

SHAHABUDDIN MARJANI'S FORMATIVE PERIOD AND THE NECESSITY OF HIS JOURNEY TO SAMARKAND**Tursunoy Hamrakulovna Igamberdieva**

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Abstract: The present study examines the formative intellectual period of the prominent Tatar theologian, historian, reformer, and educator Shahabuddin Marjani (1818–1889), with particular emphasis on the socio-political and religious circumstances that necessitated his educational migration to Bukhara and Samarkand. The article analyzes the broader historical context of the Volga-Ural Muslim communities under Russian imperial rule during the late eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth centuries, highlighting the processes of Russification, Christian missionary expansion, and administrative control over Islamic institutions. Through historical-comparative and source-critical methodologies, the study demonstrates that the migration of Tatar students to Mawarannahr was not an isolated educational phenomenon but part of a large-scale intellectual and spiritual movement shaped by imperial pressure, economic transformation, and shared Hanafi-Maturidi traditions. The research further argues that Marjani's educational experience in Central Asia profoundly influenced the emergence of Islamic reformism and Jadid thought among the Tatars. The article concludes that Samarkand and Bukhara functioned as independent intellectual zones beyond direct imperial ideological control and became decisive centers in shaping modern Tatar Muslim consciousness.

Key words: Shahabuddin Marjani, Tatars, Samarkand, Bukhara, Russian Empire, Jadidism, Islamic reformism, Mawarannahr, Hanafi tradition, Muslim education.

Introduction. The first quarter of the nineteenth century represented a period of profound transformation in the internal and external policies of the Russian Empire. For the Muslim peoples of the Volga-Ural region, particularly the Tatars, this era was simultaneously characterized by processes of national awakening and the intensification of colonial restrictions. The relatively moderate religious tolerance policy initiated under Peter I and partially softened during the reign of Catherine II gradually evolved into a more systematic mechanism of administrative and ideological control under Alexander I and especially Nicholas I.

The Russian Empire sought not only to administratively dominate Muslim populations but also to subject them spiritually and culturally. State policy increasingly supported missionary activities aimed at Russification and Christianization. Nevertheless, Tatar society responded through forms of “passive resistance,” primarily by preserving and strengthening Islamic educational traditions. As a consequence, the internal demand for authentic religious and intellectual learning significantly increased.

The establishment of the Orenburg Muslim Spiritual Assembly in 1788 became one of the central instruments of imperial control over Muslim religious life. Through this institution, the empire attempted to transform Islamic scholars into state functionaries and to place every imam under police supervision. However, despite these intentions, the Assembly indirectly contributed to preserving the religious unity of Tatar society. At the same time, strict censorship was imposed upon madrasa curricula, mosque construction, and the publication of Islamic literature. Under such conditions, Tatar students increasingly sought advanced education beyond imperial borders, particularly in the intellectual centers of Mawarannahr such as Bukhara and Samarkand.

Rizaeddin Fakhreddin, in his famous work *Asar*, described this intellectual orientation in the following manner:

“For our scholars and seekers of knowledge, the lands of Bukhara and Samarkand had become like the ‘Ka’ba of enlightenment.’ While textbooks and educational methods in Russian madrasas were restricted, the teachers of Mawarannahr transmitted Eastern philosophy, wisdom, and logic in their authentic form. Therefore, every talented youth considered the perfection of knowledge possible only within the scholarly circles of these sacred cities”.

The historical work *Mustafad al-Akhbar fi Ahwali Kazan wa Bulgar* by Shahabuddin Marjani provides significant evidence concerning these connections. In the biographical sections devoted to the imams and scholars of the Kazan region, Marjani demonstrates that a substantial number of Tatar religious figures who served during the late eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries had received education in Bukhara. This clearly illustrates the enormous intellectual influence of Central Asian Islamic culture upon the Volga-Ural region.

The purpose of this article is to analyze the socio-political, religious, intellectual, and economic factors that shaped Marjani’s formative years and compelled him toward the scholarly centers of Samarkand and Bukhara. Furthermore, the study investigates why Tatar students preferred Mawarannahr over other Islamic centers such as Cairo or Istanbul and how these educational migrations contributed to the emergence of Islamic reformism among the Tatars.

Literature review and methodology. This study employs historical-comparative, source-critical, and contextual analytical methodologies. Primary attention is devoted to the examination of Shahabuddin Marjani’s historical work *Mustafad al-Akhbar fi Ahwali Kazan wa Bulgar*, particularly its biographical sections concerning Tatar imams and scholars connected to Bukhara and Samarkand.

The research also utilizes the writings of Rizaeddin Fakhreddin, Russian imperial decrees, contemporary scholarly interpretations, and historiographical analyses by researchers such as Hisao Komatsu, Robert Geraci, and V. V. Bartold. Through comparative examination of these sources, the study reconstructs the intellectual atmosphere of nineteenth-century Tatar society and evaluates the role of Central Asian educational institutions in shaping Muslim reformist consciousness.

Additionally, the article adopts a socio-historical framework to analyze the interaction between imperial administrative policies, economic developments among Tatar merchant classes, and the preservation of Islamic identity. Special emphasis is placed on educational migration, religious networks, Naqshbandi-Mujaddidi spiritual connections, and scholarly transmission between the Volga region and Mawarannahr.

Results and discussion. Following the conquest of the Kazan Khanate in 1552, the religious freedoms of the Tatars became severely restricted. Mosque and madrasa construction was prohibited, while many pre-existing Islamic institutions were systematically destroyed by imperial decree. The decree of Tsar Fyodor I Ivanovich issued in 1593 explicitly ordered the destruction of Tatar mosques and prohibited future mosque construction. Similar anti-Muslim policies continued during the eighteenth century. By 1744, out of 536 mosques in the Kazan and Sviyazhsk regions, 418 had been demolished.

The reign of Catherine II marked a temporary shift toward relative religious tolerance. Mosque and madrasa construction was again permitted, leading to the establishment of several significant Islamic institutions in Kazan and surrounding regions. Among the most prominent was the mosque later known as Al-Marjani Mosque, built between 1766 and 1770, where Shahabuddin Marjani himself would later serve as imam between 1850 and 1889.

Despite these relative freedoms, the nineteenth century remained an era of contradictions and spiritual struggle for the Muslims of the Volga-Ural region. Under Nicholas I, the imperial doctrine of “Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationality” transformed Muslims from merely religious minorities into perceived threats to imperial unity. New missionary campaigns sought to weaken Islamic identity through Christian educational systems and linguistic assimilation.

The educational reforms associated with Nikolay Ilminsky aimed to replace Arabic-script Tatar literacy with Cyrillic orthography and establish church-oriented schools for Muslim youth.

These policies generated a strong reaction within Tatar society. Muslim communities increasingly rejected state schools and strengthened support for traditional madrasas. This atmosphere laid the foundation for the later educational reforms advocated by Marjani and other Jadid thinkers.

The evidence presented in Marjani's *Mustafad al-Akhbar* demonstrates the scale of educational migration toward Central Asia. Marjani dedicates separate sections to fourteen mosques in Kazan city and thirteen major village mosques throughout the region. He records the biographies of 187 imams associated with these institutions, fifty of whom had studied in Bukhara.

Furthermore, Marjani documents the biographies of eighty-seven additional scholars not directly connected to these mosques. Many of them had lived or died in Istanbul, Cairo, or Bukhara, while others had migrated from India, Iraq, or Mawarannahr into the Volga region. More than thirty among these scholars either studied in Bukhara or served there as imams and teachers.

These data indicate the existence of a powerful cultural and intellectual connection between the Muslims of the Volga region and Mawarannahr by the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Several factors explain why Tatar students specifically chose Samarkand and Bukhara over Cairo or Istanbul:

First, Mawarannahr represented the historical stronghold of Hanafi jurisprudence and Maturidi theology, traditions shared by the Volga Tatars themselves. Consequently, Bukhara appeared as the authentic center of Islamic orthodoxy.

Second, linguistic proximity played a crucial role. Chagatai Turkic and related Turkic languages were considerably easier for Tatar students to understand compared to Arabic or Ottoman Turkish.

Third, annual trade caravans between the Volga region and Central Asia facilitated transportation, accommodation, and financial support for students.

Fourth, within Tatar intellectual consciousness, Bukhara and Samarkand possessed symbolic prestige as "Qubbat al-Islam" – the Dome of Islam – and were regarded as the ultimate centers of authentic knowledge.

Finally, the Russian Empire itself indirectly contributed to this process. While connections with the Ottoman Empire were viewed as politically dangerous, commercial relations with the Emirate of Bukhara were economically beneficial to the empire. Therefore, the movement of students toward Central Asia was tolerated to a certain degree.

The emergence of a Tatar merchant bourgeoisie during the nineteenth century became the material foundation of these intellectual exchanges. Tatar merchants dominated commercial relations between Russia and Central Asia and increasingly invested their wealth in charitable and educational activities.

Trade caravans carried not only textiles and leather but also manuscripts, books, fatwas, and scholarly ideas. Wealthy merchants financed the construction of new madrasas and sponsored talented students studying abroad. Thus, economic modernization paradoxically became a mechanism for preserving Islamic intellectual identity.

According to Marjani himself: "In our homeland, governmental restrictions and regulations aimed at cutting the roots of religious education. In such dark times, Bukhara and Samarkand remained the only gates of salvation for seekers of knowledge. Our merchants spared no wealth in supporting students on their journeys of learning".

Shahabuddin Marjani was born on January 16, 1818, in the village of Yabynchi near Marjan village in present-day Tatarstan. He originated from a distinguished family of imams and madrasa teachers. Both his paternal and maternal grandfathers were highly educated scholars proficient in Arabic and Persian.

Marjani received his primary education in his father Bahauddin's madrasa in Tashkichu village, where he studied Arabic grammar, Qur'anic sciences, fiqh, kalam, logic, and theology. By the age of seventeen, he had already begun teaching in the same madrasa and experimenting with pedagogical methods beyond traditional standards.

Unlike many of his contemporaries, Marjani did not limit himself to rote memorization. Instead, he critically examined the logical structures and evidential foundations of scholarly texts. During his adolescent years, he increasingly recognized the intellectual limitations of the scholastic educational methods dominant in Volga madrasas.

The educational system of the 1830s heavily relied upon memorization of commentaries and super-commentaries. Marjani perceived that such methods suppressed independent reasoning. While studying texts such as Hashiyat Sharh al-Wiqaya, he began comparing interpretations and searching for original sources. For him, knowledge was not merely repetition but the demonstration of truth through rational proof.

This intellectual dissatisfaction gradually directed him toward the great scholarly centers of Samarkand and Bukhara.

The year 1838 became a turning point in Marjani's life. With his father's blessing and the support of merchant caravans, he departed for Bukhara. This journey represented not merely educational migration but a search for intellectual authenticity and spiritual truth.

Marjani later wrote: "I attended my father's lessons and read many books, yet my soul remained dissatisfied. The textbooks we studied seemed like endless repetitions disconnected from the original purpose of knowledge. I wished to know where the essence of knowledge truly existed. Then I understood that in our homeland this thirst could not easily be quenched. The names of Bukhara and Samarkand echoed within my heart like miracles".

In Bukhara, Marjani studied at the Kukaldash and Mir-i Arab madrasas. During his early years there, he distinguished himself through exceptional preparation, critical participation in scholarly debates, and profound engagement with commentaries and marginalia.

However, the deeper he immersed himself in traditional scholastic disciplines, the more dissatisfied he became with the absence of secular sciences and broader intellectual inquiry. After unsuccessfully attempting to persuade his teachers to reform educational methods, Marjani increasingly turned toward independent study, libraries, and manuscript acquisition.

After five years in Bukhara, Marjani moved to Samarkand, where he entered the Sherdor Madrasa. Here he focused particularly on historical and biographical scholarship and studied under renowned theologians, especially Abu Sa'id al-Samarqandi. It was likely under his influence that Marjani's reformist orientation strengthened.

Through comparative analysis of early Islamic sources and later interpretations, Marjani concluded that many Muslims had drifted away from the principles embodied in the Qur'an and Sunnah. During this period, he also became deeply influenced by the reformist ideas of Abu Nasr Kursavi.

After two years in Samarkand, Marjani returned once more to Bukhara and continued his studies in Islamic jurisprudence, philosophy, theology, logic, and history. During his eleven years in Central Asia, he studied the works of major Muslim intellectuals including Ibn Sina, Ibn Rushd, al-Ghazali, Ibn Khaldun, al-Suyuti, al-Shahrastani, and others.

In addition to extensive reading, Marjani authored commentaries on logical and juridical texts, criticized the methods of teaching natural sciences in Bukhara, collected historical manuscripts, and became affiliated with Naqshbandi Sufi networks from whom he received spiritual authorization (ijaza).

The historical evidence demonstrates that the educational migration of Tatar students toward Mawarannahr was not accidental but structurally rooted in the political, intellectual, and economic realities of the nineteenth century.

Russian imperial attempts at Russification and Christianization unintentionally strengthened Islamic self-consciousness among the Tatars. Under conditions of increasing administrative

pressure, Samarkand and Bukhara emerged as independent intellectual zones beyond direct imperial ideological control.

The role of Tatar merchants proved equally significant. Commercial networks facilitated not only economic exchange but also the circulation of books, manuscripts, scholarly debates, and reformist ideas. Consequently, educational migration became institutionally sustainable.

Marjani's intellectual development reflects the broader transformation of Tatar Muslim society. His early dissatisfaction with scholastic rigidity and his subsequent exposure to Central Asian scholarly traditions enabled him to synthesize classical Islamic learning with critical inquiry. This synthesis later became foundational for Jadid reformism.

Unlike conservative "Ancient" scholars who favored isolation and rigid traditionalism, Marjani advocated the harmonization of Islamic learning with rational inquiry and intellectual renewal. Therefore, he became the spiritual father of Jadidism and one of the most influential reformist figures in modern Islamic intellectual history.

The study further indicates that the relationship between the Volga region and Mawarannahr constituted a unified intellectual and religious space connected through Hanafi-Maturidi traditions, Naqshbandi spiritual networks, and merchant-sponsored scholarly mobility.

Conclusion. The formative period of Shahabuddin Marjani's life cannot be understood separately from the wider socio-political and intellectual transformations affecting Tatar Muslim society during the nineteenth century. Russian imperial policies of religious control and cultural assimilation generated strong internal demands for authentic Islamic education and intellectual autonomy.

Under these circumstances, Samarkand and Bukhara functioned as major centers of scholarly refuge and renewal for Volga-Ural Muslims. Shared theological traditions, linguistic proximity, commercial infrastructure, and symbolic religious prestige made Mawarannahr the preferred destination for Tatar students.

Marjani emerged not merely as a participant in this historical process but as its greatest reformist representative. His educational experiences in Bukhara and Samarkand transformed him into a critical thinker capable of challenging scholastic stagnation while preserving Islamic intellectual continuity.

Ultimately, the intellectual bridge between the Volga region and Central Asia played a decisive role in shaping modern Tatar Islamic reformism and contributed significantly to the emergence of Jadid educational and cultural movements across the Muslim territories of the Russian Empire.

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