



KARIM DEVONA

KARIM DEVONA, pen-name of Abdul-Karim Qurbon, Tajik folk poet (b. in the village of Jūraki Hisor, in present-day Tajikistan, in 1878; d. 1918 in the same place, a victim of a cholera epidemic). Like the other inhabitants of his village, he was very poor. He spent much of his life wandering from place to place, to other villages, to bazaars, and to cities, including [Samarqand](#), [Bukhara](#), and Kokand, dressed in a long, traditional coat of coarsely woven cloth and often accompanied by his dog and donkey. In all these places, especially in the numerous villages he passed through, he recited his poems to appreciative audiences. He worked only occasionally, a month or two at a time, whenever he had to replenish his stocks of food and other necessities. Along his way peasants would hire him to do farm chores, and artisans would engage him as a weaver.

He appears to have been illiterate, but in his travels he met many educated men who recognized his talent and invited him to join their conversations about poetry and the role of poets. It was probably from such gatherings that he drew his knowledge of classical Farsi-Tajik literature and was attracted to some of the themes in the work of Neẓāmi of [Ganja](#), [Hafez](#), and [Jāmi](#). He wove these conversations and his own observations and experiences at the lower end of society with the stories that circulated in great variety among the populations he knew, and he adapted the rhythms and rhymes of folk creativity to suit his own artistic sense. His work thus stands somewhere between folk creations and written literature. In some sense, too, he was carrying on the long tradition of folk poetry that had flourished in the rural



areas and among the poor in place of cultivated poetry, which did not go beyond the educated urban classes (Rypka, p. 529).

The main themes of his poems had to do with the hard life of ordinary people and the gulf of wealth and privilege that separated the masters of society from those who bore its burdens of labor and taxation. His criticism was often blunt and was directed especially at those who made the Emir of Bukhara's despotism work—the mayor, the high police official, and the *amin*, the tax-collector of the bazaar—and who remained heedless of the consequences for the mass of the population. Karim Devona describes his own encounter with an *amin* in “Šuriyon bozor šud” (Karim-Devona, pp. 46-47), when he refused to pay an exorbitant tax on some coarse cloth given him by a master weaver as wages and which he intended to sell. Sometimes his censure of the privileged was direct, as in the longer poem, “Šūriši hişor” (ibid., pp. 18-22), where he describes the revolt of villagers in the Hisor valley in 1907 and 1908, but often he resorted to satire as one of his most effective devices for revealing the meanness and absurdities of the prevailing social order, as in “Tūi kalon dar Jūrak” (ibid., pp. 48-50). One of the reasons he hid his identity under an assumed name and posed as “mad” was to avoid the brutal punishments the authorities meted out to all who would not conform.

Karim Devona's growing frustration with the injustice and neglect he met on all sides led him in his later poems, for example, in “Ba šok” and “Inson ġlom namešavad” (ibid., pp. 15, 16-17), to attack the emir himself and the arbitrariness and violence he perpetuated. Sometimes, his feelings reached extremes of despair as he likened the times in which he was living to a prison, and sometimes blind anger overcame him, but it is an overwhelming sadness that intrudes again and again as his complaints and laments bring no relief (“Nodoram”; ibid., pp. 15-16).

The clarity and melodiousness of his poems, his call to protest, and the ease with which he moved among various layers of society earned him considerable affection and fame. These sentiments were still strong in the 1950s when his biographer, Habibullo Nazarov, interviewed villagers who had known him or had heard him recite his poems. Some had noted down texts they liked, while others could recite portions from memory (Nazarov, 1968, pp. 99, 106). Still others remembered lines about the liberation of women and the abandonment of the veil and about the uprising of Hisor (ibid., pp. 75, 148). All agreed that his poems were simple and direct and easy to *understand*, even for those who were uneducated.



If we seek a proper context for Karim Devona's work, we may think of him as one of those poets in many countries who composed for communities beholden to an oral rather than a written tradition. Or we may see him as belonging to those broad currents of protest and reform in Central Asia represented at one level by intellectuals, the Jadids, and at another by folk poets.

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