



THE ROLE OF THE SURKHAN OASIS IN THE SPIRITUAL LIFE OF THE BUKHARA EMIRATE

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Article history:	Abstract:
Received: 14 th July 2026 Accepted: 10 th August 2026	This article examines the role of the Surkhan Oasis in the spiritual life of the Bukhara Emirate from the late eighteenth century to the first quarter of the twentieth century. The study explores the religious and educational environment of the oasis, the activities of traditional schools and madrasas, the social standing of Islamic scholars (ulama) and teachers (mudarris), the spiritual functions of mosques and pilgrimage sites, as well as the formation and development of oral folk traditions and traditional values. Particular attention is paid to the educational institutions and intellectual environment of the Boysun, Denov, and Sherobod beklik (administrative districts), highlighting their connections with the broader spiritual and intellectual sphere of the Bukhara Emirate.
Keywords: Bukhara Emirate, Surkhan Oasis, spirituality, religious and educational life, Boysun, Denov, Sherobod, madrasa, traditional school, Islamic scholars, religious teachers.	

INTRODUCTION.

The Bukhara Emirate occupied an important position in the history of Central Asia not only as a political and economic entity but also as a major centre of intellectual, religious, and spiritual life. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the development of Islamic sciences in Bukhara, including Qur'anic studies, hadith, Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh), Quranic exegesis (tafsir), and Sufism, together with the activities of madrasas and traditional schools and the prominent social standing of Islamic scholars, constituted essential elements of spiritual life.

These spiritual processes were not confined to the city of Bukhara. A religious and educational environment also developed in other territories of the emirate through the activities of local schools, madrasas, mosques, and religious scholars. One such region was the Surkhan Oasis, where Boysun, Denov, and Sherobod served as important administrative centres during the nineteenth century.

Studying the role of the Surkhan Oasis in the spiritual life of the Bukhara Emirate is important for several reasons. First, it makes it possible to identify the processes through which education and religious knowledge spread throughout the region. Second, it reveals the connections between Bukhara's intellectual and educational environment and the southern territories of the emirate. Third, it provides an opportunity to analyse the interaction between Islamic values, local customs, and oral folk traditions.

DISCUSSION.

The Surkhan Oasis occupied a distinctive geographical and historical position as one of the southern territories of the Bukhara Emirate. During the nineteenth century, the beklik districts of Boysun, Denov, and Sherobod formed part of the emirate's administrative system, while certain eastern territories were governed within other administrative districts. The oasis's location in the south contributed to the distinctive characteristics of its spiritual life. In this region, the Islamic and educational traditions associated with Bukhara interacted with local customs, oral folk traditions, and ethnocultural values. Therefore, it would be inaccurate to interpret the spiritual life of the Surkhan Oasis merely as a repetition of developments taking place in Bukhara on the periphery of the emirate. Rather, the region developed its own distinctive spiritual environment in which broader Islamic and educational traditions were integrated with local historical experiences and folk culture.

During the Bukhara Emirate, traditional schools and madrasas were among the principal institutions of spiritual life. Traditional schools provided basic literacy and religious instruction, whereas madrasas offered more advanced religious and scholarly education. In the Surkhan Oasis, these institutions also met the local population's religious and educational needs. Contemporary studies indicate that elementary education existed in the Boysun, Denov, and Sherobod districts of the Bukhara Emirate and that the region's educational institutions had a long historical tradition.



One important feature of this educational system was that traditional schools were responsible not only for teaching literacy but also for the religious and moral upbringing of children. Education and spiritual formation were therefore closely interconnected. Instruction in Qur'anic recitation, religious principles, moral conduct, and basic literacy contributed to shaping the worldview of the younger generation.

Madrasas held a particularly significant position in the spiritual life of the Surkhan Oasis. In addition to providing religious instruction, they played an important role in developing the region's intellectual environment. The Said Ataliq Madrasa in Denov is regarded as one of the oasis's important historical, architectural, and educational monuments. Research identifies this madrasa and other educational institutions in the region as significant centres of intellectual and educational activity.

Evidence also indicates the development of madrasa education in Boysun. Connections between the educational environments of Boysun and Denov and the madrasas of Bukhara contributed to the development of local scholars. The presence of Islamic scholars, teachers, and students around madrasas fostered an intellectual and educational environment. In addition to disseminating religious knowledge, this environment encouraged reading, written culture, and the continuity of scholarly traditions.

During the Bukhara Emirate, Islamic scholars occupied an influential position in the spiritual life of society. Alongside their work in mosques and madrasas, they played an important role in addressing religious, moral, and social issues in the daily lives of local communities. Religious teachers and scholars in the Surkhan Oasis likewise contributed actively to shaping the spiritual life of the population.

Their responsibilities extended beyond teaching. Islamic scholars:

- Conducted religious ceremonies;
- Provided advice on marriage and family matters;
- Explained religious and legal issues;
- Contributed to the moral upbringing of young people;
- Helped improve the population's religious knowledge.

Thus, Islamic scholars and religious teachers constituted an important social group connecting religious knowledge with everyday community life.

The spiritual life of the Surkhan Oasis cannot be fully understood without considering its intellectual and educational connections with Bukhara. As a major religious and scholarly centre of Central Asia, Bukhara

attracted students and Islamic scholars from various regions. The educational system of the Surkhan Oasis was also connected with the broader madrasa traditions of Bukhara.

Local students who travelled to Bukhara to pursue advanced education, as well as those who returned to their home region after studying there and subsequently taught others, helped maintain these spiritual and intellectual connections. This process was significant in two respects. On the one hand, Bukhara's scholarly traditions spread to the Surkhan Oasis. On the other hand, scholars originating from the oasis contributed to the intellectual environment of Bukhara. Mosques were among the most important social institutions in the spiritual life of the Surkhan Oasis. In addition to serving as places of worship, they brought communities together, disseminated religious knowledge, and strengthened communal relationships. Studies of the architecture of the Surkhan Oasis during the period of the Central Asian khanates identify the presence of mosques, madrasas, mausoleums, and other religious structures as evidence of the material foundations of religious and educational life in the region.

Pilgrimage sites also occupied a special place in the religious and spiritual outlook of the population. Pilgrimages, prayers, ceremonies, and legends associated with these sites helped strengthen spiritual connections between generations. From this perspective, pilgrimage sites should be regarded not merely as religious locations but also as places that preserve historical memory and spiritual heritage.

Sufism occupied an important position in the spiritual life of the Bukhara Emirate. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Sufi teachings, alongside other Islamic sciences, influenced social and spiritual life. Studies note the importance attached to the Qur'an, hadith, Islamic jurisprudence, and Sufism during the period of the emirate.

Sufi traditions also played a role in shaping religious views and popular spirituality in the Surkhan Oasis. The emphasis placed by Sufism on patience, honesty, humility, generosity, and human compassion influenced everyday moral values. In this process, religious education and traditional popular beliefs interacted, contributing to the development of a distinctive local spiritual environment.

The spiritual life of the Surkhan Oasis cannot be fully understood without considering oral folk traditions. Epics, *termas* (traditional lyrical and narrative compositions), songs, proverbs, legends, and myths served as important means of transmitting historical memory and moral values from one generation to



another. In particular, the bakhshi tradition of epic storytelling emerged as one of the distinctive cultural and spiritual phenomena of the Surkhan region. The epics performed by bakhshis promoted such values as:

- Courage;
- Patriotism;
- Loyalty;
- Friendship;
- Justice;
- Respect for parents;
- Humanity and compassion.

Consequently, oral folk traditions can be regarded as an informal yet powerful means of moral and spiritual education.

Family and community ceremonies also played an important role in the spiritual life of the Surkhan Oasis. Wedding ceremonies, circumcision celebrations, rituals associated with newborn children, funerals, commemorative gatherings, and seasonal customs brought members of society together.

These ceremonies reflected not only religious values but also local customs and traditions. Respect for elders, good neighbourly relations, hospitality, hashar (collective voluntary work), and mutual assistance strengthened the moral foundations of society.

From this perspective, the spiritual life of the Surkhan Oasis extended beyond religious education and encompassed a system of moral values expressed in the population's everyday lives.

Madrasas, mosques, and mausoleums in the Surkhan Oasis are of considerable significance as material expressions of the spiritual life of the period. These architectural monuments provide insights into the religious worldview, aesthetic values, and building traditions of the society of that time.

Studies indicate that madrasas, mosques, mausoleums, and other structures built in the Surkhan Oasis between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries were connected with the architectural traditions of Bukhara while incorporating distinctive local characteristics. Thus, architectural monuments should be regarded not merely as historical buildings but also as important historical sources reflecting the spiritual worldview of the population.

New developments emerged in the social and cultural life of the Surkhan Oasis during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As the political and economic influence of the Russian Empire in the region increased, the oasis's external connections also expanded.

Although traditional schools and madrasas continued to function during this period, new social and educational ideas gradually began to spread. Recent studies of the

ethnopolitical history of the Surkhan Oasis indicate that Uzbeks and Tajiks constituted the principal ethnic groups in the region during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, while Russians, Tatars, and other groups were also present.

This ethnic diversity influenced the region's cultural connections and social environment. At the same time, traditional religious and educational values retained their significance. This demonstrates that continuity of tradition and processes of change occurred simultaneously in the spiritual life of the Surkhan Oasis. The findings of this study make it possible to identify several key aspects of the role of the Surkhan Oasis in the spiritual life of the Bukhara Emirate.

First, the dissemination of education and religious knowledge constituted one of the principal dimensions of the oasis's spiritual life.

Second, the schools and madrasas of Boysun, Denov, and Sherobod met the local population's intellectual and religious needs.

Third, intellectual and educational connections with Bukhara linked the oasis's religious and educational environment with the broader scholarly traditions of the emirate.

Fourth, mosques and pilgrimage sites served not only religious purposes but also functioned as centres of social and spiritual cohesion.

Fifth, epic storytelling and oral folk traditions played an important role in preserving the historical memory and moral values of local communities.

Sixth, traditional customs and family ceremonies ensured the continuity of spiritual values in everyday life.

CONCLUSION.

From the late eighteenth century to the first quarter of the twentieth century, the Surkhan Oasis occupied an important position in the spiritual life of the Bukhara Emirate. The educational and religious environment that developed in such centres as Boysun, Denov, and Sherobod met the spiritual needs of the local population while contributing to the establishment and continuity of the emirate's broader religious and scholarly traditions in its southern territories.

Traditional schools and madrasas served as the principal institutions of spiritual life through which religious knowledge, literacy, and moral education were transmitted from one generation to another. Islamic scholars and religious teachers functioned not only as educators but also as spiritual guides within their communities.

However, the spiritual life of the Surkhan Oasis was not limited to religious education. Mosques and pilgrimage



sites, oral folk traditions, epic storytelling, family ceremonies, customs, and traditional values also constituted essential elements of the oasis's spiritual culture.

Overall, the Surkhan Oasis should be understood not simply as a peripheral territory of the Bukhara Emirate but as a region in which broader Islamic and scholarly traditions interacted with local historical experiences and cultural practices, producing a distinctive spiritual environment.

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