

SOCIO-PHILOSOPHICAL VIEWS OF MAHMUDKHOJ BEHBUDI

Sharipova Nodira Chorikulovna

Senior lecturer of the Department of

"National Idea, Fundamentals of Spirituality and Law" of NavSU

Abstract: This article explores the socio-philosophical legacy of Mahmudkhoja Behbudi, one of the leading intellectuals of the Jadid movement in Central Asia in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Behbudi's philosophical vision, rooted in Islamic ethics and modernist reformism, addressed the urgent need for educational, cultural, and socio-political renewal within the Muslim society of Turkestan. His writings, speeches, and journalistic efforts reveal a rich tapestry of ideas centered around enlightenment, national awakening, human dignity, social justice, and moral responsibility. This study analyzes his worldview within the historical context of colonial subjugation and cultural stagnation, while assessing its relevance to contemporary debates on modernity, identity, and reform in the Muslim world.

Keywords: Mahmudkhoja Behbudi, Jadidism, Islamic modernism, socio-philosophy, national awakening, enlightenment, reform, colonial critique, identity.

INTRODUCTION

Mahmudkhoja Behbudi (1875–1919) occupies a prominent place in the intellectual history of Central Asia as a pioneer of educational reform, cultural renewal, and political awakening. A central figure in the Jadid movement, which sought to modernize the Muslim societies of Turkestan in response to Russian imperial dominance, Behbudi's contributions extended across theology, philosophy, literature, and journalism. His work emerged during a critical historical juncture, when traditional religious structures were losing social traction and the need for intellectual reform became increasingly urgent.

Unlike many traditional scholars of his time, Behbudi was not content with spiritual instruction alone. He emphasized the socio-political dimensions of religion, advocating for enlightenment through knowledge, civic engagement, and moral responsibility. In his view, the backwardness of Muslim society was not solely a result of external colonization but also of internal inertia and ignorance. As such, his philosophical orientation blended elements of Islamic revivalism with rationalist humanism and a belief in historical progress. This article endeavors to articulate the core components of Behbudi's socio-philosophical worldview and its transformative ambition for the Turkestani Muslim community.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Behbudi's intellectual development took place during the decline of the Bukhara Emirate and under the expanding influence of the Russian Empire. Educated in both traditional Islamic sciences and modern secular subjects, he embodied the new type of Muslim intellectual who was rooted in faith yet open to scientific inquiry, technological innovation, and civic engagement. The Jadid movement, of which he was a major architect, called for "new method" (usuli jadid) schools that emphasized critical thinking, empirical knowledge, and language reform.

In this context, Behbudi's social philosophy was deeply informed by his diagnosis of societal decay — marked by ignorance, fatalism, and clerical stagnation — and his desire to revitalize the Muslim ummah through a fusion of modernity and tradition. His journal "Ayna" (The Mirror), published from 1913 to 1915, became a platform for spreading ideas of civil society, enlightenment, and national consciousness. Behbudi argued that true religiosity could not exist

without knowledge and ethical action, thus bridging the gap between spiritual piety and social engagement.

At the heart of Behbudi's socio-philosophical thought was the belief that human beings are rational, responsible, and capable of ethical self-improvement. His writings frequently stressed the importance of 'ilm (knowledge), adolat (justice), axloq (morality), and vatanparvarlik (patriotism). Unlike the fatalistic attitudes prevalent in the conservative religious establishment, Behbudi emphasized that societal transformation required ijtilah — the exercise of independent reasoning in interpreting religious and worldly matters.

In Behbudi's view, education was the most powerful instrument of transformation. He insisted that girls and boys alike should have access to quality schooling, and that schools must teach not only religion, but also history, geography, mathematics, and science. He saw ignorance as a disease and enlightenment as the cure. Furthermore, he believed that a morally educated citizenry was essential to resisting colonial domination and building a dignified society.

His political philosophy was also reformist in nature. Though not a revolutionary in the classical sense, Behbudi supported constitutionalism, civic participation, and legal reform. His support for the short-lived Turkestan Autonomy in 1917 demonstrated his commitment to a society grounded in justice, law, and the rights of the people. In this sense, his vision was both Islamic and modern, local and universal.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Behbudi viewed the intellectual (or ma'rifatparvar) as a moral agent whose responsibility was to awaken the nation. He criticized both the passive mullahs and the assimilated elites who had lost touch with their spiritual and cultural roots. In his essays and plays, he presented archetypes of corrupt clerics, ignorant masses, and enlightened reformers, using art as a medium of socio-political critique.

His famous play, "Padarkush" (The Parricide), dramatizes the generational conflict between traditional authority and modern ideals, exposing the consequences of blind obedience and ignorance. Through such works, Behbudi gave philosophical form to a new kind of subjectivity — the self-reflective, socially conscious Muslim citizen.

Moreover, Behbudi was keenly aware of the crisis of identity facing his people. Torn between imperial subjugation and cultural decline, Central Asians needed a redefined sense of who they were. Behbudi's response was to reconnect them with a living Islamic tradition capable of renewal — a tradition grounded in ethics, learning, and civil responsibility. Thus, his philosophy was not nostalgic or dogmatic, but dynamic and future-oriented.

CONCLUSION

Mahmudkhoja Behbudi was more than an educator or publicist; he was a philosopher of national renewal. His socio-philosophical views reflect a sophisticated synthesis of Islamic ethics, reformist zeal, and humanist values. At a time of colonial subjugation and intellectual inertia, he envisioned a society grounded in knowledge, morality, and active citizenship. His critique of ignorance and passivity, his advocacy for education and justice, and his unwavering belief in the moral agency of individuals make his thought a valuable resource for those committed to reforming society through ethical and intellectual means.

Behbudi's work challenges us to reconsider what it means to be a responsible intellectual in times of moral and political crisis. His vision continues to illuminate the path for educators, reformers, and scholars striving for a society in which dignity, reason, and justice prevail.

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