

**Haji Usman Sait of Bengaluru:
The Pivotal Role of Khilafat Stalwart in
Karnataka's Nationalist Awakening
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ABSTRACT:

This paper examines the critical yet understudied role of Haji Usman Sait, a prominent merchant and president of the Bengaluru Khilafat Committee, in catalysing the Non-Cooperation Movement in Karnataka. While mainstream narratives of the freedom struggle in the region often highlight Congress leaders, this study argues that Sait's leadership was instrumental in the initial mass mobilization of the early 1920s. As a key financier, organizer, and bridge between communities, he transformed the Khilafat agitation into a powerful force for nationalist action. Drawing from contemporary newspapers and historical accounts, this study reconstructs Sait's multifaceted contributions from organizing large-scale protests and funding movement activities to fostering Hindu-Muslim unity. It concludes that figures like Haji Usman Sait were grassroots architects of Gandhian mass movements in Karnataka, and their erasure from mainstream historiography reflects a significant gap in acknowledging the diverse coalitions that defined India's struggle for freedom.

KEYWORDS:

Khilafat Movement in Karnataka, Non-Cooperation Movement, Regional Nationalism, Gandhian Mass Movements, Interfaith Unity.

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Introduction

The history of India's freedom movement is often told through the lens of national icons like Gandhi, Bose, Nehru and Ali Brothers, whose leadership shaped the broad trajectory of the anti-colonial struggle. Yet, the movement's strength did not lie solely in these towering figures. It lay equally in regional leaders whose sacrifices, initiatives, and leadership transformed nationalist ideals into practical realities on the ground. Karnataka, like other regions of India, produced many such figures. While names like Gangadhar Rao Deshpande, Hardekar Manjappa, and Karnad

Sadashiva Rao are celebrated, others, especially from minority communities, have been overshadowed in dominant historical narratives.

One such figure is Haji Usman Sait of Bengaluru, a leading merchant, philanthropist, and president of the Bengaluru Khilafat Committee during the early 1920s. His contributions were wide-ranging. He financed nationalist activities, organized mass mobilizations, and provided social leadership that enabled Gandhian strategies to take root locally. Despite his impact, his name has largely disappeared from mainstream accounts, partly due to the decline of the Khilafat movement and partly because of later communal divisions that obscured earlier moments of unity.

By revisiting Sait's contributions, this paper highlights him as a pivotal yet unsung hero of Karnataka's nationalist awakening. His work exemplifies the collective effort behind India's struggle for independence, showing that the fight for freedom was not limited to elite Congress halls but was shaped equally in local communities, marketplaces, and public grounds.

Rise of the Khilafat Movement in India

The Khilafat Movement began in the aftermath of World War I, triggered by the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire under the Treaty of Sevres in 1920. The Ottoman Sultan, regarded as the Caliph, was seen by Indian Muslims as the spiritual leader of the Muslim world. Many Indians viewed the British treatment of the Caliphate as an affront to Islam and a threat to global Muslim solidarity. This generated widespread concern across the Indian subcontinent, leading to protests, petitions, and the formation of committees to protect the Caliphate.

The movement rapidly grew in India, particularly in urban centres with significant Muslim populations. Indian Muslim leaders, while motivated by religious concerns, also began to recognize the political potential of mass mobilization. Gandhi saw the movement as an opportunity to foster Hindu-Muslim unity and link it to the broader struggle for Indian independence. He described it as a unique moment, "once in a century opportunity" to bring Hindus and Muslims together under the banner of a common nationalist cause.

Khilafat committees were established in towns and cities across the country. Large-scale meetings were held, petitions were sent to the British government, and boycotts of British goods were promoted. The move-

ment's strength lay not just in its religious appeal but in its ability to mobilize people across communities, linking it to Gandhian methods of non-cooperation, hartals, and swadeshi. In this environment, urban centres like Bengaluru became crucial, as their commercial and administrative significance allowed nationalist strategies to gain visibility and impact.

Haji Usman Sait

Haji Usman Sait was a prominent figure in Bengaluru's business and social circles. As a wealthy merchant, he owned extensive properties, including over 20 bungalows along St. Marks Road and Residency Road, and operated shops popularly known as Cash Bazar. His influence extended across religious and social communities, giving him credibility and authority.

He was deeply influenced by Gandhian philosophy, particularly the principles of swadeshi, non-cooperation, and constructive social work. He actively donated to the Indian National Congress and became widely known as the 'Cash bag of Indian National Congress' due to the large sums he contributed to nationalist causes. At times, he sold personal properties, including bungalows, to ensure funding for the movement's activities.

Sait's activism was not limited to financial support. He actively promoted Swadeshi by encouraging local production and boycotting British goods. Notably, he publicly burned foreign goods worth lakhs of rupees in front of Cash Bazar, setting a powerful example for the city's residents. Upholding his famous slogan, "Be Indian, Buy Indian," he inspired many to support indigenous industries. In 1921, he also established the Indian National School for children who chose to boycott British-run institutions, providing them with an alternative education rooted in nationalist ideals.

Through these efforts, Sait combined personal sacrifice, financial backing, and social influence, creating a model for civic leadership that strengthened the nationalist movement in Karnataka.

Haji Usman Sait as Leader of the Bangalore Khilafat Committee

As president of the Madras and Bangalore Khilafat Committee, Sait played a central role in organizing movements and mobilizing Muslim youth. He coordinated meetings, protests, and educational initiatives, ensuring that the Khilafat movement was not only about religious con-

cerns but also a platform for promoting Indian nationalism.

One of his most significant achievements was organizing the Khilafat Conference at Edgah Khuddus Saheb Grounds on 21st Aug 1920. Over 40,000 Muslims from the region gathered, making it one of the largest political congregations in Karnataka at the time. Sait brought national leaders such as Gandhi and the Ali Brothers to address the crowd, spreading awareness of the nationalist struggle and forging a sense of interfaith unity. These gatherings reinforced the link between the Khilafat movement and Gandhian non-cooperation strategies, ensuring widespread participation.

Sait also coordinated grassroots campaigns to promote boycott and swadeshi movements. He instructed volunteers to picket shops selling British goods and guided local merchants to withdraw foreign products. His personal example, including the dramatic burning of goods at Cash Bazar, lent credibility and inspiration to participants. By tying these acts of protest to broader national aims, he demonstrated how local leadership could amplify the effectiveness of mass movements.

Financial management was another crucial aspect of his role. Sait personally ensured that the committee had sufficient funds for organizing rallies, printing pamphlets, and supporting families of imprisoned activists. His reputation for honesty and commitment earned him trust across communities, enabling the Khilafat Committee to maintain discipline and purpose.

In recognition of his contributions, Sait was often called ‘Khilafat-wale’ by local supporters, highlighting his central role in mobilizing communities and linking religious concerns to nationalist action. His leadership exemplified regional nationalism and interfaith unity, creating a model for local leaders across Karnataka.

Conclusion

Haji Usman Sait’s life illustrates the critical but understudied role of regional leaders in India’s freedom struggle. He mobilized communities, funded movements, promoted swadeshi, and nurtured Hindu-Muslim unity. Yet, despite these contributions, his story remains largely unsung, overshadowed by national figures and later communal politics.

Reclaiming Sait’s legacy highlights the collective nature of India’s independence movement, showing that freedom was won not only in Del-

hi or Sabarmati but also in local committees, marketplaces, and public grounds across Karnataka. His leadership demonstrates how regional activism, financial sacrifice, and community mobilization were essential to building nationalist momentum.

Haji Usman Sait deserves recognition as a pivotal architect of Karnataka's nationalist awakening, a symbol of interfaith cooperation, and a true unsung hero of India's struggle for independence. Restoring his story to public memory and historical scholarship is an important step in understanding the plural, layered, and collective character of India's freedom movement.

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