
ABDURRAUF FITRAT & HIS CONTRIBUTION TO THE JADID CULTURAL TRADITION



<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7394969>

Nandini Bhattacharya

PhD in Soviet Central Asian History, 2003 Jadavpur University, Kolkata, India

Title : “The Role of Soviet Identity and Regional Identity in Central Asia: The
Special Case of Tajikistan (1970-1990)”

Associate Professor in History, Calcutta Girls’ College, Kolkata, West Bengal , India

Telephone Number : +91 8442896514

Email : nandini70@gmail.com

Abdurrauf Fitrat was an iconic figure in the formative phase of Uzbek national identity as part of the supra-national Soviet identity growing along the Bolshevik Revolution and its expansion in the East during the interwar period. However, Fitrat’s life and career as an intellectual and a potential leader began to develop much before the advent of the Bolshevik power in the region of inner Asia. He was an established scholar, a poet and a promising author who had a critical approach towards traditional strongholds of orthodoxy and repression and an agile and fearless pen to express his thoughts. This was for his association and belonging to the Jadid movement , an all pervasive renaissance growing within the Turko-Persian literary genre centring around the great education hubs of the Islamic world. As a young Jadid, aspiring for an all-out reform and modernization of his society , Fitrat, like many of his contemporaries were spontaneously attracted towards the Bolshevik ideology, preaching against extortion, repression and imperial domination. As a mascot of the Bolshevik vanguard party in the east, he had shouldered a double responsibility to his people and the political entity he had represented. However, the task itself was an exceedingly complicated one for an uneasy equation was soon developed between the Jadids and the Bolsheviks over the lofty principles and their implementation. Most significantly, the question of national identity , their scope and limits within the Soviet ideological structure and policy making became a point of complete disjuncture for the Jadids who had harnessed their trust and hope to this powerful group. For an indomitable spirit like Fitrat it was impossible to compromise on principle, and his difficult dialogue with the Bolshevik power precipitated initially towards marginalization and finally to his death sentence. Fitrat represented a time

and genre of a failed experiment of the early Soviet state where the finest of intellectuals, ready to contribute and enrich the Soviet system were sacrificed for the lack of trust and misunderstanding on part of the newly created Soviet State. Never the less, it was impossible to obliterate the contribution of the Jadids from the intellectual persuasion as their writings made them immortal. Abdurrauf Fitrat had been resurrected in his full glory as a great literary genius and a national hero of this land as the Soviet experiment had exhausted itself after a seven decades trial. This paper would like to address his position and persona in a critical historic epoch and understand the lasting contribution of his life and thoughts towards the common intellectual space of Turko-Persian inheritance of Central Asia.

Jadidism : A Spontaneous Intellectual Trend , a Political Movement and a Cultural Renaissance

Jadidism was the ideological base of the spontaneous intellectual movement on the rise in the fringes of crumbling Turkish Empire , in and around the Oriental Russia(Tatar and Caucasus region) and had spread into inner Asia –that remained under the suzerainty of Russian Empire. The rise of Jadid movement was kind of an enlightenment process which prescribed and imbibed an extensive reform programme to meet up the challenges posed by the West, especially , the White Russia around the late 19th and early 20th C. Ideas floated in this movement mainly stressed the need for spreading education , increase print knowledge, and century, Jadidism had to encounter much more powerful forces of changes under the Socialist Revolutionary spell. The drive for revolution in Russia in two major waves, one in February and the other in October, 1917 and steadily rising tremour of the radical upheaval had obvious impact on Jadidist thoughts and actions. It would be an interesting study to delve within this difficult hour of history to discover the difficult dialogue between the two ideas with immense potentials , at work , and their scope and limitation to complement each other.

Apparently, remaining in the confluence of both Europe and Asia, the Islamic intellectuals of Central Asia, Caucasus and certain pockets of Russian Empire (Tatar land) had developed a pan-Turkic identity that envisaged a progressive goal through intense educative and cultural movement. Actually, the scholars in this nodal zone could come in touch with the rapid growth of Western knowledge system and application of scientific and rational understanding in the way of life and could feel the decline of Islamic world view along with the fall of the Ottoman Empire of Turkey. Meanwhile, Turkey had also undergone a sea change with the rise of Kemal

Ataturk and a rapid process of Westernization was set in since the turn of the 20th Century, over there.

In fact, ever since the transformation of Europe along with the discoveries of the new world and rapid industrialization following scientific revolution, there had been a world wide spread of Western knowledge in a package , as a set of superior ideas and way of life, based on rationalism. For decades, the Muslim subjects of the East as well as the West preferred not to accept the claim of superiority of Western knowledge and kept aside the scope of interaction and up-gradation of their own knowledge base- the method of teaching and learning had also undergone marked degeneration. As a result, not only the scope of Western knowledge remained beyond their purview , the very basis of Islamic epistemology also had turned shallow and corrupt. It was just a few decades prior to the Bolshevik Revolution one can notice the rise of a group of rational thinkers, , who considered the imminent necessity for a thorough reformation in the educational system and the method of its imparting. Etymologically, Jadidism had intended to change the teaching methods and thereby spread the understanding of Turkic-Arabic or Persian languages as medium of percolating knowledge. Thus *usul-i-Jadid* or the way to true learning became the crux of the movement.

In the expert view of Adeeb Khalid, Jadidism is connected with education. *“It refers to the advocacy by the reformers of the phonetic, or new method (usul -i- Jadid) of teaching the alphabets in the maktab. Khaleed further enumerated, that, From the new method Jadid reform went to the advocacy of the new-method school , a transformation of the syllabus, and ultimately a new conception of knowledge.”*ⁱ Khalid, in another of his more elaborate study of the Jadids remarked , *“ The Key concepts in Jadidism were “civilization” (madaniyat) and “progress” (taraqqiya) , evidence that the Jadids had appropriated Enlightenment notions of history and historical change.”*ⁱⁱ They branded the out dated and corrupt teaching method of the maqtab (traditional Islamic schools) as the major obstacle towards the path of progress- which did not introduce new branches of education like, arithmetic, geography and Russian language etc, but also failed to inculcate the basic literacy in Arabic or Turkic languages, keeping the religious education also superficial and often faulty. Thus, Jadid movement was initially focused on the creation of new schools where not only new branches of knowledge as per Western sciences and humanities would be imparted, but the teaching of Arabic texts, by following phonetic method would reach a new dimension of outreach. Never the less, Khalid further elucidated in lucid terms the roots and trajectory of the movement, *“ These new –method schools*

were to be the flagship of reform and indeed to give the movement its name, but the reform soon extended far beyond the modest goals of teaching functional literacy to children.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Actually, the Jadids wished to bring all out reform and progress for the Muslim society so that they could stand at par with the European neighbours once again. Their intense drive towards progress and reforms had obvious encounters with the existing political authorities under whom they belonged. By stretching their argument even further, they claimed the decline and degeneration due to their folly in pursuing the path of true Islam.

Fitrat & The Branch of the Bukharan Jadids

Jadidism was a spontaneous intellectual movement on the rise in the fringes of crumbling Turkish Empire, in and around the Oriental Russia which included Tatar and Caucasus region as well as dependencies of royal emirates in inner Asia. This was an initiative towards progress to get at par with the Western secular model by imbibing a ‘new method’ - which is the etymological meaning of the term ‘Jadid’.

The Bolshevik Revolution (1917), taking place during the First World War had obvious dialogue with the ongoing Jadid movement of the orient. As Marxist socialist revolution, it had kindled the aspirations of oppressed, and downtrodden people of the world. The same ideology was extended towards the nationalities writhing under colonial/imperialist oppression. The progressive Jadid leaders, found great hope in the summons for a radical socialist revolution against old emirates under Russian empire. The Jadids and the Bolsheviks had apparently immense potential towards the common socialist goal. However, as history reflects, it was not a smooth sail for either of the two. The branch of the Jadids belonging to Bukharan intellectual tradition were brought into the fold of Eastern wing of the Bolshevik political forces and had been part of the leading associates of the Revolutionary drive to break through the vestiges of the religious orthodoxy and centuries old autocracy. Abdurrauf Fitrat belonged to this particular genre who tried to combine their knowledge and spirit of reformism with the promise of socialist Revolution.

It was a unique experience of collaboration and journey together without full ideological support and mutual trust. It was during the World War, that the realization dawned on many of the Jadids about the futility of their work without political transformation. Many of them, trained in Istanbul after the Young Turk movement were convinced by the new ideals of democracy and secularism. They tried to bring about these modernization in political life of Bukhara by insisting the Amir (the local Muslim ruler). As these Jadids realized that the Amir of Bukhara would never relent

to their request, they were turning radical in their postulate. Simultaneously, it was during the same moment of disillusionment that the Bolshevik Revolution had taken place and the Moscow high command needed their local support base in each of its far flung regions. The Jadids were the best suited collaborators at this cross road of history- although none of their ultimate goal seemed to synchronize. Never the less, for the time being , both found their dependency meaningful . “The link between the Young Bukharans and the Bolsheviks was tenuous from the start. The basis for their cooperation lay in the realization that they needed one another to achieve their respective goals.”^{iv} However, both the reformist Jadids and the Revolutionary Bolshevik made a journey together for a significant period of time that bore its lasting impact on the History of Soviet Orient , ultimately culminating in a tragic end.

Fitrat and His Early Writings Reflecting a Critical Mind-set

Fitrat was a prolific writer, versatile and dynamic from the very inception of his academic career. During his early career he used to write in Persian language as Persian used to dominate the Islamicate world and its intellectual sphere even at the turn of the 20th Century. One of his writings of those early days have an interesting connection with Hind/Hindustan and carries enormous significance for understanding the critical postulate of Fitrat posed against the traditional state and society of Bukhara under the Amir and Ulama. This was a text which actually reflected the experience and reaction of an Indian traveller to Bukhara , from a strongly critical lenses. Written around the early 20th Century, before the advent of the Soviet regime, this book , represented a completely different approach towards the oriental way of life under Islamic sway. Written in the form of a dialogue ,it was a strong critic of every aspect of traditional life, education and culture under the traditional religious order in Bukhara. Titled as Bayanat –i- Sahay-i- Hind , this book reflection on the life of Bukhara much before the advent of the Bolsheviks. Thus, implying Fitrat’s fearless drive for self-criticism as against an alien eyes.

As observed in Encyclopaedia Iranica , “Bayānāt-e sayyāḥ -e hendī(Tales of an Indian traveler) relates the memoirs of an Indian tourist on a visit to Bokharo. It compares every aspect of life there against European standards and finds it wanting; in particular, it taunts the superstitious beliefs of the masses, as expressed in pilgrimage to the mausoleum of Bahā’ -al Dīn Naqšband or through the contrast between a traditional healer and a Russian physician. It groups Bukharan society into three social classes: ‘olamā’ (the clergy), omarā’ (the rulers), and ahālī(residents, masses), and criticizes all three for the decline of the country.”²² Interestingly this book of Fitrat brought out a rare insight of alienation on part of an Indian traveller

who, obviously had undergone a Western orientation of knowledge and way of life, under the British colonial experience and therefore found everything in the Bukharan tradition under the Islamic milieu, backward, superstitious and stagnating. In fact, it is interesting to note that traditional Indian society had undergone a diverse and elaborate reform programme in order to face the challenge posed by Western knowledge and civilization throughout the nineteenth century. This Indian traveller's perspective must have reflected that Western model of secular education and practice of medicines based on natural sciences which he found lacking in the Bukharan society even at the wake of the new Century. According to Edward Allworth Fitrat encountered this 'foreigner' when he was a student in Istanbul around 1909-1910 and the book in his pen name Abd-ur-rauf' came to be published in 1911-12. In fact, he represented those youth forces who were exasperated with the decadence of the traditional social order and eagerly wished to regenerate new forces in the stagnating social order.

Being an enlightened Jadid, Fitrat felt the compulsion to shift away education from ecclesiastical control and here the traveller from Hindustan was the agency to bring about the realization for the need to change the conventional order of life and stagnant sources of knowledge. India, was a model of a transformed orient that had a silent bearing on the young intellectual of Bukhara keen to reform and regenerate his own land and people under the guiding spirit of reason, justice and nationalism. For Fitrat, this was an invocation of a new genre, a revolutionary transformation of the traditional society standing at the brink of collapse.

Fitrat and the Bolshevik Revolution

As part of the early Bolshevik realm, the Jadid leaders took up wide scale socio-religious reform programme. Initially they even approached religious institutions and tried to convince the moderate Ulamas the need for progress in religious affairs.

At the outbreak of World War I in 1914, Feṭrat, together with many other Bukharan students (Allworth, 1994, p. 200), left Istanbul for Transoxiana, where he continued to cooperate with the Jadids, who were also known as the Young Bukharans (Becker, pp. 208-9). In November 1917 Feṭrat and 'Oṭmān K̄vāja wrote a reform agenda for the Young Bukharan party which was implemented later when the reformists seized power. Their original draft called for liberal reforms but was published only after being padded with radical phrases to appease the triumphant Bolsheviks^v

It was in 1920 that Mikhail Frunze had ultimately made a military campaign against the Amir of Bukhara and ‘toppled him from the throne.’^{vi} Thus was born the People’s Soviet Republic of Bukhara, where Bukharan Communist Party (made up of mostly outsiders, from Tatar land and Turkestan) was bestowed with the formal authority- but large number of Jadids were co-opted as part of the Young Bukharans. In fact, Abdurrauf Fitrat, who had left Bukhara due to Amir’s hostility was summoned back and given many responsibilities , most significant of them being the ministry of Education and Foreign Affairs. Apparently, this was a golden opportunity for the Jadids to uphold their vision and realize their mission for enlightenment and progress. The 1920s were years of great enthusiasm for the Jadids. In Bukhara, they found themselves at the helm of an ostensibly independent state although very short lived (abolished in 1924).^{vii}

Fitrat, made vigorous attempt to introduce new curriculum in schools. He had also established a music school in Bukhara as part of preservation and promotion of cultural richness of the region. It was during these four ears that the development of Uzbek language as an official language began. Fitrat had shifted his literary orientation from the conventional Persian medium to revivie Chaghtai Turkic language for the need of the hour. Feṭrat escaped in 1917 from Amīr ‘Ālem Khan’s increasing repression and went to Tashkent, where he became a staunch organizer of Bukharan intellectuals and founded the Chagatay Conversation Circle (Čağatay gurungi), aimed at establishing a unified literary Chaghatay (q.v.) and Turki language by reading and disseminating its heritage, such as the writings of ‘Alī-Šīr Navā’ī, Sultan Ḥosayn Bāyqarā, and Zāhīr-al-Dīn Bābor, and publishing modern literary works in that language, particularly drama.^{viii} In fact, the conscious development of Turkic language, distinct from the classical Persian language of the aristocrats was once a project of Fitrat as an individual Jadid. His initiative to develop a vernacular out of local Turkic language through Chaghtai tradition was highly appreciated by the Bolshevik leadership. Now in power, he along with other Young Bukharans tried to develop the language and made further experiment with the introduction of Latin script for writing the Turkik language. In the observation of Adeb Khalid,

“All through the ear Jadid writers evoked Chinggis, Temur, and Ulughbek. Nowhere is this clearer than in the writings of Fitrat, who wrote a regular column in *Hurriyat* after becoming its editor in August 1917. In July, he wrote: "O great Turan, the land of lions! What happened to you? What bad days have you fallen into? What happened to the brave Turks who once ruled the world? Why did they pass? Why did they go away?" This newfound Turkism was also reflected in Fitrat’s

language. Up until the revolution, Fitrat had published almost exclusively in Persian; in that ear he switched to a highly purist form of Turkic. In September 1917, he published a reader for the fourth ear of new-method schools (ostensibly for use in Bukhara) with a vocabulary so rigorously Turkish that Fitrat felt compelled to translate several words in footnotes. All the characters in the reading passages bear Turkic names.”^{ix}

After the establishment of the Bukharan People’s Conciliar Republic in 1920, which replaced the emirate, Feʼrat held high official positions, including the ministerial posts of education, finance, and foreign affairs, in addition to the membership of the Central Bureau of the Bukharan Communist party . This had given him the platform to carry out his reform program of modernizing the school curricula. In 1922, he sent seventy students to Germany as prospective instructors at the Bukharan university founded in the same ear.^x It was presumably under his influence that in March 1921 the Ministry of Education changed the language of instruction from Persian to Turki, which also became the official language of the Republic.^{xi} However, when the Bolsheviks gained supremacy in Bukhara, Feʼrat and most other high officials were removed from their posts and deported to Russia in 1923.^{xii} In the following ear the short-lived republic was integrated into the Soviet Union as a part of the Uzbek SSR.

The shift in power (from nationalist to communist) and status (from independent to a satellite state) of his homeland also marked a turning point in his life from politics to academic studies. In terms of scholarship, these were fruitful ears. He spent part of 1923 and 1924 in Moscow, and, reportedly, worked at the Lazarov Institute of Oriental Languages (Mirzozoda). On his return to Tashkent and Samarqand, he taught literature in high schools and, from 1928, at the University of Samarqand. In the same ear he was appointed a member of the Scientific Council of the the Uzbek SSR.^{xiii}

Fitrat and His Doomed Genre

A fervent advocate of freedom of thought, Fitrat wrote a number of plays which appeared highly suspicious in the newly established Soviet regime, and his works were banned one by one. While in Bukhara office, he wrote a play ‘Quamat’ or ‘Last Judgement’ which had deep implication of Bolshevik power’s highhanded decision about dividing Central Asia in ethno-linguistic parameter. It seems he had allegedly attempted along with the President of Bukhara, Faizulla Khojaev to placate Turkey and Afghan support for bringing independence to Bukhara – but it went futile.^{xiv} The very notion of ‘right to secede’ although a constitutional right of USSR,

thus remained inapplicable and dangerous for all practical purposes. It was observed by some other experts that “Jadidism was destroyed by Bolsheviks because the concept of nation-state formation and society’s breaking of colonialism deadlocks was serious alternative to the totalitarian Soviet system and threatened its downfall. But, despite the sad end, a national –progressive movement founded by Jadids, favoured the development of national self-consciousness , has played an essential role in formation and development of national liberation ideology.”^{xv} No wonder Fitrat was removed from his administrative post. Rest of his life he had to spend by teaching in different institutions. But indomitable Fitrat continued his independent thoughts and ideas in his writings- a non-conformist so far Bolshevik Communist values are concerned. His play ‘Day of Saturn’ was the most subversive attempt under the suspicious ‘revolutionary regime’.^{xvi} It was in 1937 that he along with most of other prominent Jadid leaders, all members of Young Bukharans, were purged and sent for the gulag. Next ear, 1938, he was sentenced to death. But he was not alone in his mission and his fate, with him came to the closure of Soviet-Jadid experiment. “The incompatibility between the Young Bukharans’ aspirations and Stalin’s Soviet regime widened on all fronts in the 1930s and assumed violent forms. Although Fitrat was partially resurrected in the post-Stalin era in Soviet Central Asia, et the revival and acknowledgement of this great thinker and reformer whose writings are immortal contribution to the formation of Uzbek national language and identity could begin only after the withdrawal of the Soviet yoke.

In the post –Soviet era , along the quest for identity and independence , many Uzbek schoars began to pay special attention to Fitrat and whole generation of the Jadid thinkers and intellectuals of Central Asia. One such endeavour may be worth mentioning here ,

“Cultural markers are the main tool of the society tightly linked with language, traditions, religion, motherland, social life, economics, politics, history and the past of the nation. They play an important role in saving the nation in any difficult cases, and in bringing our cultural inheritance to the future generation. Also, they are the persons who took the main responsibility in developing the nation’s self-consciousness and lightening the process of reconstruction of the society.”^{xvii}

The Jadids fought against orthodoxy and dogmatism under Islamic repression which brought them closer to the Bolsheviks. However, the two ideologies had clashed headlong over national identity and self-determination , a promise that the Soviet system had never allowed to happen. It is tragedy that the Jadids had fallen victim of another variant of dogmatism under the new regime. A short phase of

disillusionment and compromise had been followed by the tragic end and demise of this great intellectual movement with enormous promise and prospect. Fitrat, the most prominent and vocal of them had left lasting contribution to the making of the Uzbek nation which visibly carries its bearings in its tenets. The shift from Cyrillic to Latin alphabets actually shows a silent move to resurrect Fitrat's ideas conceived about a century ago. The knowledge about Fitrat and his enormous contribution in the field of knowledge and educational reforms deserves even further advocacy for general people's access. In fact, more and more translations of his works, into various languages may help develop a popular awareness about Fitrat and his genre, legacy of the brilliant literature that he had left behind and their sacrifice for the cause of Uzbek national identity.

Notes and References

- ⁱ Khalid, Adeeb, 'Jadidism in Central Asia: Islam and Modernity in Russian Empire,' ISIM News Letter, 2/66, 1999, https://openaccess.leidenuniv.nl/.../ISIM_2_Jadidism_in_Central_Asia-Islam_and_Mo_Accessed on 15th May, 2018, P -16 , Visited in 11th September, 2022
- ⁱⁱ Khalid, "A., The Fascination of Revolution: Central Asian Intellectuals, 1917-1927," in Uvama Tomohiko ed. Empire, Islam and Politics in Central Eurasia, Sapporo: Slavic Research Center, Hokkaido University, 2007, p-138
- ⁱⁱⁱ Khalid, A., 2007, p-138-139
- ^{iv} Khalid", 2007, p-138-139
- ^v Dimanshtein, S. M. ed., *Revaliutsiya i natsionalnyi vopros* III, Moscow, 1930, pp. 354-5
- ^{vi} Khalid, A., 2007, p-117
- ^{vii} Khalid, A., 2007, p-148
- ^{viii} Allworth, Edward, *The Rediscovery of Central Asia*, 1996, pp. 38-39
- ^{ix} Khalid, Adeeb *Politics of Muslim Cultural Reforms Jadidism in Central Asia*, California University Press, p-291
- ^x D'encausse Hélène Carrère , *Islam and the Russian Empire: Reform and Revolution in Central Asia (Comparative Studies on Muslim Societies)*, University of California Press, USA, 1988, PP-172-74
- ^{xi} *Pravda*, 20 March 1921
- ^{xii} Becker, pp. 306-7; Hayit, 1956, pp. 141-42; Allworth, 1964, p. 115
- ^{xiii} Habib Borjian, Fetrat- Abdur –Al Rauf Bokhari, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/fetrat-abd-al-rauf-bokari>, Accessed on 12th September, 2022
- ^{xiv} Borjian, P- 148-150
- ^{xv} Bazarbayev, Kanat & Ashimlhanovna, Adilbekova Zabirash , *Jadids Movement in Central Asia in the Late 19th and the Early 20th Centuries Asian Social Science*, Vol 8, No. 8, 2012, URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/ass.v8n8> p- 235
- ^{xvi} Habib Borjian, Fetrat- Abdur –Al Rauf Bokhari, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/fetrat-abd-al-rauf-bokari>, Accessed on 20th May, 2018
- ^{xvii} Usmonov , giyosiddin Murotjonovich, *Views of Uzbek and Foreign Scholars on the Works of Abdurauf Fitrat*, *Middle European Scientific Bulletin* , Vol. 18, Nov, 2021