

HISTORY OF AHMAD DONISH'S CREATIVE LEGACY

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Abstract

This article examines the formation of Ahmad Donish's creative legacy and its historical significance. It also discusses the historical factors that influenced the development of Donish's intellectual and literary works.

Keywords: Ahmad Donish, creativity, heritage, history, philosophy, king, tyrant.

Introduction

During the second half of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, the socio-political system that existed in Bukhara, together with religious conservatism, injustice, economic hardship, and backwardness, prevented the spread of enlightenment ideas throughout the country. These factors became some of the main reasons for the region's lagging behind in social and cultural development. In the second chapter of his work *Navodir-ul Vaoqe*, Ahmad Donish discusses how rulers should treat their officials. He states that "A ruler must be both powerful and just. If a king is tyrannical or weak and incapable, wicked people will multiply within the country, while neighboring states will begin to encroach upon its territory. As a result, peace and stability will disappear from such a land"¹.

Ahmad Donish expressed these views on the basis of many years of study, observation, and intellectual inquiry. During his student years, his strong thirst for knowledge motivated him to pursue independent studies beyond the traditional madrasa curriculum. He devoted particular attention to geometry, astronomy, philosophy, and literature. Donish thoroughly studied the lives and scholarly works of renowned Eastern thinkers, including Ibn Sina (Avicenna), Abu Rayhan Beruni, Umar Khayyam, Alisher Navoi, Al-Ghazali, Fuzuli, and Bedil.

Through his careful examination of the writings of these distinguished scholars, Ahmad Donish developed his own critical and analytical approach to scientific and philosophical inquiry. After obtaining a private study room (*hujra*) in the madrasa, he also began teaching students and sharing his knowledge. Ahmad Donish had a profound interest in the natural sciences, particularly astronomy. Through his systematic observations of the sky, he was able to predict the exact time of a lunar eclipse and estimate its duration with remarkable accuracy, despite living in an era when modern scientific instruments and technologies had not yet been developed. He reportedly announced that anyone wishing to witness this phenomenon should climb to the roof of the madrasa at a specified time, where they would be able to observe the eclipse with their own eyes. This episode was later recorded in the memoirs of Sadridin Ayni, providing evidence of Donish's exceptional scientific knowledge and observational skills².

Ahmad Donish regularly gathered his students at his home on Mondays, Wednesdays, and

¹ A. Donish. *Donish. "Navodir-ul vaoqe" fors-tojikchadan tarjima qiluvchilar Alixonto'ra Sog'uniiy va Abdurahmon Hamroyev*. Toshkent-Istanbul 2021. B-63.

² 8 Садриддин Айний. Танланган асарлар. Т.5.–Тошкент.:Бадий адабиёт, 1965. – Б.205



Fridays to organize scholarly gatherings devoted to intellectual discussion and the exchange of knowledge. His commitment to science and education demonstrates his selfless devotion to the advancement of learning. In addition to being a distinguished scholar, Ahmad Donish was also one of the leading architects of his time.

During his years of study at the madrasa, his father apprenticed him to the renowned master architect Bobome'mor. Following the death of Bobome'mor, Amir Nasrullah appointed Ahmad Donish as the chief architect of the Emirate and bestowed upon him the honorary title Mahdum. In this position, he supervised all construction projects within the royal court. Ahmad Donish was among the first architects in Bukhara to introduce the use of colored plaster in architectural decoration. A second layer of plaster, colored with natural pigments, was applied over the traditional white surface to create decorative patterns. In particular, black, red, and green pigments were used to depict celestial motifs such as stars, resulting in aesthetically remarkable architectural compositions. He also trained his son in architecture and ornamental painting, who later became an accomplished architect and master decorator.

As a member of the diplomatic missions of the Emirate of Bukhara, Ahmad Donish traveled to Saint Petersburg as part of the embassy sent between 9 November 1857 and 12 January 1858. The delegation was entrusted with conveying condolences on the death of Emperor Nicholas I, congratulating Alexander II on his accession to the throne, and conducting negotiations aimed at strengthening commercial relations between the Emirate of Bukhara and the Russian Empire. Ahmad Donish served as the secretary of the delegation and was specifically instructed to study Russia's political system and social organization. Recalling this mission, he wrote: "I was given the following instruction: study the internal order of that country and pay close attention to its system of state administration, because information about neighboring countries usually reaches us only through merchants and travelers."

During his stay in Saint Petersburg, Ahmad Donish met with high-ranking government officials and participated in diplomatic negotiations. He visited many of the city's most important cultural and scientific institutions, including the Technological Institute, the Alexandrov Manufactory, St. Isaac's Cathedral, the museum of the Academy of Sciences, the Pulkovo Astronomical Observatory, and numerous other notable sites. The principal objective of these visits was to demonstrate the scientific, technological, and political achievements of the Russian Empire. After returning to Bukhara, Ahmad Donish prepared a comprehensive analysis of his observations, emphasizing the positive aspects of Russia's administrative system, scientific progress, and technological development. However, his recommendations were not well received by the rulers of the Emirate. His proposals to improve state administration by drawing upon Russian experience failed to attract the support of the ruling elite. Nevertheless, Donish remained committed to promoting Enlightenment ideals and advocating reforms that would enable Bukhara to modernize in line with the progress achieved by European states. He continued to disseminate these reformist ideas despite official opposition.

Ahmad Donish's second diplomatic mission to Russia took place approximately five years after the beginning of the Russian military expansion into Central Asia. On this occasion, he again joined the diplomatic delegation of the Emirate of Bukhara. The principal purpose of the mission was to reaffirm the Emirate's loyalty to the Russian government while negotiating the return of the territories of Tashkent, Samarkand, and Jizzakh, which had come under Russian control.



This second diplomatic journey further enriched Ahmad Donish's understanding of the Russian state and its system of governance. His vision of comprehensive state reform and his desire to modernize Bukhara, which he regarded as having fallen behind the advanced European countries, became even more firmly established. During this visit, he toured museums devoted to agriculture, geology, and transportation. Owing to his deep interest in astronomy, he once again visited the Pulkovo Astronomical Observatory. He also inspected paper manufacturing plants, as well as factories producing glassware and porcelain. Interested in Russian cultural life, he visited the military fortress at Kronstadt and attended performances at the renowned opera and ballet theatres of Saint Petersburg. Furthermore, he participated in a ceremonial event dedicated to the monument commemorating Empress Catherine II. Although his second stay in Russia was relatively brief, it enabled him to gain valuable insights into the daily life, customs, and traditions of the Russian people. Throughout the diplomatic negotiations, he interacted with numerous government officials and left a favorable impression through his intellectual ability, political insight, philosophical thought, and extensive scientific knowledge.

The Emir of Bukhara was greatly impressed by the respect and recognition that the Russian authorities accorded to Ahmad Donish. Upon his return, Donish was offered several high-ranking administrative positions within the Emirate of Bukhara. However, he believed that no meaningful achievements could be attained in a state characterized by absolute monarchy, unrestricted political authority, and the absence of the rule of law without first implementing fundamental reforms. Through his wisdom and diplomatic tact, Ahmad Donish expressed sincere gratitude for the Emir's offer but politely declined the appointment. He regarded the Bukhara Emirate as a blazing fire, understanding that anyone who became deeply involved in the affairs of the royal court would inevitably suffer its destructive consequences. For this reason, he deliberately avoided close association with the palace administration. In his work *Navodir-ul Vaqoe*, Ahmad Donish writes: "My contemporaries who serve the ruler have considered flattery and the approval of improper actions to be essential duties. I am incapable of doing either. If the ruler expects me, as a man of letters, to enter military service, then it is first necessary to transform this state into one governed by proper laws and regulations like other orderly states. However, establishing military discipline among the Uzbeks cannot be accomplished without considerable difficulty. Therefore, I shall prepare a treatise on regulations based on both Uzbek and European experience. If they implement these reforms, I promise to serve the ruler for four to six hours each day. I will perform whatever duties are within my ability and appropriate to the responsibilities of public office. But if they are unwilling to accept such advice, then let them excuse me, for just as a horse cannot be blamed for being unable to carry the burden of an elephant, neither should I be blamed for being unable to accomplish the impossible."

This passage clearly reflects Ahmad Donish's political philosophy and reformist worldview. Rather than seeking personal status or authority, he emphasized that genuine progress could only be achieved through institutional reform, the establishment of lawful governance, and the introduction of an effective administrative system based on justice, discipline, and rational state management³.

During his third visit to Russia, Ahmad Donish devoted greater attention to the social life of the

³ Ahmad Donish. *Navodir-ul vaqoe*. (Nodir voqealar). Fors-tojikdan tarjima qiluvchilar. Alixonto'ra Sog'unliy va A.Xamroyev. Toshkent-Istanbul 2021. B-18.



Russian people. Based on his observations, he wrote:

"Russian society, like societies elsewhere, consists of various social groups and classes. Each group occupies its own privileged position, while others are deprived of rights and freedoms and live in absolute poverty under oppression and injustice."

During his travels in Russia, Ahmad Donish had the opportunity to meet representatives of different segments of society. Among them were the Russian orientalist and statesman V. V. Grigoriev, as well as, during his second mission, the literary scholar and historian P. I. Pashino. These encounters enabled him to gain a deeper understanding of the Russian system of government and social structure and to compare them with those of the Emirate of Bukhara.

As a result of these observations, Ahmad Donish composed a treatise entitled *Treatise on Civilization and the Principles of Mutual Cooperation*, in which he compared the socio-political systems of Russia and the Emirate of Bukhara. He presented this work to Amir Muzaffar Khan. Even before reading the treatise, the Amir offered Ahmad Donish several high-ranking governmental positions. Donish, however, declared that he would accept such an appointment only if the social and political reforms proposed in the treatise were implemented within the Emirate. After reviewing the manuscript, Amir Muzaffar Khan became angered by its reformist proposals and consequently removed Ahmad Donish from the diplomatic service.

Following the deterioration of his relationship with Amir Muzaffar Khan, Ahmad Donish resigned from court service. He devoted this period of his life to scholarly research, organizing and refining his scientific and literary works. A man of exceptional intelligence, profound wisdom, and an insatiable desire for knowledge, Ahmad Donish never regarded isolation or withdrawal from public office as a burden. Amir Muzaffar Khan understood that leaving such an eminent intellectual unemployed in the capital could damage his own prestige. At the same time, he feared the influence that a reform-minded thinker such as Donish might exert on the political life of the Emirate.

Consequently, in 1882 Ahmad Donish was appointed *qadi* (judge) of the Guzor Bekdom. In 1885 he was transferred to serve as the judge of Narpay. In 1887 he was appointed director of the royal library, a position he held until 1889. Throughout his public service, Ahmad Donish remained steadfast in his commitment to justice and the pursuit of knowledge. Fearless in defending his principles, he consistently supported scholars and promoted learning wherever he served, earning enduring respect as both a reformer and a patron of intellectual life.

Ahmad Donish's scholarly legacy is remarkably extensive. Among his many fields of interest was the history and genealogy of the Ninety-Two Uzbek tribes, about which he collected valuable historical and ethnographic information.

Important details concerning the life of Ahmad Donish can be found in his work *Jome' al-Hikoyat* (*Collection of Stories*). This work has a biographical character and constitutes one of the principal sources for the study of Donish's life and intellectual development.

Ahmad Donish also produced several significant works on astronomy, including *Manazir al-Kawakib* (*The Splendor of the Stars*), *Risala fi A'mal al-Kurra* (*A Treatise on the Use of the Globe*), *Muntakhab al-Ahkam* (*Selected Laws*), and *Istikhraj Tul wa Arz al-Bilad* (*Determining the Longitude and Latitude of Places*). These writings demonstrate his profound interest in astronomy, geography, and the natural sciences.



The history of the Emirate of Bukhara, the Russian conquest of Central Asia, and the socio-political conditions of the nineteenth century are reflected in such works as *History of the Manghit Rulers*, *A Concise History of the Manghit Amirs of Bukhara*, and *Navodir al-Vaqoe (Rare Events)*. The latter may be compared with Nizam al-Mulk's renowned political treatise *Siyasatnama* because of its comprehensive discussion of governance, society, and state administration. Owing to the breadth of its subjects, *Navodir al-Vaqoe* may justifiably be regarded as an encyclopedia of its age.

Throughout his life, Ahmad Donish tirelessly sought ways to rescue his homeland from political, economic, and cultural stagnation. He showed a keen interest in the development of Western countries and in their systems of governance and social organization, believing that these experiences could serve as valuable models for the modernization of Bukhara. His ideas concerning urban development, public welfare, economic prosperity, and the transformation of the country into a flourishing and well-governed state possess enduring historical significance. Although his reformist and Enlightenment-oriented ideas were rejected by the rulers of Bukhara during his lifetime, subsequent generations of politicians, philosophers, historians, and literary scholars came to recognize their progressive nature and lasting importance. Following the death of Amir Muzaffar Khan, Ahmad Donish returned to Bukhara. In 1897 he fell seriously ill and passed away in his native city.

During the second half of the nineteenth century, the Emirate of Bukhara was a feudal state in which absolute political authority was concentrated in the hands of the Amir. Its administrative system had remained virtually unchanged since the medieval period. The Amir exercised both legislative and judicial authority and possessed the unrestricted power to appoint state officials according to his own discretion. The state lacked a centralized budgetary system, and government officials did not receive regular salaries; instead, they depended largely upon revenues collected from the population.

Legislative authority was exercised in accordance with the principles of Islamic law (*Sharia*). Consequently, the Muslim religious establishment exerted considerable influence over the educational system as well as the judicial and administrative institutions of the Emirate. Judicial proceedings were conducted by *qadis* (Islamic judges) in accordance with the provisions of *Sharia*. In addition to administering justice, the *qadis* were responsible for supervising compliance with moral and religious norms. They possessed broad authority in interpreting Islamic law and issuing legal judgments, thereby playing a central role in the legal and social life of the Emirate.

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