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THE INTERPRETATION OF ENTREPRENEURIAL CULTURE AND THE ETHICS OF LABOUR IN THE WORKS OF ABDURAUF FITRAT

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Tohirova Firuzabonu Umidjon qizi
Student of group 3-3IQT-25
Faculty of economics and tourism
Bukhara state university
firuzabonutohirova1803@gmail.com

Abstract

This study investigates the conceptualisation of entrepreneurial culture and the ethics of labour in the works of Abdurauf Fitrat (1886–1938), one of the foremost intellectuals of the Bukharan Jadid movement and a foundational figure of modern Uzbek thought. Drawing on a hermeneutic and historical-comparative analysis of his major reformist treatises — Munozara (1909), Bayonoti sayyohi hindi (1912), Oila (1914) and Rahbari najot (1916) — supplemented by selected journalistic essays of 1917–1918, the article reconstructs the discursive framework through which Fitrat diagnosed the economic stagnation of Muslim Central Asia and articulated an alternative vision grounded in productive labour, technical education and civic entrepreneurship. The analysis identifies five interrelated dimensions of his thought: a diagnostic critique of economic stagnation; the rehabilitation of labour as a moral and religious imperative; the modern entrepreneur as a civic ideal; education as the institutional foundation of a productive culture; and an anti-colonial conception of national economic awakening (vatan iqtisodi). The findings show that Fitrat's economic-cultural thought is neither a passive importation of European liberalism nor a mere echo of Tatar Jadidism, but a culturally embedded synthesis that combines an ethical reactivation of early Islamic mercantile values with selective adoption of modern economic rationality. The study argues that this synthesis offers a historically grounded resource for contemporary Uzbek debates on entrepreneurship, vocational education and human capital formation.

Keywords

Abdurauf Fitrat, Jadidism, entrepreneurial culture, work ethic, Bukhara, *vatan iqtisodi*, Central Asian intellectual history, economic modernisation, vocational education.

The intellectual legacy of the Jadid movement (*jadidchilik*) has emerged in recent decades as an indispensable reference point for understanding the formation of modern Uzbek identity, civic consciousness and economic culture. Among the figures associated with this current of late-imperial and early-Soviet reformism, Abdurauf Fitrat (1886–1938) occupies a position of particular density and complexity. Pedagogue, dramatist, poet, linguist, historian, statesman and religious reformer, he produced a body of work that engaged simultaneously with literary form, theological interpretation, political mobilisation and — of central interest here — the moral and material organisation of economic life.

While Fitrat's literary and linguistic achievements have received substantial scholarly attention, both within Uzbekistan and internationally, his sustained engagement with questions of labour, profession, commerce and what may today be termed entrepreneurial culture has been comparatively under-theorised. This is a significant lacuna. The economic dimensions of Jadid reformism were not peripheral to its programme; they constituted, as Khalid (1998) has demonstrated, one of its core axes. Fitrat himself returned again and again, across languages and genres, to the conviction that the regeneration of Muslim society in Central Asia could not be accomplished without a thoroughgoing transformation of its productive practices, its valorisation of labour and the cultural status accorded to those engaged in trade, craft and industry.

The relevance of this inquiry extends well beyond the historical-philological reconstruction of a single author's thought. Contemporary Uzbekistan, in pursuing accelerated economic modernisation, vocational reform and the cultivation of an entrepreneurial culture aligned with sustainability and human capital priorities, is in significant respects engaging with problems that Jadid intellectuals first formulated within a Central Asian register. To revisit Fitrat's writings is therefore to recover an indigenous intellectual genealogy for present-day debates on work, productivity and economic citizenship — a genealogy that situates these debates not as imported novelties but as long-standing concerns of national thought.

The scholarly literature on Fitrat may be organised into three principal strands. The first, and most extensive, comprises Uzbek-language philological and biographical scholarship, which since the late Soviet period and especially after independence has reconstructed Fitrat's textual corpus, edited his works, and traced his literary, linguistic and pedagogical contributions (Qosimov, 2002; Sirojiddinov, 2005; Karimov, 2020). Within this tradition, Fitrat is treated above all as a foundational figure of modern Uzbek literature and as a victim of Stalinist repression, with comparatively less emphasis on the systematic content of his social and economic thought.

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The second strand is constituted by Anglophone and European scholarship on Central Asian Jadidism more broadly. The seminal contribution here is Khalid's *The Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform: Jadidism in Central Asia* (1998), which established the analytical framework within which Fitrat is typically discussed: as a member of a transnational reformist intelligentsia who, while drawing on Tatar, Ottoman and Egyptian models, articulated a distinctive Central Asian project of cultural regeneration. Khalid's later *Making Uzbekistan* (2015) extends the analysis into the early Soviet decade, illuminating Fitrat's complex trajectory between Bukharan reformism, the People's Republic of Bukhara and Soviet Uzbek statehood. Allworth (1990) and Edgar (2004) provide complementary historical context, while Komatsu (1989) offers focused analysis of the Bukharan Jadid current to which Fitrat belonged.

The third strand — and the one most directly relevant to the present study — comprises a smaller but growing literature concerned with the economic, social and religious-ethical content of Jadid thought. Studies in this vein have examined Jadid critiques of *waqf* endowments, advocacy of modern schooling, attitudes toward women's labour and engagement with European political economy. Yet sustained, focused analysis of how Fitrat in particular conceptualised entrepreneurship, productive labour and the moral status of commercial activity remains relatively scarce, with the topic typically appearing as a subordinate element within broader treatments of his reformism.

Three observations emerge from this review. First, Fitrat's economic-cultural thought is not a marginal subtext of his reformist project; it is a structural component, integrated with his theological, pedagogical and political arguments. Second, his treatment of labour and enterprise cannot be assimilated either to a "Westernising" or to a strictly "Islamic revivalist" framework, but is more accurately read as a creative synthesis that mobilises selected resources from both. Third, attention to this dimension of his work yields not only philological insight but also a usable conceptual resource for understanding contemporary debates on work culture and entrepreneurship in post-Soviet Central Asia.

The study employs a qualitative methodology combining hermeneutic textual analysis, conceptual analysis and historical contextualisation. The primary corpus consists of four of Fitrat's major reformist works: *Munozara*, originally published in Persian in Istanbul in 1909 and subsequently rendered into Turkic by Haji Muin (1911); *Bayonoti sayyohi hindi*, published in Istanbul in 1912; *Oila*, published in 1914; and *Rahbari najot*, published in Petrograd in 1916. These texts are supplemented by a selection of journalistic essays published in such venues as *Hurriyat* and *Sadoi Turkiston* during 1917–1918, as collected in the modern Uzbek edition of his works

(Fitrat, 2000). Each text was analysed for passages addressing labour (*mehnat*, *kasb*), profession (*hunar*, *san'at*), commerce (*tijorat*), wealth (*mol*, *davlat*), idleness (*tanballik*), education (*ta'lim*, *tarbiya*) and the moral or religious framing of these categories. Recurring conceptual clusters were identified inductively and organised into the five thematic dimensions presented in the analysis. To minimise the risk of anachronistic projection, particular attention was paid to the specific Persianate and Islamic vocabulary deployed by Fitrat and to the distinction between his diagnostic, normative and prescriptive registers.

The analysis is contextualised historically by reference to the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century intellectual environment of Bukhara and the broader Russian Empire. Where translation of Fitrat's terminology is provided, it has been rendered in a manner that preserves his conceptual vocabulary, with original Uzbek or Persian terms cited in italics where necessary for analytical precision. The interpretive position adopted here is that of contextualised reconstruction: the aim is neither to impose contemporary categories on Fitrat's texts nor to confine his thought to its historical horizon, but to articulate the conceptual content of his work in a register intelligible to current scholarship while remaining faithful to its original semantic field.

Any reconstruction of Fitrat's positive vision of entrepreneurial culture must begin with his diagnostic critique — the unsparing, often sardonic indictment of economic and cultural stagnation that animates his earliest reformist writings. In *Munozara*, structured as a dialogue between a Bukharan religious teacher (*mudarris*) and a European visitor, Fitrat advances a series of arguments that locate the material decline of Muslim Central Asia not in any inherent defect of Islamic civilisation but in its corruption by accumulated layers of customary practice (*odatlar*), juridical formalism and unproductive expenditure of social resources (Fitrat, 1909/2000). Several themes recur with particular insistence. The first is the neglect of productive infrastructure. Fitrat draws attention to the absence of modern roads, factories, banks, postal systems and educational institutions, contrasting this absence with the visible material development of European, Ottoman and even Russian-administered territories. The contrast is not invoked, as some critics of Jadidism have suggested, in a posture of self-abnegating mimicry; it is invoked diagnostically, to make visible what Fitrat regards as a culpable failure of will and organisation (Khalid, 1998).

A second theme concerns the misallocation of religious endowments (*waqf*). The *waqf* institution, originally designed to support charitable, educational and infrastructural functions, had — in Fitrat's reading — become in the Bukharan Emirate a vehicle for the maintenance of unproductive religious establishments and

a source of rents detached from any productive social function. His critique here is technical as well as moral: he is concerned with the institution's actual economic effects, not merely with its symbolic associations. A third theme is the cultivation of dependency, mendicancy and what Fitrat terms *tanballik* (laziness). The figure of the begging dervish, the parasitic intermediary and the religious functionary subsisting on alms appear in his texts as exemplars of a mode of life that has detached itself from productive contribution to the social body. In *Bayonoti sayyohi hindi*, the Indian traveller describes the streets of Bukhara as populated by figures whose livelihoods depend not on the production of value but on the extraction of rent from a static and contracting economic base (Fitrat, 1912/2000).

A fourth theme concerns the contempt for manual and commercial labour among certain elite strata. Fitrat documents what he sees as a hierarchy of esteem in which religious learning, however formalistic, occupies the apex, while craft, agriculture and trade are relegated to the periphery of cultural prestige. This inversion of value, in his analysis, has direct material consequences: it diverts the most able young people into unproductive careers, it discourages technical innovation and it leaves the productive economy in the hands of those least equipped to develop it (Sirojiddinov, 2005). Crucially, Fitrat's diagnosis is not advanced as an external attack on Islamic society; it is articulated from within, often by appeal to the very religious resources that contemporary practice was held to have betrayed. He repeatedly cites the Prophetic tradition emphasising the dignity of trade, the historical example of merchant scholars in classical Islam, and Quranic injunctions to seek lawful livelihood. In this respect his critique is, in the strict sense, a reformist rather than a secularising one: it seeks to reactivate, not to displace, the moral and religious resources of his community. The cumulative effect of this diagnostic register is to clear conceptual space for the positive programme that follows. By demonstrating that economic stagnation is neither natural nor preordained, Fitrat establishes that an alternative is both possible and obligatory. The next four sub-sections examine the principal pillars of that alternative.

The first and most fundamental element of Fitrat's positive programme is a sustained effort to rehabilitate productive labour (*mehnat*) as a category of moral and religious value. His texts repeatedly mobilise a rhetoric in which the willingness to work, the capacity for sustained effort and the production of socially useful output are treated not merely as economic virtues but as spiritual obligations. This rehabilitation operates on three distinct registers. The first is theological. Fitrat reads the Islamic tradition as a tradition of work. He calls attention to the Prophet Muhammad's involvement in trade prior to the prophetic mission, to the Quranic emphasis on lawful earning (*kasb-i halol*), and to the

historical record of early Muslim communities in which scholarship and craft were not opposed but interwoven. The contemporary depreciation of labour, in his account, represents a deviation from the original tradition rather than its faithful continuation (Fitrat, 1916/2000). The second register is anthropological. Fitrat advances what may be described as a labour-anthropology: a view of the human person in which the realisation of human dignity is bound up with productive activity. To live without working, in this conception, is not merely to depend upon others materially; it is to fail in the cultivation of the faculties through which the human being achieves moral and intellectual completion. The figure of the idle individual is therefore a figure of incompleteness, not of leisure.

The third register is sociological. Fitrat argues that the moral health of a community is a function of the productive engagement of its members. Where significant strata are detached from productive activity — whether through enforced impoverishment, structural mendicancy or cultural disdain for labour — the community as a whole suffers a corresponding moral and material decline. The rehabilitation of labour is therefore not only an individual but a collective project; the regeneration of the *umma* requires the productive activation of all its capable members (Qosimov, 2002).

Several conceptual moves are characteristic. First, Fitrat refuses any sharp opposition between manual and intellectual labour. The agronomist, the craftsman, the trader, the teacher and the scholar appear in his texts as engaged in differentiated but morally equivalent forms of productive contribution. Second, he insists on the temporal discipline of work — on regularity, punctuality and sustained effort — as itself a moral practice. The hadith on the use of time and the religious exhortations to avoid idleness are mobilised in support of what is, in effect, a culturally embedded version of the work-time discipline that European observers would have associated with the modern factory and office. Third, he ties the moral evaluation of labour to its social effects: lawful labour that contributes to the welfare of the community is dignified; activities that extract value without contributing to it — however prestigious in social form — are marked as parasitic.

This rehabilitation of labour has direct implications for the social geography of esteem. Fitrat's texts implicitly call for a redistribution of cultural prestige: the productive farmer, the skilled craftsman, the honest merchant and the qualified teacher are to be accorded the social standing that, under the existing order, is monopolised by figures whose social usefulness he questions. This is not a populist inversion of hierarchy; it is a recalibration of hierarchy according to criteria of productive contribution. The significance of this rehabilitation for the present study is that it establishes the moral foundation upon which the positive ideal of the

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entrepreneur, examined in the next sub-section, can be constructed. Without a prior valorisation of labour as such, no specifically entrepreneurial form of labour can carry the moral weight that Fitrat seeks to assign it.

Within the rehabilitated category of productive labour, Fitrat accords a particular and distinctive place to commercial and entrepreneurial activity. The figure of the merchant (*tojir*), the manufacturer (*sanoatchi*) and the modern enterprise organiser emerges across his works as a civic ideal, charged not only with economic but with moral and political significance. This emphasis is in part a function of the specific economic situation of late-imperial Bukhara, where indigenous mercantile capital had historically constituted a significant social force but had been progressively displaced by Russian and other foreign commercial interests. Fitrat's writings register this displacement with sharp concern. The retreat of indigenous trade is read by him not merely as a commercial misfortune but as a strategic vulnerability, with implications for cultural autonomy as well as material welfare (Khalid, 1998; Komatsu, 1989). In response, Fitrat articulates an ideal of the entrepreneur defined by several distinctive features. First, the modern entrepreneur, in his account, is not a mere accumulator of wealth. Wealth that is hoarded, ostentatiously displayed or expended on status competition is repeatedly criticised in his texts; the wealth of the productive entrepreneur is, by contrast, oriented toward reinvestment, employment generation and the expansion of productive capacity. The legitimacy of accumulation, in this conception, derives from its productive deployment.

Second, the modern entrepreneur is characterised by knowledge. Fitrat insists that the trader and manufacturer of his time can no longer rely on the inherited practical knowledge of bazaar transactions; they require literacy, numeracy, knowledge of foreign languages, awareness of international markets, familiarity with modern accounting and an understanding of the legal and political environments in which commerce operates. The entrepreneur, in this sense, is a specifically educated figure — a node of human capital rather than a mere proprietor. Third, the entrepreneur is characterised by ethical self-discipline. Honesty in transactions, fulfilment of contracts, transparency of dealings and resistance to the multiple forms of corruption endemic in the late Bukharan environment are presented as constitutive of the modern entrepreneurial vocation. Fitrat draws here on Islamic commercial ethics, but he also articulates these norms in terms recognisable to a broader early twentieth-century discourse on commercial trustworthiness. Fourth, and most distinctively, the entrepreneur is characterised by civic orientation. Fitrat's entrepreneur is not the isolated maximiser of individual utility familiar from caricatures of laissez-faire economics; he is a member of a

community whose productive activity is implicitly oriented toward collective economic strength. Investment in education, support for indigenous publication, contribution to charitable infrastructure and the cultivation of younger entrepreneurs are presented as natural extensions of legitimate commercial activity. In this sense, Fitrat's entrepreneur is closer to the figure of the civic burgher in early-modern European thought than to the abstract economic agent of later neoclassical theory.

The combination of these features yields an ideal that may be characterised as ethically bounded, knowledge-intensive and civically oriented entrepreneurship. It is significant for the present analysis to note that this ideal is constructed not by importation of a foreign model but by creative recombination of elements indigenous to Islamic commercial tradition, contemporary reformist discourse and selected modern economic concepts. The result is a culturally embedded, recognisably Central Asian articulation of entrepreneurial vocation (Karimov, 2020). The figure of the educated entrepreneur is not sustainable, in Fitrat's analysis, in the absence of a corresponding transformation of the educational system. It is no accident that his economic reformism is inseparable from his pedagogical reformism: the cultivation of an entrepreneurial culture, as he conceives it, requires a system of instruction capable of producing the literate, numerate, technically skilled and ethically formed individuals whom such a culture demands.

Several lines of argument converge here. The first concerns the inadequacy of the existing *maktab* and *madrasa* system for the formation of productive economic agents. Fitrat's critique of the traditional educational institutions of Bukhara is well known; for present purposes, what is significant is the specifically economic dimension of this critique. The graduates of the existing system, in his analysis, are equipped neither with the basic numerical and literacy skills that modern commerce demands nor with the broader cognitive habits — systematic inquiry, analytical reasoning, factual orientation — that productive engagement with a modern economy requires (Fitrat, 1909/2000; Khalid, 1998). The second line of argument concerns the necessity of vocational and technical training. Fitrat repeatedly insists that the regeneration of Central Asian society requires not only humanistic and religious instruction but also the systematic cultivation of practical skills (*hunar*). The trades, agriculture, manufacture and commerce all require specific competencies, and these competencies do not arise spontaneously; they must be deliberately taught, ideally within institutions designed for that purpose. In this sense, Fitrat's educational vision anticipates by several decades the central

role that vocational and technical education would assume in subsequent twentieth-century development thought.

The third line of argument concerns the formation of cognitive and moral dispositions. Beyond specific skills, education must cultivate habits of regular work, attention to detail, respect for evidence and self-discipline. These dispositions are themselves preconditions for productive economic activity; their absence would render any quantity of formal schooling ineffective. Here Fitrat's analysis approaches the territory that later economic anthropologists would call "cultural capital" or human capital in its broader sense. The fourth line of argument concerns the inclusion of women. While the present article cannot exhaustively examine Fitrat's complex and not always consistent writings on the position of women, it must be noted that his treatment of female education — most explicitly in *Oila* — has direct economic implications (Fitrat, 1914/2000). The exclusion of half the population from systematic instruction is, for Fitrat, not only a moral and religious failure but a structural drag on the productive capacity of the community. Whatever the limitations of his specific positions by contemporary standards, his insistence on the educational integration of women is integral to his broader economic-cultural vision.

The implications of these arguments for educational policy are far-reaching. They imply a curriculum that integrates classical religious and literary content with arithmetic, natural science, geography, modern languages and vocational training. They imply a pedagogy oriented toward active inquiry rather than rote memorisation. They imply a teaching profession itself transformed, professionalised and accorded social esteem commensurate with its civic importance. And they imply a system of schooling sufficiently extensive to reach the rural majority, not merely the urban elite. The convergence of these features yields a conception of education as the institutional foundation of productive culture. Without such an educational transformation, Fitrat's vision of a regenerated entrepreneurial society remains aspirational; with it, the cultivation of a new generation of literate, skilled and civically oriented economic agents becomes, in his view, an achievable historical task.

The final dimension of Fitrat's economic-cultural thought is its inscription within a project of national economic awakening (*vatan iqtisodi*). His treatment of labour, education and entrepreneurship cannot be understood in isolation from his broader political analysis of the colonial and semi-colonial conditions under which Central Asian society operated in the late imperial period (Edgar, 2004; Khalid, 2015). Several elements are central. First, Fitrat is acutely aware of the structural asymmetries of the imperial economy. The flow of agricultural raw materials —

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above all cotton — from Central Asia to Russian industrial centres, and the corresponding inflow of finished manufactures, is registered in his texts as a relation of dependency that reproduces itself through both economic and cultural mechanisms. The displacement of indigenous craft production by imported goods, the dependence of indigenous merchants on foreign credit, and the orientation of agricultural production toward the demands of distant markets all contribute, in his analysis, to a long-term erosion of economic autonomy.

Second, Fitrat insists that the response to this asymmetry cannot be limited to political agitation or to cultural revival; it must include the deliberate construction of indigenous productive capacity. Schools that train technicians, banks that mobilise indigenous savings, publishing houses that produce indigenous knowledge and manufacturing enterprises that substitute for imported goods all appear in his programme as elements of a coordinated project of economic awakening. The vocabulary is not, of course, that of twentieth-century import-substitution industrialisation; but the underlying logic anticipates many of the concerns that would later animate that body of thought. Third, Fitrat ties this national economic project to a broader conception of dignity. The economic regeneration of his community is not, for him, an end in itself; it is a precondition of the community's capacity to act as a subject in its own history rather than as an object of external action. The entrepreneur, the technician, the educated professional and the productive worker are therefore not merely economic figures but political ones: their existence and prosperity are constitutive of national self-determination (Allworth, 1990).

Fourth, the anti-colonial dimension of Fitrat's thought is articulated with notable analytical sophistication. He does not collapse into a generic anti-Westernism; selected European achievements — in science, technology, education and law — are explicitly admired and recommended for adoption. What he opposes is not modernity as such but the specific configurations of imperial domination through which modernity reached his society. The distinction is methodologically important: it permits him to argue simultaneously for the assimilation of modern productive techniques and for resistance to the political and economic structures that mediated their introduction. This combination of arguments yields what may be characterised as a pragmatic, selectively modernising, anti-colonial vision of national economic awakening. Productive labour, entrepreneurial culture and educational reform are recruited into this vision not as ends in themselves but as elements of a coordinated project of collective self-realisation. This contextualisation is essential for any responsible reading of Fitrat's economic thought: stripped of its political horizon, his treatment of labour and

enterprise risks being misread either as a generic developmentalism or as a culturally naive reception of European liberalism, when in fact it is neither.

The foregoing analysis has reconstructed five interconnected dimensions of Abdurauf Fitrat's treatment of entrepreneurial culture and labour: a diagnostic critique of economic stagnation; the rehabilitation of labour as a moral and religious imperative; the construction of the modern entrepreneur as a civic ideal; the educational foundations of a productive culture; and the inscription of these themes within a project of national economic awakening. Three concluding observations follow. The first concerns the internal coherence of Fitrat's thought. The five dimensions identified above are not independent themes occasionally juxtaposed in his writings; they are mutually entailing components of a unified vision. The diagnostic critique opens the conceptual space within which the rehabilitation of labour becomes possible; the rehabilitation of labour establishes the moral ground on which the entrepreneurial ideal can stand; the entrepreneurial ideal generates demands on the educational system that the educational reformist programme is designed to meet; and the entire architecture is given political direction by its inscription within the project of national awakening. To extract any single dimension from this architecture is to misrepresent its meaning.

The second observation concerns the intellectual originality of Fitrat's contribution. The reading proposed here resists two reductive interpretations: the assimilation of his economic thought to Western liberalism, and its assimilation to a defensive Islamic revivalism. Neither captures what is most distinctive about his work, which is the creative synthesis of resources from both traditions in response to a specifically Central Asian historical situation. Fitrat's entrepreneur is neither the *homo economicus* of European political economy nor the merchant of nostalgic Islamic memory; he is a culturally embedded reconstruction whose features answer to the demands of his particular time and place. The third observation concerns the contemporary relevance of this reconstruction. Present-day Uzbekistan is engaged in ambitious programmes of economic modernisation, vocational reform and the cultivation of entrepreneurial culture, often under the rubric of human capital development and, increasingly, of sustainability and ESG-aligned governance. To engage with Fitrat's economic-cultural thought in this context is not to retrieve a historical curiosity; it is to recover an indigenous intellectual genealogy for these contemporary concerns. The questions Fitrat addressed — how a society can transform its valorisation of labour, cultivate productive habits, build educational foundations for an entrepreneurial culture and pursue economic modernisation without sacrificing cultural autonomy — are recognisably the questions that contemporary policy and scholarship continue to engage.

Several lines of further research suggest themselves. A more systematic comparison of Fitrat with other Jadid reformers — Behbudi, Munavvar Qori and the Tatar reformers whose work informed the Bukharan current — would clarify the specific texture of his contribution. A focused analysis of his post-1917 writings, in which the economic question is reframed within the early Soviet horizon, would extend the present account into a period of dramatic conceptual transformation. And empirical research on the reception of Fitrat in contemporary Uzbek economic and educational discourse would document the active afterlife of his ideas in present-day institutions. What remains beyond doubt is that Fitrat's economic-cultural thought constitutes a substantive intellectual resource. It is at once historically situated and analytically suggestive, locally rooted and internationally legible. Its recovery enriches not only the study of Central Asian intellectual history but also the broader conversation on the cultural foundations of entrepreneurial economies.

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