ubaidullah had proposed to the Afghan Amir to declare war against British India. Maulana Abul Kalam Azad is known to have been involved in the movement prior to his arrest in 1916.

Maulana and Mahmud al Hasan (principal of the Darul Uloom Deoband) had proceeded to Kabul in October 1915. Ubaidullah was to propose that the Amir of Afghanistan declares war against Britain while Mahmud al Hasan sought German and Turkish help. Hasan proceeded to Hijaz. Ubaidullah was able to establish friendly relations with Amir Habibullah of Afghanistan. At Kabul, Ubaidullah along with some of his students were to make their way to Turkey to join

the Caliph's "Jihad" against Britain. But it was eventually decided that the pan-Islamic cause was to be best served by focusing on the Indian Freedom Movement.

In 1915, Sindhi reached Kabul by the proposal of the Indian Independence Committee in Berlin and the German war ministry. The expedition tried to rally Amir Habibullah's support and through him begin a campaign in British India. It was hoped that it would initiate a rebellion in British India. On 1 December 1915, the Provisional Government of India was founded at Amir Habibullah's 'Bagh-e-Babur palace' in the presence of the Indian, German, and Turkish members of the expedition. It was declared a 'revolutionary government' which was to take charge of independent India when British authority is overthrown. Mahendra Pratap was proclaimed its president, Barkatullah the prime minister, and Ubaidullah Sindhi as the Minister for India. The Provisional Government of India obtained support from Galib Pasha and proclaimed Jihad against Britain. Recognition was sought from the Russian Empire, Republican China, and Japan.

The provisional government would later attempt to get support from Soviet leadership. After the February Revolution in Russia in 1917, Pratap's government corresponded with the Soviet government. In 1918, Mahendra Pratap met Trotsky in Petrograd, urging both to mobilize against British India. However, these plans faltered. Amir Habibullah remained steadfastly neutral and family members indicated their support against Britain. The Germans withdrew their support in 1917 but the 'Provisional Government of India' stayed behind in Kabul. In 1919, this government was ultimately dissolved under British diplomatic pressure on Afghanistan. Ubaidullah had stayed in Kabul for nearly seven years. He even encouraged the young King Amanullah Khan, who took power in Afghanistan after Habibullah's assassination, in the Third Anglo-Afghan War. The conclusion of the war forced Ubaidullah Sindhi to leave Afghanistan as King Amanullah came under pressure from Britain.

### **His Pan Islamism**

Ubaidullah Sindhi was the only political thinker to come directly in contact with Russian communism at an early stage. He was a Pan-Islamist and epitomized the plural character that characterized the Ghadar Movement, of which he became a member in 1926. It is said that books like *Tufatul Hind*, *Taqwiyatul Eeman*, and *Ahwaal ul Aakhira* instilled in him an interest in

Islam, leading eventually to his conversion in 1887. Thus a number of Sindhi pirs forged close links with Pan-Islamists in other parts of India, most notably with Deobandi Ulema.

Sindh provided a conducive atmosphere for Ubaidullah's religious instruction, which was reputed to be an important center of religious learning. There, he was taught by Hafiz Muhammad Sadiq. At Deoband, it seems he cast as much influence on his teachers and colleagues as they did on him. In 1891, he graduated from Darul Uloom Deoband and went to Sukkur where he took up teaching under Taj Mahmood Amroti. In 1901, he established the Darul Irshad in Goth Peer Jhanda. He returned to Delhi in 1909. In 1912, he took over a "Deobandi affiliate in Delhi" where he sought for the synthesis of Aligarh's modernism and Deoband's traditionalism. Therefore, he not only introduced English-educated instructors but also put into circulation newspapers with advanced political views.

In 1913 he began to make a militant line in his teaching. It is relatable that Sindhi's social thoughts were secured in the work of Shah Waliullah. In June 1915, Sindhi secretly established a network of frontier tribes throughout Sindh and Peshawar district to kindle an insurgency in the North West Frontier and the tribal areas. He then traveled to Kabul in October 1915, where he joined with Lahore students and Turku-German sponsored Berlin-India Committee mission.

In his capacity as home minister of an Indian government-in-exile, he tried to pursue his Pan-Islamic aims. But the Arab unrest in 1916 forced Ubaidullah to move in a more nationalist direction. He was convinced that the interests of Indian Muslims could best be served by forging a sense of Indian Muslim identity. He declared that Indian Muslims must strengthen their ties with Indians. While in Kabul, Ubaidullah observed with great interest what was unfolding in Russia. With the support of his friends, he organized revolutionary propaganda in India and linked it to Sindhi's army in Kabul.

In 1919 during the Third Afghan War, Sindhi sent a public letter to his Indian urging them not to support the British Indian government. But rather to kill the English in every possible way, don't help them with men and money. While in Afghanistan, he also founded his militia named Jundullah or Al-Jund al-Rabbaniya (the Armies of God). As Zaman (2012) states,

it included English-educated Indian Muslims who had come to Afghanistan to pursue anti-British campaigns.

After this, Ubaidullah traveled widely. He went to Turkey in 1923 and then to Makkah in 1927, staying there for two years. Then he left Makkah for Russia where he studied the ideology of socialism and found many gaps in it. He is reported to have debated with the Soviet high command trying to explain the accuracy of Islam. Despite his criticism of the Soviet system, Sindhi's own thoughts regarding society's decline were informed by socialism. The reasons for the decline of any society, according to Sindhi, founded on ideology are two-fold. First, the concentration of wealth in the hands of a small elite and the failure of the general welfare, meaning that the masses are always busy making ends meet and lack the opportunity to attend to their moral/religious development. Second, is the exclusion of the general population from knowledge of value to society, which is the sole preserve of the elite. This exclusion, Sindhi claims, leads ordinary people to suspect the moral foundations on which the community nominally rests.

These thoughts of Sindhi were gathered from Shah Waliullah's classic *Hujjat Allah al-Baligha*. He returned to India in 1939 after a quarter of a century and began teaching Shah Waliullah's books until his death in August 1944 in Lahore (Khuhro, 1998).

### **Ubaidullah's View on Socialism**

The legendary crusader for Indian independence, Maulana Ubaidullah Sindhi traveled to Afghanistan in 1915 at the direction of his teacher, Sheikh al-Hind Maulana Mahmudul Hasan. Ubaidullah was one of the prime movers of the 'Reshmi rumal' or 'silk letters' conspiracy to overthrow the British. Sindhi rose in prominence in India's nationalist imagination for his role in the 'Silk Letters Conspiracy.' At the urging of Hasan, he had written letters to the governor of Russian Turkistan and the Czar asking them to join forces with Turkey and declare war on the British. The letters provided minute details of the proposed organizational structure of an army called Hezbollah. The letters were hidden in silk scarves to escape detection. However, it was found, and the British clamped down in India by passing the draconian Rowlett Act limiting civil

freedoms. Ubaidullah remained in Kabul for seven years, working closely with the revolutionaries

During his stay in Moscow, he deeply observed the principles of communism and the attempts to bring these principles to practice in the Soviet Union. In Istanbul, he published a draft of a constitution for Free India in Urdu from Istanbul in 1924 which closely resembled the Soviet constitution in its economic character, emphasizing peoples' welfare, nationalization, and abolition of feudalism, and landlordism. Ubaidullah understood socialist teachings to be directly in conformity with Islam. He also formed a party, the Mahabharata Svarajia Party to advance the political program his constitution envisaged. The British removed copies of the document and Ubaidullah was forced to remain in exile – in Turkey, Italy, and Arabia. After his return to India in 1939, he continued expressing these views.

Noor, Sikand & Bruinessen (1982) quote the effect that during his sojourn abroad his 'Islamist' approach to Indian politics was transformed into 'nationalist-secularist'. He had left India as a firebrand agitator and an organizer of revolutionary activities; he came back as a thinker. In his preface to the 'Constitution', he wrote while describing the impressions of Moscow "We had the opportunity to witness the results of the Russian Revolution in Moscow with our eyes. Some members of our Committee learned the Russian language in order to study the Revolution. We had good opportunities to exchange views with important people from Russia. To study the influence of the Russian Revolution on other countries of Europe, we feel this reality with sorrow that the present generation of our country has gone very far away from understanding the nature of the Revolution" (Noor, Sikand & Bruinessen, 1982).

### **Ubaidullah's View of Indian Problems**

Class is intricately present in every nation. The mutual struggle of the rich and laborers, landlord and peasant, capitalist and worker can easily divide every nation into competitive and opposing ranks. That is why it was needed to resolve all Indian problems and especially Hindu-Muslim differences on a purely religious basis. He said, "We do not believe religion to be the basis to resolve these problems in our program, but present a solution to these problems on national and class division". Maulana Sindhi was a great opponent of the capitalist system. He



said that “By breaking the present capitalist system in our country, we establish the foundations of such a system which is the guarantor of the welfare of the working class meaning the majority and remains under the rule of this working class. Our independence movement can become certainly successful from this” (Noor, Sikand & Bruinessen, 1982).

Though a Deobandi and an avowed follower of Shah Waliullah, the 18th-century Delhi theologian who is seen by scholars as the father of a rigid and puritanical Islam, Ubaidullah’s definition of Islam, was broad-based than the one which is traditionally held. Similarly, his definition of kafir (generally translated as ‘unbelievers’) was far more restrictive and altogether novel. In his exegesis of the Qur’an, Sindhi argued that the kafirs mentioned in Surah 2, v.4, actually represent ‘reactionary conservatives. In another place, he is reported as using the same term for those who want to divide people on the basis of religion, sect, and nation. He once said a true Indian is the one who strives the most to unite India. The Aryans were the first to give a united conception of India. This position was later on taken by Muslims. Therefore, Muslims are the ones who deserve to be called ‘Indians’ of the first order. In this scheme of things Mahmood of Ghazni and Aurangzeb, extremely divisive figures in Indian history and the Hindu imagination, become heroes for uniting India and stand shoulder to shoulder with Asoka and the earlier Aryans. The British can also be accorded the status of the ‘Indian of the first order’ if they adopt India as their homeland, as the Muslims and Anglo-Indians have done. His last years were marked by a life of great simplicity. He remained an opponent of the country’s partition and a fighter against imperialism till his death in 1944.

### **Silk Letter Movement**

The Silk Letter Movement refers to a movement organized by Deobandi leaders between 1913 and 1920, aimed at freeing India from British rule by forming an alliance with Ottoman Turkey, Germany, and Afghanistan. Muhammad Main Mansour Ansari went to Hejaz with Mahmood Hasan in September 1915. He returned to India in April 1916 with Galib Nama (Silk Letter) which he showed to freedom fighters in India and the autonomous areas, and then took to Kabul where he arrived in June 1916. With the onset of World War I, Ubaidullah Sindhi and Mehmud Hasan (principal of the Darul Uloom Deoband) had traveled to Kabul in October 1915 with plans to initiate a Muslim insurgency in the tribal belt of India. For this purpose, Ubaidullah

was to propose that the Amir of Afghanistan declare war on Britain, while Mahmud al Hasan sought German and Turkish help. Hasan proceeded to Hijaz. Maulana, in the meantime, was able to establish friendly relations with Amir. As the plans unfolded in what came to be called the Silk Letter Movement, Ubaidullah was able to establish friendly relations with Amir. At Kabul, Ubaidullah, along with some students who had preceded him to Turkey to join the Caliph's "Jihad" against Britain, decided that the pan-Islamic cause would be best served by focusing on the Indian Freedom Movement. The Berlin-Indian committee (which became the Indian Independence Committee after 1915) also produced an Indo-German-Turkish mission to the Indo-Iranian border, to encourage the local tribes to attack the British interests. This group met the Deobandis in Kabul in December 1915. The mission, along with bringing members of the Indian movement right to India's border, also brought messages from the Kaiser, Anwar Pasha and Abbas Helm, the displaced Khedive of Egypt, expressing support for Pratap's mission and inviting the Amir to move against British India. The mission's immediate aim was to rally the Amir against British India and to obtain from the Afghan government a right of free passage. But after the leakage of the plan, the top Deobandi leaders were arrested. Mahmud Hasan was arrested in Makkah together with Husain Ahmad, and was exiled to Malta, and later released.

### **Ubaidullah Sindhi's View on Political Equality**

Democracy is the name of freedom of the people and it will not be real when there is no freedom of expression, political participation, freedom of association, etc. Ubaidullah Sindhi says when there is political equality there will be no difference between the people such as black and white, poor and rich (Syros, 2012). It means the particular society will be free from any type of discrimination, all the people will be treated equally. All the people will have the right to freedom of expression. If wealthy people run the state and have the power to make laws according to their own wishes and have control over all the state institutions, this is neither political freedom nor political equality. Hence all the people of the state should have the right to participate in the politics of the state, especially the farmers and hard workers to protect their rights. If there is no political equality such as economic, social, and political, the particular society will be going to destruction and decay soon or late (Husain, 2008).

### **His Later Works**

Ubaidullah then proceeded from Afghanistan to Russia. Where he spent seven months at the invitation of the Soviet leadership and was officially treated as a guest of the state. During this period, he studied the ideology of socialism. He said that Islam showed not only deep sympathy for the poor and downtrodden but also condemned strongly the concentration of wealth in a number of Makkah surahs. Makkah, as an important center of international trade, was home to the very rich (tribal chiefs) and the extremely poor (Dawn, 2011, July 8). Some people, at that time, thought that Sindhi was impressed by Communist ideals during his stay in Russia, however, that is not true at all. In 1923, Ubaidullah left Russia for Turkey where he initiated the third phase of the 'Shah Waliullah Movement' in 1924. He issued the 'Charter for the Independence of India' from Istanbul. Ubaidullah then left for Mecca, Arabia in 1927 and remained there until 1929 (Al Mujahid, 1986). During this period, he brought the message of the rights of Muslims and other important religious issues to the people of Arabia. During his stay in Russia, he was not impressed by the Communist ideas but rather, after the Soviet revolution, he presented his belief to the Soviet government that: "Communism is not a natural law system but rather is a reaction to oppression; the natural law is offered by Islam" (Khan, 2015). It is evident from Ubaidullah Sindhi's travels around the world that he had an international and world outlook. It is also evident from his lifetime behavior and struggles that he wanted India not to be ruled by the British. He wanted India to be ruled by the Indians (Husain, 2008)

### **His Death**

In 1936, the Indian National Congress requested his return to India, and the British Raj subsequently gave its permission. He landed at the port of Karachi from Saudi Arabia in 1938. He then went to Delhi, where he began a program of teaching Shah Waliullah's Hujjatullahil Baalighah book to Maulana Saeed Ahmad Akbarabadi, who would then write an exegesis in his own words. Opposed to the partition of India, Ubaidullah led a conference supporting a united India in June 1941 at Kumbakonam (Ali, 1982). Ubaidullah left for Rahim Yar Khan to visit his daughter in 1944. At the village 'Deen Pur' near Khanpur town in Rahim Yar Khan District, he was taken seriously ill and died on 21 August 1944. He was buried in the graveyard adjacent to the grave of his mentors (Halepota, 1982).

## Conclusion

Maulana Ubaidullah Sindhi was a great political, religious and revolutionary scholar of the sub-continent. He presented a limitless contributions to the independence of Muslims. He visited a number of places for motivating Muslims in order to tell them about their basic rights. He raised his voice against the British government and tried his best for uniting Muslims of the world. Ubaidullah was very active in covert anti-British propaganda activities, which led to him alienating a large number of the Deoband School leaders. He tried his level best to unite the Indians against the British occupation of the subcontinent. He had a very positive attitude towards socialism. While in Russia he studied the ideology of socialism. In 1923, Ubaidullah left Russia for Turkey where he initiated the third phase of the 'Shah Waliullah Movement' in 1924. He issued the 'Charter for the Independence of India' from Istanbul. He gave the message about the rights of Muslims and other important religious issues. In 1936, the Indian National Congress requested him to return to India and the British Raj subsequently gave its permission (Wasti, 2006). He died on August 21, 1944

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