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विश्वनीति VIŚVANĪTI



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From the Dean



It gives me great pleasure to introduce this issue of *Viśvanīti: A Quarterly Review*, which features contributions from the scholars of the Centre for Russian and Central Asian Studies (CRCAS) at the School of International Studies. The essays gathered here span history, politics, identity, culture, and international engagement, reflecting both the breadth and the depth of the Centre's scholarship.

We begin with a tribute by Dr. Mahavir Singh to Professor Devendra Kaushik, the founding figure of Russian and Central Asian studies in India. His pioneering work on Central Asia and the Soviet Union set the contours for the field in this country. The biographical essay in this issue recalls his intellectual leadership, his prolific writings, and his role in building institutional and cultural bridges with the Soviet Union and later with post-Soviet Eurasia. His legacy remains a source of inspiration for successive generations of scholars.

Professor Preeti D. Das contributes an essay on *Russia's Civilisational Turn*, examining the ways in which contemporary Russia seeks to define itself as a 'state-civilisation'. She traces how identity, Orthodox Christianity, and Eurasian geography converge to frame Russia's worldview, and how these narratives shape its relations with the West and its role in a multipolar world. Her analysis captures the interplay of values, power, and geopolitics that lies at the core of Russia's present self-conception.

In his essay *An Indian Perspective of Eurasia*, Professor Nalin Kumar Mohapatra interrogates Eurasia as both an ideational construct and a geopolitical reality. He highlights how India's own civilisational linkages and strategic presence make it a significant Eurasian actor today.

The cultural dimension of the region is examined in *Central Asian Cultural Identity in a Eurasian Perspective* by Dr. Pramod Kumar. His essay underscores how Central Asian societies negotiate continuity and change, tradition and modernity, within a Eurasian framework. By bringing culture to the forefront, he reminds us that the idea of Eurasia must be understood not only in terms of states and strategy, but also as a civilisational space shaped by memory, language, and identity.

The issue also carries a book review of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *Rebuilding Russia*, which revisits the turbulent years of the Soviet collapse. The review reflects on Solzhenitsyn's prophetic but paradoxical vision of a Russia rebuilt on moral foundations rather than imperial ambitions, and the dilemmas of national identity and self-



determination that continue to resonate today. This discussion provides a historical lens through which to view the challenges of Russia's contemporary trajectory.

Taken together, the essays presented here demonstrate the vitality of scholarship at the Centre for Russian and Central Asian Studies. They show how the Centre continues to engage with fundamental questions of civilisational identity, geopolitical transformation, and cultural negotiation. From Russia's efforts to define itself as a civilisation-state, to the contested meanings of Eurasia, to the cultural currents shaping Central Asia, and the legacies of the Soviet collapse, the contributions reflect the Centre's intellectual range and its ability to link history with contemporary developments.

For readers, this issue offers a window into the concerns that animate our scholarship today. The Eurasian space-stretching from Moscow and St Petersburg to the steppes of Central Asia, from the Black Sea to the Far East-remains central to the dynamics of global politics. India's longstanding civilisational ties, and its contemporary strategic engagements with this region make its study a continuing academic and policy imperative.

I commend the contributors for their thoughtful essays, and invite readers to engage with them in the spirit of critical inquiry and open dialogue that has long been the hallmark of the School of International Studies.

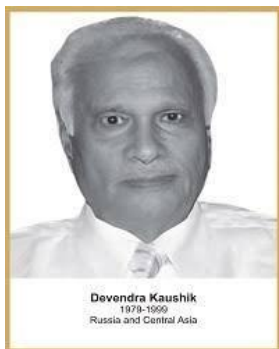
Amitabh Mattoo

Dean, School of International Studies, JNU

Pioneers of SIS

Remembering Prof. Devendra Kaushik (1934-2020)

Mahavir Singh



While examining the doyen of Soviet/Russian and Central Asian Studies in India, one name that figures prominently in our minds is the late Prof. Devendra Kaushik, who played a pivotal role in establishing a strong foundation for this discipline. This was largely due to his deep knowledge of the Soviet and post-Soviet regions, his mastery of Russian, and his training in Russian/Soviet history in India and in institutions of the former Soviet Union. This enabled him to gain first-hand knowledge of the Soviet Union and to strengthen Soviet and East European studies after he joined JNU in 1979. Before joining JNU, Prof. Kaushik served as a Visiting Professor at the Institute of Oriental

Studies, Moscow. After that, he joined the Department of History, University of Rajasthan, Jaipur, as its Chairperson. In his long, illustrious career, he had also served as Chairperson of the Soviet Studies and as the Chairman of Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies (MAKAIAS), Kolkata.

What adds substance to his academic career is his long list of publications on diverse issues confronting global geopolitics. In fact some of his major publications are: *Central Asia in Modern Times: A History From the Early 19th Century*, (1970, Moscow, Progress Publishers); *India and Central Asia in Modern Times: A Study in Historical-cultural Contacts from the Early Nineteenth Century*, (1985, Delhi: Satavahan); *Socialism in Central Asia: A Study in the Transformation of Socio-Ethnic Relations in Soviet Central Asia* (1976, Delhi: Allied Publishers); *Soviet Political System: Perceptions and Perspectives* (1983; Moscow: Progress Publishers); *Soviet Relations with India and Pakistan* (1971: Delhi: Vikas); *The Indian Ocean: A Strategic Dimension* (1983: Delhi: Vikas); *Towards Collective Security in Asia* (Co-authored with Satyendra Peerthum, Mauritius), (1973, Delhi: Allied Publishers); *China and the Third World*, (1975, Delhi: Sterling Publisher); *China an Ideological Puzzle*, (1979, Delhi: Sopan Publishing House). Besides, he served as the Editor-in-Chief of an international journal, *Contemporary Central Asia*, published from Delhi. He had also contributed numerous research articles to reputed national and international journals.

Prof. Kaushik's books have been reviewed widely in a number of journals and newspapers in India and abroad. Reviewing his book *Soviet Relations with India and Pakistan*, The Times Literary Supplement (London) wrote in its issue of 8 October 1971: "Dr. Kaushik ranks high among the leading Indian specialists on Soviet affairs. His long residence and study in the USSR lend weight to his conclusions."

Being a foremost scholar on Soviet/ Russian and Central Asian Studies, he had contributed immensely to the academic development of the Centre. As a research supervisor, he guided numerous Ph.D. and M.Phil. scholars in the Centre. He was available to any student for advice, even if they were registered with other colleagues. In the Centre, he always shared cordial relations with his colleagues, Prof. Zafar Imam, Prof. R.R. Sharma, Prof Arvind Vyas, Prof. Jaisekhar, and Prof. Nirmala Joshi, who were considered to be stalwarts of the Centre

in the 1970s. Many of his former students later became his colleagues at the Centre and held him in high esteem. I have the proud privilege of being an alumnus of the Centre under the guidance and mentorship of Prof. Kaushik. Having also worked with him as Director of MAKAIAS at Kolkata where he was the Chairman of the Executive Council, it is only appropriate to recall his contribution to the Eurasian studies through this brief article.

Under his leadership as Chairman of MAKAIAS, the Institute reached a new height in terms of academic excellence. It hosted many national and international seminars and conferences on Asian Security, Central Asia, Eurasia, etc. and published their proceedings. In 1999, the MAKAIAS organised an International Seminar to commemorate the 90th birth anniversary of Babajan Gafurov, a prominent academician of the former Soviet Union and also present-day Tajikistan. The distinguished International Conference was inaugurated by the late Prime Minister, Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee. The inspiring inaugural address of Prime Minister Vajpayee to the Conference, to a great extent, shaped India-Central Asia academic collaborations in which scholars from Tajikistan, Russia and other Central Asian countries participated.

The areas of his academic interest varied from the USSR, post-Soviet Russia, Central Asia, to contemporary international relations, security, foreign and domestic policies and the political system of Eurasian countries. His works as an erudite scholar will always be remembered.

Recognising his contribution to the discipline of Soviet and post-Soviet Studies and strengthening people-to-people relations between India and Russia, the Russian President Vladimir Putin bestowed on him the 'Order of Friendship' in 2003. Prof. Kaushik was also a recipient of the Soviet Land Nehru Award in 1970.

For the last several years before his death, Prof. Kaushik was working on a book which he titled - *The Russian Labyrinth: From Perestroika to Putin* in which he intended to cover the developments under the USSR to its successor state, the Russian Federation, since Gorbachev started his Perestroika reforms. He desired to extend it to cover President Yeltsin's period and to update up to the presidency of Vladimir Putin. Unfortunately, the work remained incomplete due to his sudden demise in November 2020.

Prof. Kaushik was an erudite scholar, a humanist to the core and an institution builder. In fact, a large group of his former students, now academics, bureaucrats, diplomats, and journalists, who have imbibed from him an abiding interest in Eurasian affairs and have been nurtured by his ideas, constitutes a sort of Eurasian School in India.

An alumnus of CSEES/SIS/JNU, Professor Mahavir Singh was former Director, ICC & Cultural Counsellor, High Commission of India in Fiji. He was also Director, MAKAIAS & EZCC at Kolkata, Professor of History at Pondicherry University, Hon. Sr. Fellow at the University College, London and Professor & Dean Academics at the GBU, Greater Noida.

Viewpoint

Russia's Civilisational Turn: Values, Identity and Geopolitical Narratives

Preeti D. Das

Introduction

A significant philosophical, ideological, and strategic shift occurred in Russia post-1991. A fundamental conceptual transformation that came to be known as Russia's 'civilisational turn' was not a mere rhetorical shift. This reorientation contains an overarching re-evaluation of Russian identity, as well as the core values it seeks to uphold. The civilisational turn also aligns with the role that Russia seeks to play on the global stage.

In official discourse, Russia's civilisational perspective has gained prominence since 2014 and has become an essential part of the state's legitimacy and projection of power in the international arena. Through the civilisational turn, Russia strives to create a distinctive identity focusing on traditional values and asserting a unique presence within contemporary geopolitical narratives. Unlike traditional nation-states, Russia's civilisational approach is based on an identity that goes beyond geographic or cultural boundaries. Rooted in Eurasian heritage, Russia claims itself as a 'state-civilisation', distinct from either Europe or Asia, but a synthesis of both. This narrative spans across the continent from the Atlantic to the Pacific, encompassing both vast territories and a rich tapestry of cultures.

The concept of Eurasia remains contested in philosophical and political discourse, and is debated as either a shared civilizational continuum shaped by common history and tradition or merely a strategic geographic expanse. Exploring Russia's civilisational turn necessitates examining how it strives to assert itself as

a civilisation-state, focusing on traditional values, Orthodox spirituality, and cultural sovereignty as essential pillars of its Eurasian integration project.

The Civilisational State and the Notion of dialectics of Legacy

Traditions, Orthodox Christianity, history, imperial legacies, and the unique Eurasian geography lay the founding grounds for the notion of the 'state-civilisation' in Russia. The collective memory of the past serves as the base for this identity. Moscow is considered the 'Third Rome', following the fall of Constantinople, and a spiritual and political successor of universal and eschatological importance.

Within this self-conception, Orthodox Christianity occupies a central place. For many Russians, Orthodoxy is not simply a faith or a belief; it is a political doctrine, a theological vision, which is discreetly linked with political 'symphonia'. Orthodoxy is also seen as the spiritual basis for Eurasian integration. The notion of 'symphonia', denoting the harmonious relationship between church and state, is frequently publicised as the model for Russia's social and moral order.

Imperial legacies further strengthen this identity. Eurasianist thinkers emphasise a civilisational continuity that associates the Russian Empire with contemporary Russian society. This continuity stretches from the Soviet Union to the present-day Russian Federation. Russia's historical identity has evolved from Slavic, Turkic, and Ugric tribes, shaped by the rise of Kievan Rus' and Muscovy, to the Tsarist and Soviet empires, and continues till the

present-day Russian Federation. Even the Mongol-Tatar yoke, once depicted as a period of subjugation, has been reinterpreted by Lev Gumilev as a formative period in Russia's ethnogenesis and political culture. The Eurasian integration project is also perceived as a 'historic milestone' focusing on the integration of diverse ethnic communities, drawing on shared historical wisdom and civilisational values.

Geography, equally, is a powerful factor in the Eurasian civilisational narrative. Russia's position in the 'Heartland' of Eurasia is articulated by both classical and neo-Eurasianists. They distinguish it from Sea civilisations and set it apart from purely Asian models. The concept of 'mestorazvitie'¹ (developmental place) summarises the belief that physical environment shapes communal psychology, forging a unique destiny for the people of Eurasia. This resonates in solidarity, communalism, and anti-individualism of Eurasianism.

This polyethnic, multilingual state promotes a polyphony of ethnic cultures, nurturing a sense of collective belonging and harmony among its diverse populations. Similar cultural plurality is placed as a contrary to Western universalism, emphasising collective values and social solidarity rather than individualism. Consequently, the civilisational approach is a dynamic interplay of historical continuity and reinterpretation. It combines Orthodox spirituality with the realities of Eurasian geography and is propagated through political discourse, literature, and popular culture. This narrative not only shapes Russia's developmental orientation but

¹ Mestorazvitie: It is an exclusive term emphasized by Eurasianist ideology intertwined with the geographical space of Eurasia. This referred to the belief that the large socio-political units could be created only within a specific geographical framework such as the Scythians, the Huns, the

also defines its role as a pivotal actor in a multipolar world.

Civilisational Legacy and Strategic Narratives

Civilisational narratives and strategic narratives represent Russia not only as a nation-state, but as a state-civilisation that lays the foundation of Russian foreign policy. It rejects Western hegemony, affirms multipolarity, and justifies Russia's actions to protect its civilisational sovereignty against perceived external infiltration.

The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, the country's key foreign policy document, is rooted in civilisational language and articulates its unique path. There has been a significant rise in the use of terms like 'civilisation' and 'Eurasianism' in foreign policy documents compared to 2000 or 2008. For instance, the 2013 document states that "*global competition takes place on a civilisational level*". This statement highlights the growing cultural and civilisational diversity of the modern world. The 2024 document places emphasis on "independent statehood, the cultural heritage of the preceding era, deep historical ties with the traditional European culture and other Eurasian cultures, and the ability to ensure harmonious coexistence of different people, ethnic, religious and linguistic groups on one common territory". This aligns with Alexander Dugin's vision of geopolitical expansion, which envisions the Greater Eurasian Union as a union combining Europe, the Caucasus, and the Middle East as part of Russia's civilisational turn.

Mongolian and the Russian. Consequently, 'Eurasia' was considered to be a unique mestorazvitie that broke the traditional understanding of Russia as being part of either Europe or Asia.

The shift is not merely linguistic, but also defines the political landscape, providing a framework for understanding Russia's place in the world and legitimising its resurgence in the global order. The Russian Public Opinion Research Centre's survey report further strengthens this, as nearly 71% of Russians believe the Western model of development is not suitable for them and that their country belongs to a distinct Eurasian or Orthodox civilisation².

The fundamental principles of Russia's strategic narrative are the complete rejection of Western universalism and US hegemony. It also promotes a multipolarity worldwide. It advocates a multipolar world order - a 'pluriversum' of autonomous civilisational 'Great Spaces' - as an alternative to unipolar globalisation and neocolonial Westernisation. Vladimir Putin's Munich speech in 2007 is regarded as a turning point in this narrative. Following Munich, Russia's foreign policy entered a 'neo-revisionist' phase, asserting itself as a norm-enforcer rather than a norm-taker, questioning the hegemonic system's practices while appealing to universal principles of international governance and stressing the reassertion of sovereignty.

Russian Values as an Antithesis of Western Liberalism

Family, morality, traditional values, communal ethics, and sacrifice, ingrained in Russian culture, gained prominence during the civilisational turn. These values serve as the foundation of individual and collective identity, presumably as universal yet distinctly rooted in Russian cultural identity.

Russian political thought challenges Eurocentrism and Western models. The Eurasianist approach advocates alternatives rooted in traditions, spirituality, and collective solidarity. Liberalism, as an imported ideology or an alien product of the West, is dismissed. It is portrayed as an existential threat to national integrity. Russian intellectual and political elites disapprove of the universality of liberal democracy and the market economy. It argues that these are culturally specific phenomena rather than globally applicable models. Instead, Russia advances the idea of a 'cultural polycentricity of the world', where multiple civilisations coexist in mutual respect and non-interference, but at the same time, each with its own values and paths of development.

Russia's civilisational narrative is deeply rooted in its geopolitical narrative, particularly the contrast between the 'land civilisation' of the Eurasian Heartland and the 'sea civilisation' represented by the Atlanticist West. It presents itself as the 'second major axis of geopolitical thought' and the Heartland of the Eurasian continent. Heartland - a strategic location that shapes both its internal policies and external ambitions.

Hence, at its core, this philosophy supports building a world countering 'unipolar globalism'. Initiatives like the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) are not merely economic projects but are considered milestones in the construction of a new geopolitical order. The civilisational turn also shapes its interpretation of regional conflict; for instance, the Ukrainian crisis is depicted as a 'moment of truth' in Russia's self-determination. It is considered to be a space where Russian,

² As per Alexander Dugin's opinion expressed in his book, *Putin vs Putin* (2014) - as elections approached, Putin's policies shifted from balancing patriotic rhetoric with

liberal reforms to nationalism and state-strengthening policies. While the West expected support for liberal and pro-Western values, most Russians supported distinct Eurasian or Orthodox civilisational values.

Eurasian, and European values intersect.

Popular culture of Russia and Identity Discourse

Considering Russia's vast territory and centuries-old cultural and philosophical legacy, it continues to prioritise preserving its traditions and spiritual heritage. Russian civilisational identity is being extensively popularised through various channels of popular culture. It immensely contributed to shaping and spreading ideologies that emphasise the unique identity of Russia and Eurasian destiny. It's implemented both by top-down state-sanctioned initiatives and bottom-up engagements with diverse cultural expressions and public sentiments.

To engage a wider audience, intellectual movements and ideologies are channelised through popular cultural platforms. For instance, Alexander Dugin's Neo-Eurasianist vision has been circulated via radio, television, and print media. Initially, Dugin's ideas were popular among patriotic opposition groups and intellectual circles only. Gradually, it entered mainstream outlets, a deliberate strategy to popularise these concepts. Popular culture is actively used in promoting Russia's stance against a unipolar world and its critique of Western values. It is also advocating for preserving traditions and conservative organic values. They are powerful narratives communicated through various cultural channels. Popular culture also actively reinterprets historical narratives to assert Russia's distinctive civilisational path.

Popular culture is also significantly influenced by the convergence of historical narratives and popular culture. This is more obvious in the post-Soviet period. Often, it is considered to be a strategically managed approach to influence collective identity and political agenda. This convergence is particularly obvious in

Siberia and the Far East. Regional narratives related to national consciousness are deeply rooted in these territories, and Russia appears to be the bridge between East and West. It symbolises a synthesis of identities rooted in history and geography. Yet, the construction of Russia's civilisational identity is fraught with internal contradictions here. Official narratives often emphasise unity and harmony, but in reality, particularly in the Russian Far East, it is more nuanced.

Historically, Siberia and the Far East regions have been an integral part of Russia's 'Heartland'. Russian writers such as Mikhail Lomonosov and Alexander Pushkin laid the foundational idea of an 'Asian Russia', and 'Rus the Great'. They presented a unity of Slavic, Turkic, Finno-Ugric, and Paleo-Asian people. From this perspective, Siberia is seen as significantly contributing to shaping the 'core of the future world', with a civilisational and peacekeeping mission.

Nonetheless, internal contradictions do exist within this cultural push. Irrespective of the state narrative popularising a unified Eurasian identity, the population of the Russian Far East, at some point in time, feels more European. Possibly, it is due to their increased interactions with China and Central Asia that reinforce their European identity. There is a concern about migration from Central Asia and unease over China's growing presence in Siberia. This complicates the Eurasian Unity vision. Despite all these, the ambitious transport and energy project, connecting the Far East region with Northeast Asia and beyond it, has emerged as a key strategic hub for advancing Eurasian integration. The international transport corridors Primorye-1 and Primorye-2 strengthen the Far East as a vital regional trade.

Popular culture actively shapes the civilisational identity of Russia, and the

ideal of an 'all-Eurasian destiny' continues to inspire solidarity among diverse people. Post-2014 developments further damaged Russia's relations with the West, encouraging strategic recalibration that intensified the civilisational discourse. Eurasia emerged at the centre of Russia's developmental strategy and self-concept. Gradually, Russia began to see itself as an Asian power. Russia didn't reject having European roots, but adopted an approach with dual orientation, which is capable of operating on both the Western and the Eastern axes. This approach allowed Russia to navigate the challenging international environment, affirming Russia's distinct civilisational and geopolitical identity. Hence, the approach takes into account not only pragmatic considerations but also caters to safeguarding the autonomy and reinforcing sovereignty.

Russia's civilisational identity entered a new phase after the 2014 annexation of Crimea, the Ukraine crisis, and escalating tensions with the West. Particularly, the Eurasian Economic Union presented multifaceted efforts to forge a new regional and global order. The Western sanctions pushed Russia to seek economic and political alternatives in the East, reviving its earlier political, economic and cultural cooperation. This aligns with Roerich, one of the Eurasianist thinkers, who stresses that true unity requires considering the unique 'Eurasian constants', cultural landscape, and worldview of its people. Alexander Dugin also emphasised the cultural and civilisational aspects as primary for Eurasian integration, although the economic integration remains a significant component.

Shaping of Civilisational Imagination

A distinct civilisational approach helps Russia escape external pressure and preserve its social fabric, reflected in its

socio-cultural, educational and political aspects. At the domestic level, this fosters unity among culturally diverse people. Internationally, it strengthens the strategic partnership within the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, BRICS, and other Eurasian alliances. From political and economic cooperation, the neo-Eurasianist ideas have permeated literature, popular culture and intellectual discourse. Although scholars have only recently begun to analyse Eurasianism as a literary and cultural phenomenon, it has played a central role in literary texts of the 1990s and early 2000s. Even in pre-revolutionary Russia, attempts were made to seek historical alternatives. Bukharin, a liberal Bolshevik, was replaced by Pyotr Stolypin, a politician of the late Russian empire. Alexander Solzhenitsyn was exiled and could finally return in 1994.

Solzhenitsyn, in his 'August 1914', depicts Stolypin as a strong and capable leader. Had he not been assassinated by Dmitry Bogrov, no revolution would have occurred in 1917. He was one of the wise counsellors of Nicholas II. The chaos of 'shock therapy' and economic crisis pushed many writers to look back on such figures. It was uncertainty and nostalgia that Russian writers began turning to alternative history. Contemporary authors like Pavel Krusanov's 'A Bite of an Angel' or van Zaichik's Eurasian Symphony also present an alternate history. They use the Eurasianist approach, craving for the past and aligning with ongoing ambitions. Tatiana Filimonova observes that public imagination got captured across genres, from pulp fiction to intellectual prose, demonstrating Eurasian political discourse. The writers' and thinkers' imagination go beyond the territorial borders of the nation, influencing greater civilisational integration. Allegedly, the idea of 'symphonic unity' presumes bringing together diverse cultural groups under a unified spiritual umbrella.

Conclusion

Russia's civilisational turn fundamentally reaffirms its historical legacy while redefining its place internationally. Considering its vast geography, rich cultural heritage, and strategic influence, Russia considers itself a civilisational state, not merely a nation-state. As a key player in the changing world order, Russian Eurasianism sees its approach as a philosophy of cultural blending or a vision of multipolarity. The Eurasian Economic Union serves as a pragmatic step in this direction. It contributes to strengthening the intellectual and strategic foundation for asserting sovereignty.

Regional dynamics of migration has influenced Russia's civilisational project. Although cultural pluralism is being celebrated in civilisational discourse, it is primarily celebrated in theory only. Very

often, it gets narrowed by political agendas. Literature, popular culture, and political discourse frequently reflect these ambiguities. It also reinforces and contests the vision of Russia as a civilisational state. Nonetheless, the Eurasian ideals have been continuously revitalised and reinterpreted across decades. Given the changing world order and its shift towards multipolarity, Eurasia is increasingly recognised as one of the most vital and contested regions. It is a region where diverse values, identities, and strategies converge. It's challenging for Russia to preserve its deep-rooted traditions while embracing innovation by bridging the cultural diversity of East and West. The Russian state reaffirms its civilisational identity rooted in its cultural legacy, thus marking a departure from Western liberal values. This makes Russia a unique state as reflected in its foreign policy.

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Perspective

Indian Perspective on Eurasia

Nalin Kumar Mohapatra

India shares deep-rooted geo-cultural, geopolitical and geo-economic relations with the Eurasian space. It is worth mentioning that India's connection with this region can be traced back centuries, as Indian holy religious texts like the Rig Veda and the Mahabharata provide a glimpse of such relations. For instance, Mount Meru, located in the Arctic region of Russia, is called Sumeru in the holy Puranas. The same can also be inferred from the writings of Bal Gangadhar Tilak, who, in his book, *The Arctic Home in the Vedas*, mentioned India's cultural relations with Eurasia in great detail. In this book, Tilak mentions that "Meru is the home or seat of all the gods". Similar geo-cultural connections can also be highlighted from many other academic writings. The notion of Bahalika (present-day Balkh) has also been mentioned by holy religious Hindu texts, as well as by Kalidas in his work *Abhijnana-Shakuntalam*.

The influence of Sanskriti on Eurasian languages is a known fact, and the worship of nature (Pancha Mahabhuta, the five elements of nature), an Indian tradition, is also a common practice in Eurasia, as studies suggest. It is worth recalling here that Russian geopolitical thinker Alexander Dugin, in his path-breaking work *Foundations of Geopolitics*, underlines the significance of the five elements of nature. The existence of Ateshgah fire temple near Baku in Azerbaijan and the worship of the Sun god that has been widely prevalent in the Eurasian space in the form of Tengri in Kazakhstan and Mibir in Armenia in ancient times, reflect the imprint of Indian geo-cultural traditions in Eurasia, as historiographical works suggest. Since the

Aryan Invasion theory is proving to be false, as advanced scientific studies suggest, India's geo-cultural frontiers extended up to the present-day Arctic, which includes Central Asia and Altie space in ancient times. Even in the modern era, another Indian scholar, Surendra Gopal, in his academic writings, suggests that Indian traders used to trade with the present-day Eurasian space. In his work, Gopal also provides an account of Indian temples located in Astrakhan and the protection being provided by the Tsarist Russian ruler.

As argued by British travelogue Alexander Burnes in his book, *Travels into Bokhara*, "worship of holy Hindu deities is a common practice in Bokhara". It is pertinent to mention here that Buddhism has had a lasting impact on the geo-culture of Eurasia. Even today, archaeological excavations in post-Soviet Eurasian countries have proven many such Buddhist sites to have Indian architectural imprints. It is a fact that the Tantric cult of Buddhism is highly popular in the Siberian and the Far Eastern region of Russia. Some historical accounts suggest that the name Bukhara (a city in Uzbekistan) is derived from Vihar (which means Buddhist Monastery). Studies also suggest that Arctic climatic conditions have largely influenced India's climate.

Indian religious texts also highlight the symbolic spiritual relationship between the Himalayan Mountain and Mount Meru (Sumeru). Nicholas Roerich, a Russian art connoisseur who later settled in India, vividly explored such a spiritual and imaginative connection between the two

holy mountains. With the Baltic countries, India also shares a deeper cultural cooperation through the Sanskrit language. Because of some of the above reasons, Indian scholar Devendra Kaushik argues that India and Eurasia are part of a "single geo-cultural space". Russian Orientalist Bongard Levin, in his scientific work on Ancient Indian history, also delved into some of these aspects as highlighted above. Tajik scholar Babajan Gafurov's writings on Central Asia explore India and Eurasia's geo-cultural relations in greater depth. P.C. Bagchi has also cogently explained the richness of India-Central Asia relations in his book *India and Central Asia Relations*. In his earlier writings, the present author brought out the richness of India and Eurasia's geo-cultural relations as underlined here.

The above geo-cultural descriptions provide a normative framework to understand India's relations with Eurasia in a historical and geopolitical context. In recent years, India has augmented its geopolitical and geo-economic engagements with Eurasian countries of the post-Soviet space. The same can be manifested from the fact that the presidents of both Russia and Ukraine, on a number of occasions, urged India to intervene to resolve the war. Similarly, Russia, despite having a deeper strategic partnership with China, agreed to supply S-400 to India during the Galwan crisis in 2020. The bilateral trade between India and Russia is also moving up, and it is reaching a staggering high of USD 68.7 billion in 2024-25. At the same time, India also stood with Russia in times of crisis. The same can be gauged from the fact that India opposed the moves of the Western countries at the United Nations to isolate and punish Russia. It is interesting to note that Russia looked towards India as a major energy partner when its war with Ukraine broke out. In this regard, India is also taking a keen interest in Russia's Siberia and the Far East for energy

exploration and is a regular participant in the Eastern Economic Forum (EEF). Both India and Russia have also identified new areas of cooperation, like critical technology, climate change, etc. Both countries have also agreed to strengthen counter-terrorism cooperation. It is pertinent to mention that Russia stood with India when it carried out Operation Sindoor against Pakistan in the month of May 2025.

India is also cementing its relationship with other post-Soviet Eurasian countries. For instance, India-Central Asia relations have been elevated to new heights in recent years, especially after Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to all the Central Asian countries in 2015. In recent years, one can see the institutionalisation of India's relations with Central Asia. The first meeting of the India-Central Asia Summit took place in 2022. Both India and Central Asian countries are also forging cooperation in different areas, ranging from energy to climate change, as well as sustainable development. At the level of security cooperation, both India and the Central Asian countries augmented their cooperation to a new level. The strategic development in Afghanistan is also a major factor in propelling greater India-Eurasia cooperation. It may be added here that over the years, India has also strengthened its presence in the South Caucasus and the Baltic regions. In the context of the South Caucasus, Armenia and Georgia are becoming key strategic partners of India. India's growing presence in the South Caucasus/Greater Caspian region also strengthens New Delhi's outreach in the Black Sea region. It is a known fact that this Sea has been playing a critical role in the global geopolitical structure in recent years. By beefing up its presence in the strategically located South Caucasus/ Greater Caspian region, India would be able to counter the nexus of Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Pakistan. It is well known that both Turkey and Azerbaijan

are providing both overt and covert support to Pakistan's nefarious activities directed against India.

Similarly, in the Baltic region, India has also made its presence felt over the years. India considers the Baltic region as a "natural gateway" to Europe due to its strategic location. In this context, it may be underlined here that over the years, trade between India and the Baltic countries has been moving at a faster pace. Cooperation in the field of cybersecurity, information technology, and critical technology is considered to be the key area of cooperation. It may be added that the institutionalisation of India-Nordic-Baltic Ministerial cooperation will give further impetus to India-Baltic cooperation.

India's geopolitical and geo-economic engagement with post-Soviet Eurasian countries has also been strengthened due to geo-economic connectivity. For instance, some of the key infrastructure connectivity projects connecting the post-Soviet Eurasian countries, like the International North South Transport Corridor (INSTC), the Chabahar initiative through Iran, and the Chennai-Vladivostok Eastern Maritime Corridor, are considered to be the key connectivity projects which India initiated and has imparted renewed momentum in recent years. Even with the active cooperation with Russia, the Indo-Pacific maritime corridor can emerge as a key route for India-Russia energy trade. The Kazakh energy sector can also be linked up with the Indo-Pacific energy corridor through Altai and the Siberian region of Russia. This will help to forge India-Kazakhstan energy relations. Similarly, Central Asian countries are keen to explore connectivity to the Indian Ocean by using the Chabahar port in Iran. In this context, India can help the Central Asian countries by facilitating access through the Chabahar port, which India has developed and managed. While looking at India's

engagement with the post-Soviet Eurasian space, three important inferences can be drawn. These are:

- The rich geo-cultural connections with Eurasia are providing the basic thrust to India's proactive engagement with this part of the world.
- India is charting out the geopolitical engagement with Eurasia on a pragmatic basis based on mutually advantageous relations.
- One of the key components of India's relations with the Eurasian countries is augmenting the geo-economic connectivity. This will give greater impetus to trade relations.
- Russia should also include India in the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). This will give a greater thrust to India-EEU member countries' trade relations.

Thus, looking at India's Eurasian outreach, one can underline here that India is emerging as a pivotal player in Eurasian geopolitics. One of the major factors that is propelling India to play a role is its growing stature as a major global power. In this context, one can argue that over the years, India has been a dominant power balancer in Eurasian geopolitics.

Conclusion

While looking at the epistemological framework of Eurasia and its contemporary relevance, four major inferences can be drawn. These are:

- The ideational framework of Eurasia, to a great extent, is shaping the present geopolitical dynamics of the region.
- The security scenario of Eurasia closely resembles the 'security dilemma model', where external powers are competing with each other, thus fueling geopolitical uncertainty. These external powers, whether the US, under whose leadership the Trans-Atlantic European alliance is currently operating, or China,

influence the geopolitical developments in Eurasia. The Ukrainian crisis is an apt example where NATO is propping up a geopolitical crisis by aiding Ukraine to achieve its geopolitical goals. In a nutshell, it can be stated that, as in the past, in the present geopolitical scenario, the Eurasian geopolitical space is also in a state of geopolitical flux.

- The geopolitical flux also provides India with an opportunity to shape the geopolitical dynamics of the Eurasian region.

- The connectivity projects that India has initiated to connect with Eurasian countries are also fostering greater cooperation.

To conclude, the Eurasian region is going to shape global geopolitics because of its strategic location, resources, and size. However, it is the ideational polemics that will shape the normative dynamics of the region in the 21st century. In this context, India will play a vital role in shaping the emerging geopolitical contours of the Eurasian region.

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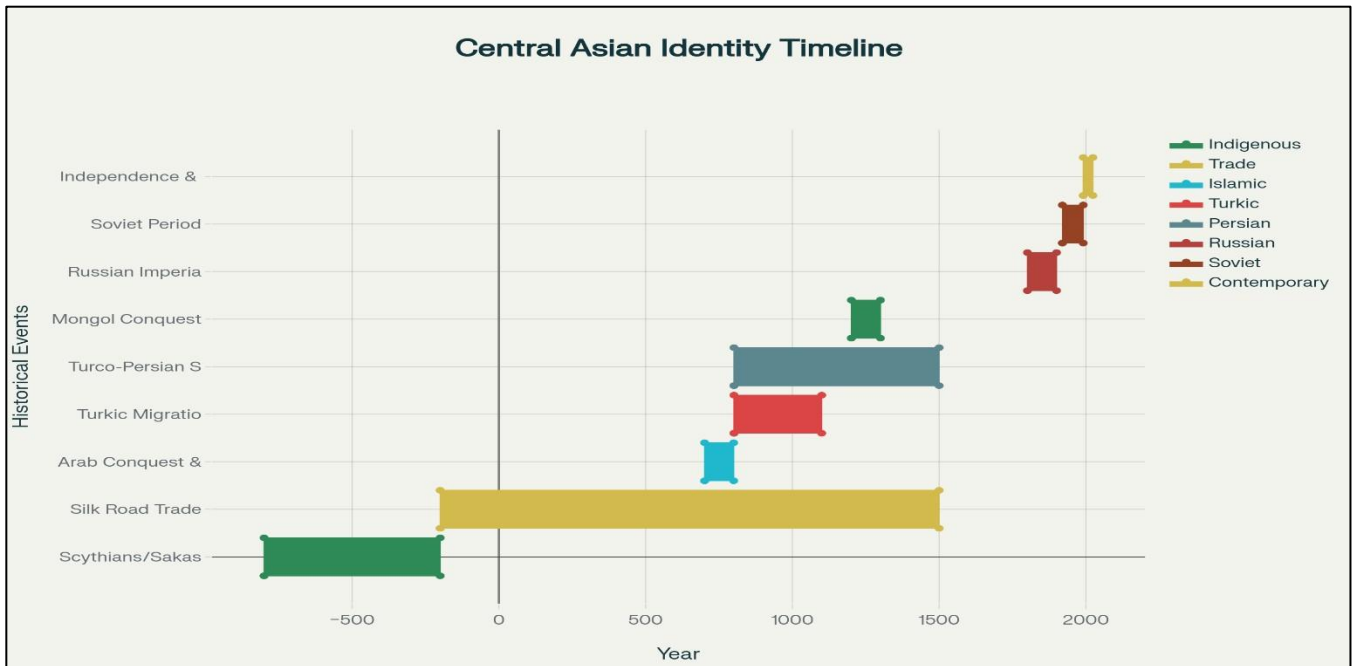
Opinion

Central Asia's Cultural Identity in Eurasian Perspective

Pramod Kumar

Central Asian cultural identity is one of the most complex and multi-layered phenomena in the modern world. It has been shaped by centuries of cultural exchange, political transformation, and civilizational encounters. It shaped by ages of cultural exchange, political transformation, and civilizational encounters. This research paper examines how the five Central Asian republics - Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan have developed unique yet interconnected cultural identities within the broader Eurasian context. Through the lens of history, contemporary developments, and geopolitical dynamics, this study reveals that Central Asian cultural identity emerges from a unique synthesis of nomadic traditions, Silk Road heritage, Islamic civilization, Turco-Persian cultural fusion, Soviet modernization, and post-independence nation-building efforts.

The strategic position of Central Asia at the crossroads of Europe and Asia has made it a crucial bridge between civilizations. This is the area where diverse cultural influences have converged to create a distinctive regional identity that both unites and differentiates Central Asian societies within the broader Eurasian space.



Timeline of Cultural Influences on Central Asian Identity

Historic-Cultural Foundations of Central Asian Identity

The following sections detail the historic-cultural foundations of Central Asian identity.

A. Ancient Nomadic Heritage and Early Civilizations

The cultural foundations of Central Asia were established by ancient nomadic civilizations. Nomadic groups dominated the vast steppes for over two millennia. The Scythians, known to the Greeks, and the Sakas, as they were called by the Persians, inhabited Central Asia from the seventh to the third centuries BCE. They established patterns of pastoral nomadism that greatly influenced regional culture. These early inhabitants of this region developed sophisticated systems of animal husbandry, seasonal migration, and social organization that became defining characteristics of Central Asian identity.

The nomadic lifestyle nurtured distinctive values such as mobility, adaptability, and tribal solidarity. Archaeological evidence from sites like the Berel burial ground in Kazakhstan demonstrates that these communities were not merely pastoral herders but sophisticated artisans. They were capable of producing attractive metalwork and textiles that would later influence Silk Road trade. The horse-centred culture that emerged during this period became a defining element of Central Asian identity. The Kazakhs were among the first to develop riding skills that served both practical and symbolic functions in nomadic society.

Central Asian nomadic societies developed unique social structures based on tribal units and extended kinship networks. These organizational patterns proved remarkably strong, surviving through following historical transformations. These social structures continue to influence political and social dynamics in contemporary Central Asia. The emphasis on oral tradition, including epic narratives, genealogical knowledge, and customary law, created cultural continuity that preserved nomadic values across generations in Central Asia.

B. The Silk Road Era and Cultural Amalgamation

The emergence of the Silk Road trade networks fundamentally transformed Central Asian cultural identity and positioned the region as a primary channel of exchange between East and West. During this period, Central Asian cities like Samarkand and Bukhara in Uzbekistan, Merv in Turkmenistan, and Balkh became multicultural centres where diverse civilizations met one another. This period witnessed unprecedented cultural amalgamation as Persian, Chinese, Indian, Greek, and later Arab influences congregated in Central Asian centres.

The Sogdians³ emerged as master merchants and cultural mediators and their language serving as a lingua franca across the Silk Road network during this period. Their role in facilitating cultural exchange was so significant that historians describe the main driving force of the Great Silk Road as carriers of a 'mixed Sogdian-Türkic culture'. This cultural mixture created new artistic forms, architectural elegances, and intellectual traditions that became symbols of Central Asian civilization.

Silk Road cities developed distinctive architectural styles that combined Persian, Byzantine, Chinese, and indigenous elements. The glorious monuments of Samarkand and Bukhara,

³ The Sogdians were an Iranian people whose homeland, Sogdiana, was located at the centre of several of those routes, in present-day Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.

with their characteristic blue domes and complex tile-work, represent this cultural combination and continue to serve as symbols of Central Asian identity. These architectural achievements demonstrate how Central Asian societies successfully integrated the various cultural influences while maintaining their distinctive character.

Islamic Transformation and Cultural Integration

C. The Arab Conquest and Religious Transformation

The Arab conquest of Central Asia initiated one of the most profound transformations in regional cultural identity. The introduction of Islam fundamentally transformed social structures, legal systems, artistic expression, and intellectual life while also accommodating existing Central Asian cultural patterns. Unlike in other regions where Islamic conquest often led to cultural displacement, Central Asia experienced a gradual amalgamation that preserved significant elements of pre-Islamic tradition.

The process of Islamization in Central Asia was characterized by accommodation rather than replacement of existing cultural forms. Islamic teachings and principles integrated with local customs, creating distinctive regional expressions of Muslim identity. This combination allowed Central Asian societies to maintain their cultural identity while participating in the broader Islamic world.

The emergence of Sufi orders created new forms of religious and cultural expression that combined Islamic spirituality with local traditions. These Sufi orders helped maintain connections between nomadic and sedentary populations while nurturing unique regional interpretations of Islamic civilization.

The Turco-Persian Cultural Synthesis

Another significant period saw Central Asia become the birthplace of the Turco-Persian cultural tradition. It was one of the most significant civilizational combinations in world history. This tradition emerged as Turkic people gained political dominance and began adopting Persian as their cultural and administrative language.

The Turco-Persian combination represented more than mere cultural borrowing; it created new forms of literary expression, administrative practice and artistic achievement. The development of Chagatai literature exemplified by the works of Ali-Shir Nava'i - demonstrated how Turkic linguistic identity could coexist with Persian literary traditions, creating distinctively Central Asian cultural forms. This period established Persian as the primary cultural language.

Central Asian cities became centres of learning and artistic achievement during this period. It was attracting scholars, poets, and artisans from across the Islamic world. The support systems developed by Turkic rulers nurtured remarkable cultural achievements, including architectural monuments, literary works, and scientific innovations that continue to define Central Asian cultural identity.

The Soviet Experience and the forms of Cultural Transformation

National Delimitation and Identity Formation

The Soviet period represented a fundamental change in Central Asian cultural identity formation. Through national delimitation in the 1920s and 1930s, the Soviet authorities created modern Central Asian national identities by drawing territorial boundaries based on nationalities - boundaries that largely persist today. This process involved the systematic creation of national languages, literatures, and cultural institutions that integrated national identities into the Soviet framework.

The Soviet nationality policy produced paradoxical results in Central Asia. While officially promoting national cultures, Soviet authorities simultaneously worked to weaken traditional social structures and religious practices that formed the basis of pre-Soviet identity. The creation of uniform literary languages, educational systems, and cultural institutions nurtured modern national consciousness. On the other hand, they undermined traditional forms of identity based on tribal, regional, and religious affiliations.

The Soviet approach to Central Asian identity involved selective preservation and transformation of cultural elements. Traditional arts like carpet weaving, music, and dance were maintained and even promoted, but religious practices were suppressed and nomadic lifestyles were forcibly sedentarized. This selective cultural policy created hybrid identities that combined Soviet modernisation with conserved elements of traditional culture.

Industrialization and Social Transformation during Soviet Period

Soviet industrialization fundamentally transformed Central Asian social structures and cultural patterns. The massive arrival of Slavic populations, particularly Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians, created multi-ethnic societies where indigenous populations had to negotiate their cultural identity within a broader Soviet framework. In Kazakhstan, demographic changes were so dramatic that Kazakhs became a minority in their own republic by the 1960s. Similar demographic shifts occurred in other parts of Central Asia. The Soviet education system introduced literacy in uniform national languages. The Soviet authorities promoted Russian as the lingua franca of interethnic communication. This linguistic policy created generational differences: older populations tended to maintain stronger connections to traditional practices, while younger generations became increasingly integrated into Soviet cultural norms. Despite these changes, rural populations largely maintained traditional cultural practices and linguistic preferences.

Soviet cultural policies encouraged the development of national literatures, theatres, and artistic institutions while ensuring their conformity to socialist realist principles. This approach adopted for the emergence of modern Central Asian cultural expression. Writers and artists learned to navigate between official requirements and cultural authenticity, often inserting traditional themes within acceptable Soviet frameworks.

Post-Soviet Identity Debate and Revival of Nation-Building process

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 created extraordinary opportunities for Central Asian societies to reassert their cultural heritage. The republics began constructing independent national identities. This process involved the selective revival of pre-Soviet traditions and the reinterpretation of historical narratives. These republics also created new national symbols designed to legitimize post-Soviet state authority. Each Central Asian republic followed different strategies for cultural revival while facing common challenges of economic transition and political consolidation.

The post-Soviet period witnessed a remarkable revival of Islamic religious practices and cultural expressions that had been suppressed during the Soviet era. Thousands of mosques were reopened or newly constructed, and pilgrimage to Mecca resumed on a large scale. Islamic education also experienced significant expansion. This religious revival characterized both genuine cultural restoration and strategic political positioning by post-Soviet elites. The Ruling Elites were seeking to distinguish their societies from Russian influence.

Traditional cultural practices experienced significant revival during this period. They started celebrating pre-Islamic festivals such as Navruz, restored traditional crafts, and promoted indigenous languages. Governments throughout Central Asia invested heavily in cultural institutions designed to preserve and promote national heritage. They also started constructing new national narratives that emphasized continuity with pre-Soviet traditions.

Traditional Festivals and Cultural Unity

Regional cultural festivals play crucial roles in maintaining Central Asian cultural unity while celebrating national distinctiveness. Navruz, the spring equinox celebration, serves as the most significant shared cultural tradition. It is a major festival that unites Central Asian societies through common historical roots. The festival's recognition by UNESCO as Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity demonstrates international appreciation for Central Asian cultural contributions to world heritage.

Initiated by Kyrgyzstan, the World Nomad Games involve participants from throughout Central Asia and beyond. They represent contemporary efforts to preserve and promote traditional nomadic culture within modern contexts. These events combine traditional sports like kokpar⁴ (mounted team competition) and kuresi⁵ (traditional wrestling) with cultural exhibitions and international participation. These are a good example of how traditional practices can adapt to contemporary global settings while maintaining cultural authenticity.

Regional music and literary festivals provide additional venues for cultural exchange and preservation throughout Central Asia. Events like Uzbekistan's Shark Taronalari festival⁶ and various folk music celebrations create opportunities for cross-cultural interaction, while promoting traditional artistic forms. These festivals demonstrate the continued vitality of Central Asian cultural traditions while fostering regional cooperation and mutual understanding.

⁴ Kokpar is an ancient Central Asian horseback game where two teams of riders on horses compete to gain control of a headless goat carcass and throw it into a designated goal. Also known as Kok Boru in Kyrgyzstan or Buzkashi in Afghanistan, the sport requires significant agility and skill from both the riders and their trained horses. Modern competitions use a special dummy instead of a real animal carcass.

⁵ Kuresi (or Qazaq Kuresi) is a traditional Kazakh folk wrestling style where the primary goal is to throw your opponent onto their back while standing. It is a deeply cultural practice for the Kazakh people, with participants known as "Baluan" and a history rooted in strength, courage, and community solidarity. The sport is taught in sports clubs and masterclasses, practiced by men and women, and continues to be a significant national sport with international competitions taking place annually.

⁶ The Sharq Taronalari ('Melodies of the East') festival is a major biennial international music event held in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, under the auspices of UNESCO. Since its inception in 1997, it showcases national folk and traditional music from around the world, bringing together musicians and cultural representatives to promote understanding, peace, and cultural heritage through art. The festival features a large international competition, a scientific conference, and various concert performances on the famous Registan Square.

Literature and Intellectual Traditions

Central Asian literary traditions continue to evolve through the work of contemporary writers who navigate between traditional cultural forms and global literary trends. The region's rich literary heritage - including epic traditions like the Kyrgyz *Manas*⁷, Kazakh *Alyp Er Tonga*⁸, and Uzbek *Alpamysh*⁹, provides foundation for contemporary literary expressions. It is also a means of connecting modern writers to ancient cultural traditions. Soviet-era writers like Chinghiz Aitmatov achieved international recognition while maintaining distinctively Central Asian perspectives and themes.

Contemporary Central Asian writers explore themes of cultural identity, historical memory, and social transformation within the context of post-Soviet development and global integration. These literary developments demonstrate the continued strength of Central Asian intellectual traditions while engaging with universal human themes.

The preservation and promotion of Central Asian languages represent a crucial challenge for contemporary cultural identity. While Russian continues to serve important purposes as a regional lingua franca, national governments throughout Central Asia have implemented policies to strengthen indigenous languages through education, media, and official usage. This linguistic policy balances practical communication needs with cultural preservation goals while reflecting broader themes of national identity construction.

Arts, Crafts, and Cultural Heritage

Traditional Central Asian crafts continue to serve important roles in cultural identity. Carpet weaving, particularly in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, maintains ancient techniques and designs. They have also started adapting to contemporary market demands and tourist interest. These crafts preserve traditional knowledge systems. Traditional crafts also provide economic opportunities for rural populations and connect communities to their cultural heritage.

Contemporary Central Asian artists work to preserve traditional techniques. They are also developing innovative expressions that engage with global artistic trends. Cultural institutions throughout the region support both preservation of traditional arts and development of contemporary artistic expression. Their work maintains connections to Central Asian cultural themes and aesthetic principles. This approach demonstrates how cultural identity can remain rooted in tradition while embracing innovation and change.

⁷ The epic of 'Manas' is the golden treasury of popular thought and reflected more than 3000 years of experience in the history and spiritual life of the Kyrgyz. The content of "Manas" is much larger and deeper than ordinary songs about the adventures of folk heroes. A significant place in the epic is occupied by scenes of military clashes.

⁸ Kazakh Alyp Er Tonga is the subject of an ancient Turkic epic, also appearing in other Central Asian cultures as a heroic and mythical figure. He is a legendary warrior, hero, and ruler (Khan) who is portrayed as a symbol of Turkish courage and strength, though he is also identified with the Persian epic hero Afrasiyab in some Turkish sources, albeit with a distinctly positive nationalistic reinterpretation.

⁹ The Uzbek Alpamysh is the most widespread and cherished national epic of the Uzbek people, telling the story of the legendary hero Alpamysh and his heroic deeds, particularly his quest to meet his bride and his battles for his people's independence. The epic, considered a foundational work of Central Asian literature, reflects Uzbek customs and traditions and celebrates virtues like bravery, fearlessness, and loyalty.

Digital technology and social media create new opportunities for Central Asian cultural expression and preservation. Young people throughout the region use digital platforms to share traditional music, create contemporary artistic works, and maintain cultural connections across national boundaries. These technological developments show how Central Asian cultural identity adjusts to contemporary global realities. It is also maintaining distinctive regional characteristics.

Contemporary Cultural Challenges and Opportunities

Contemporary Central Asian cultural identity faces complex challenges related to globalization, modernization, and geopolitical competition. The region's strategic location has attracted increased attention from major powers, including Russia, China, the United States, and the European Union. These major powers promote different models of cultural and political development. These external influences create opportunities for cultural exchange while also raising concerns about cultural autonomy and authenticity.

The preservation of traditional cultural practices faces pressure from urbanization, technological change, and generational changes in values and lifestyle preferences. The challenge involves maintaining cultural authenticity while adapting to contemporary global realities and technological capabilities.

Youth populations throughout Central Asia increasingly navigate between traditional cultural expectations and global cultural influences transmitted through digital media, education, and migration. This generational dynamic creates opportunities for cultural innovation as well as generating tensions between traditional and modern identity orientations. The World Nomad Games and other cultural events of this type represent efforts to bridge generational gaps by presenting traditional culture in contemporary formats.

Conclusion

Central Asian cultural identity is a remarkable combination of diverse historical influences, contemporary challenges, and future possibilities within the broader Eurasian context. The region's strategic position at the crossroads of major civilizations has created cultural identities that are rooted in ancient traditions yet adaptive to contemporary global realities. The nature of Central Asian identity incorporates nomadic heritage, Silk Road cosmopolitanism, Islamic civilization, the Turco-Persian synthesis, Soviet modernization, and post-independence revival - a combination that demonstrates the complexity and resilience of regional cultures.

The contemporary period presents both opportunities and challenges for Central Asian cultural identity development. External influences from Russia, China, and Western countries create competitive pressures while also providing resources and opportunities for cultural preservation and development. Regional cooperation through organizations like the SCO and cultural events like the World Nomad Games demonstrates Central Asian capacity for maintaining cultural autonomy while engaging productively with broader Eurasian and global networks.

The future of Central Asian cultural identity depends largely on the region's ability to balance the preservation of traditional forms with adaptation to technological change, demographic shifts, and the pressures of global integration. Success in this attempt requires continued investment in cultural institutions, educational systems, and regional cooperation

mechanisms. Central Asia's role as a bridge between civilizations continues to evolve in the twenty-first century, with the region's cultural identity serving both as a foundation for national development and as a contribution to global cultural diversity. Central Asian culture is neither purely traditional nor entirely modern but a living synthesis that continues to evolve within the broader Eurasian context.

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Book Review

Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *Rebuilding Russia: Reflections and Tentative Proposals* (1990), translated by Alexei Klimoff (1991)

Sujal Yadav

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *Rebuilding Russia: Reflections and Tentative Proposals* (1990) has become relevant again in this larger perspective. Written while the author was in exile and first published in *Komsomolskaya Pravda* just before the Soviet Union fell apart, the book sounds more like the voice of a moral visionary than a typical political pamphlet. Solzhenitsyn posits that, despite the anguish associated with the collapse of an empire, it can serve as a catalyst for renewal when anchored in robust ethical and cultural principles.

The current 'special operation' by Russia in Ukraine, initiated on 24 February 2022, has garnered international attention and incited discourse among analysts and political theorists. Observers see Moscow's choice variably: some attribute it to Russia's imperial and Soviet traditions and a persistent geopolitical purpose; others perceive it as a tactic to divert attention from domestic issues and reinforce control via overseas conflict. Although there are varying perspectives, commentators generally concur that Russia's current activities are influenced by unsolved historical issues pertaining to national identity, power, and authority. This book provides a profound comprehension of the contemporary war interwoven inside historical chapters.

The English translation by Alexei Klimoff divides the novel into two parts based on themes. 'First Priorities', the first part, deals with concerns that need to be answered right away for the post-Soviet

state. 'Looking Ahead', the second part, looks at Russia's future and its relationships with its neighbours. The writing is still very pertinent to today's arguments, even though it was written thirty years before the current situation between Russia and Ukraine. The book's thoughts on empire, identity, and the link between religion and state are still very relevant.

The section of the book called 'A Word to the Ukrainians and the Belorussians' is where Solzhenitsyn's thoughts on Ukraine come out the strongest and most controversially. He writes from a personal perspective, stating that he is "well-nigh half Ukrainian by birth" and that he was nurtured in a Ukrainian-speaking and cultural environment. This personal connection is what makes his passionate plea so powerful: he doesn't want Russia and Ukraine to be completely separate politically. He says that Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians all came from the same civilisation in Kievan Rus', which is connected by religion, government systems, and hundreds of years of shared history. He asserts that even throughout Polish-Lithuanian governance, numerous Ukrainians and Belarusians persisted in their identification with the Russian sphere and yearned for reunification. Solzhenitsyn believed that the breaking up of this unity was more due to bad luck in history, including the Mongol conquest, foreign rule, and divisions forced from the outside. These thoughts are the emotional and conceptual core of *Rebuilding Russia*.

Solzhenitsyn also says that the country should be renewed via culture, morals, and voluntary union, not by force or political means. He tells Russia to look to its spiritual and historical origins instead of trying to keep a broken imperial structure alive. He downplays Ukraine's unique national identity, although he does respect the suffering of Ukrainians, speak out against Tsarist repression, and stress the shared agony of Russians and Ukrainians throughout the Soviet era [Page No 20]. He supports the right of people to choose their own path, but he warns against forced separation. He suggests that decisions be made locally in areas that are being fought over, like Crimea and the Donbas, and that peaceful separation be used where it makes sense. Ultimately, he envisions a consensual East Slavic union founded on a common heritage, ethics, and collective memory.

Solzhenitsyn also talks on how many different groups there are in Russia. He says that Russia's large size makes multiculturalism last even after the USSR broke up. He believes that significant ethnic groups, like the Tatars and Yakuts, should be free to govern themselves. He also says that it is morally wrong to not safeguard weak groups like the Finno-Ugric populations, whose cultures were destroyed during Soviet domination. At the same time, he warns against the political claims of smaller organisations and stresses the need for responsible government. He believes that politics should be based on morals rather than just power. True leadership is when you care about the country and appreciate all nationalities.

There is a constant contradiction in the book between Solzhenitsyn's yearning for a "Russian union" and his advocacy of self-determination. He wants people to come together culturally based on shared traditions, but he also believes that communities should be able to choose their own political fates. More than thirty

years later, that problem is still not solved in the post-Soviet space, where desires for independence often clash with strong historical and cultural links.

Part Two of the book offers a political alternative to Western liberal democracy as interpreted by Solzhenitsyn. He says that multi-party systems generate division and put party interests ahead of the common good. He also says that party politics often turn down initiatives only because of where they came from. He suggests a grassroots approach based on local self-government, inspired by the old *zemstvo* councils of Imperial Russia, because of his experiences living under Soviet control and his frustrations with Western politics. His four-tier approach envisions leadership ascending from small communities to national levels—village, district, region, and national—selected through community consensus rather than party machinery, thereby fostering personal accountability and a more genuine, community-oriented governance.

Solzhenitsyn also calls for quick changes in the economy and society, notably in agriculture and in making sure the country is free. He wants to dismantle the collective farm system and give peasants long, transferable leases on the property. He says that if these changes don't happen, rural life and the peasant way of life will die away. He says that spending money on foreign countries, like allies, is a waste when there are still needs at home. He also says that money should be spent on housing, elder care, and restoring the environment. Solzhenitsyn envisions a humble, ethically motivated Russia that eschews empire in favour of responsible administration and local accountability.

Though his ideas are idealistic, but it put a tremendous impact on Russian society and culture. The moral urgency of his plea is also clear, though the political elites disagreed at that moment of Russian

history.

Rebuilding Russia is still both prophetic and contradictory more than thirty years after it was published. Solzhenitsyn predicted the fall of the Soviet Union and told people to get ready instead of being sad about it. He said that unresolved ethnic tensions and ambiguous borders could lead to more conflicts in the future. His requests for local referendums in areas with people of different ethnicities, like Crimea, were ignored. His fears about the Caucasus, such as that Georgian independence might lead to the oppression of Abkhazians and Ossetians, have often come true. At the same time, his dreams of a voluntary Slavic union of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus mostly didn't come true as the USSR fell apart. He was worried about burgeoning Ukrainian nationalism, but he was against forcing people to join and said that unity could only be real if people chose it willingly. Unfortunately, many have used his talk of cultural and spiritual kinship to excuse violence, which he never meant to do. Similarly, his critique of Western liberalism has echoes in modern Russian politics, even though his broader ideas about grassroots democracy and national repentance have mostly been forgotten. Instead, the country went with a centralised 'managed democracy' that brought back old power institutions in new forms.

Rebuilding Russia is still important because it sets out a moral and political goal that Russia has not yet fully fulfilled.

Solzhenitsyn imagined a country that would heal by giving up its imperial goals, decentralising power, and being honest about its past. He advocated for humanity, spiritual regeneration, and public morality, which are very different from the geopolitical realpolitik that guides Russian policy today. His message is still important for civilisations that are coming out of authoritarian collapse: real regeneration can't happen through force or ideology alone; it has to come from truth, repentance, and a moral foundation strong enough to support lasting freedom.

The book ends on a pessimistic note but at the same time offers alternative to Russian society. Solzhenitsyn depicts post-Soviet Russia as delicate yet can be addressed with prudent management. The process would be difficult and hard, but if Russia were willing to ease the burdens of empire and face its past honestly, it could yet be able to build a future on solid ground. As he writes "Rebuilding Russia is not just a political pamphlet; it is also a way to think about morality and the country's own problems". He further argues that it is an interesting proof that the "national soul is just as important as the structure of the institutions, even though it is uneven and sometimes messy".

Solzhenitsyn will be remembered as a philosopher who gave prudent alternative to Soviet system at that moment of history.

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