



A LIFE FOR KNOWLEDGE: HOW MAHMUDHOJA BEHBUDIY SPARKED AN INTELLECTUAL REVOLUTION IN TURKESTAN

Alimova Madinabonu Islomjon qizi University of Journalism and Mass
Communications of Uzbekistan master's student in Foreign Languages and
Literature: English Language

Annotation:

This article explores the life and legacy of Mahmudhoja Behbudiy, a visionary reformer whose dedication to knowledge and enlightenment transformed the intellectual landscape of early 20th-century Turkestan. At a time when the region was under Russian imperial rule, its people stood between deep-rooted traditions and the call for modern progress. The old educational system, centered on rote learning in madrasas, could no longer meet the challenges of a rapidly changing world. Amid this tension, Behbudiy emerged as one of the leading voices of the Jadid (New Method) movement a generation of thinkers who believed that education was the key to freedom and national revival. A scholar, teacher, journalist, and playwright from Samarkand, he saw knowledge as the force that could awaken a nation from intellectual sleep. Through his schools, publications, and his pioneering play *Padarkush*, Behbudiy urged his people to embrace modern science and critical thought while remaining faithful to their cultural and spiritual roots. His life's mission to awaken minds through learning ignited an intellectual revolution that helped shape the foundation of modern Uzbek identity. Behbudiy's message endures today as a reminder that true liberation begins with education, and that a nation's strength lies in the enlightenment of its people.

Key words: Mahmudhoja Behbudiy, persecution, educational reform, intellectual legacy, Uzbek educators, tradition and modernity.



Born on 20 January 1875 in the village of Baxshitepa near Samarkand, Behbudiy hailed from a devout Muslim family steeped in scholarship: his father, Behbudkhoja Solihkhoja ogli, served as an imam-khatib, and his maternal lineage traced back to Niyozkhoja from Urgench. Early on he memorised portions of the Qur'an under his father's guidance, and by age fifteen he was studying at a local madrasah under his uncle Mulla Odil. The traditional education he received rooted in Islamic law, Arabic grammar and religious ethics gave him both spiritual grounding and an appreciation for disciplined learning. However, during a pilgrimage and travels around 1899-1900, when he visited Arabia, Istanbul and Egypt, he encountered modern networks of thought and reformist Muslim ideas circulating in the broader Ottoman and Arab worlds. These experiences broadened his intellectual horizon and planted the seeds of his later commitment to educational innovation. Soon after, Behbudiy began to question the utility of rote-style instruction dominant in the region's madrasahs. He concluded that the old system lacked engagement with science, modern languages and critical thinking and he envisioned a "new-method" (usul-i jadid) school system designed to blend religious values with rational, secular subjects. This synthesis of tradition and modernity shaped his dual identity: he remained a religious scholar becoming a qazi and later mufti-level figure in his region while simultaneously positioning himself as a modern intellectual advocating reform and national awakening. In this way, Behbudiy's early life and education formed the bedrock for his later role as a reformer: his deep respect for Islamic learning, combined with his exposure to global reformist currents and dissatisfaction with outdated pedagogy, drove him to imagine and enact a revolution in education that would help awaken Central Asian society.

The Jadid Vision Education as Liberation In the waning years of the Russian Imperial era, the movement known as Jadid movement literally the "New Method" reformer emerged across Central Asia with the conviction that true awakening lay



in educating the people. For Mahmudhoja Behbudiy, this conviction became a life's mission: he joined the Jadids and became one of the foremost advocates for "usul-i jadid" schools (new-method schools), believing that the youth of Turkestan would only flourish if taught both the new sciences and their own cultural heritage. Behbudiy argued that the colonial and traditional systems of education were failing his people: memorisation of religious texts alone did not equip them to navigate a changing world. Through his reformist schools, textbooks in native Turkic languages, and teaching that wove together Islamic ethics with modern subject-matter (mathematics, geography, science), he sought to build a generation of informed citizens who could think critically and act freely. His emphasis on education as a tool of liberation—both from ignorance and from colonial subjugation—meant that for him the classroom was not merely a place of learning, but a space of national revival. In short, Behbudiy coordinated the intellectual resources of the Jadid movement into concrete institutions: schools using the new method, reading-rooms, libraries, and printed materials. He fused the spiritual root of Islamic learning with the branches of secular knowledge, showing that faith and modernity need not be at odds but could together empower a society.

Mahmudhoja Behbudiy recognised that education and reform could not stop at the classroom: they needed to reach people's hearts and minds through media and art. Behbudiy worked as a journalist and editor for bold new publications such as *Samarkand* and *Ayina* (The Mirror), using these outlets to bring forward ideas about progress, society and national awakening. He believed that newspapers and journals were more than information vehicles—they were instruments of cultural transformation. For example, through *Ayina* he offered his readers new visions of what their community might become. Perhaps his most enduring cultural contribution was the play *Padarkush* (The Parricide), written in 1911 and first performed in 1914. In this drama, he staged a conflict between ignorance and



enlightenment: the uneducated son murders his father, symbolising the destructive effects of illiteracy and backwardness. By placing his message on stage, he extended his reach far beyond the classroom and the newspaper and invited audiences to see themselves in the story. In employing both journalism and theatre, Behbudiy demonstrated how culture itself could be a battlefield of ideas. He fused his reformist agenda that education and critical thought were essential with vivid media: writing and performance. His work shows that to awaken a society one must address its minds.

Mahmudhoja Behbudiy's life was tragically cut short, yet the impact of his work has endured far beyond his years. The Mind That Changed a Nation In March 1919, Behbudiy's commitment to progress placed him in fatal opposition to the forces of the day. He was arrested and executed in the city of Qarshi by the Bolshevik-aligned authorities a fate that underscored the threat his ideas posed to entrenched power. Despite his tragic end, his vision did not die with him. His dedication to education, reform, and the awakening of critical thought planted seeds that continued to grow in the hearts and minds of generations of Uzbek teachers, writers, and thinkers. Educational reformers, writers and national-minded intellectuals in Uzbekistan and the wider Central Asian region carried forward his belief that knowledge is liberation. His insistence on modern schooling, native-language textbooks and cultural renewal became touchstones for subsequent generations reshaping post-colonial society. In contemporary Uzbekistan, Behbudiy is honoured as more than a historical footnote. He is celebrated as a symbol of enlightenment, courage and patriotic dedication. Schools, streets and cultural programmes bear his name; his work is taught in curricula and cited in national discourse as a model of intellectual service to the people. Ultimately, Behbudiy's life teaches us that real progress begins in the classroom and in the mind. He showed that educating youth, fostering critical thought and bridging tradition with modernity are not separate goals but the foundations of a free, thriving society. His sacrifice



reminds us that social change often requires both knowledge and courage. Today, Behbudiy is remembered not only for his reforms and writings but also as a symbol of courage, vision, and commitment to the power of knowledge. His life reminds us that true progress begins with education, and that the ideas we nurture in classrooms and communities can shape the future of a nation. Even in the face of oppression, Behbudiy's belief in the transformative potential of learning continues to inspire those who seek to enlighten and empower.

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