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# Siberia and India

## Historical Cultural Affinities

Prof. K. Warikoo



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3, San Martin Marg | Chanakyapuri | New Delhi - 110021

Tel: 011-24121764 | Fax: 011-66173415

E-mail: [info@vifindia.org](mailto:info@vifindia.org)

Website: [www.vifindia.org](http://www.vifindia.org)

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Dr. K. Warikoo is former Professor, Centre for Inner Asian Studies, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. He is currently Senior Fellow, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi. This paper is based on the author's writings published earlier, which have been updated and consolidated at one place. All photos have been taken by the author during his field studies in the region.

# **Siberia and India: Historical Cultural Affinities**

India and Eurasia have had close social and cultural linkages, as Buddhism spread from India to Central Asia, Mongolia, Buryatia, Tuva and far wide. Buddhism provides a direct link between India and the peoples of Siberia (Buryatia, Chita, Irkutsk, Tuva, Altai, Urals etc.) who have distinctive historico-cultural affinities with the Indian Himalayas particularly due to common traditions and Buddhist culture. Revival of Buddhism in Siberia is of great importance to India in terms of restoring and reinvigorating the lost linkages. The Eurasianism of Russia, which is a Eurasian country due to its geographical situation, brings it closer to India in historical-cultural, political and economic terms. This paper reflects upon this author's experiences of travels in Buryatia, Khakassia , Altai and Tuva Republics of Russian Federation, bringing to light certain commonalities of traditions and beliefs still prevalent in this Siberian region and India.

There is wide scope for developing economic and cultural interaction between Eurasia and India, as the two regions maintained cultural

contacts since ancient times. Archaeological evidence supports the concept of unity of the Eurasian region and the link of Russia and Central Asian states with India into a complex of cross-cultural bindings. Indian Vedas, Shamanism and Tengrism of Eurasia have so many commonalities. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century Buddhism penetrated to Altai where Buddhist rituals were assimilated with the traditional Shamanist practices. One can find traces of ancient Vedic doctrines in the traditional rituals and practices of the Siberian people even today.

## **BURYATIA**

Covering an area of 351,300 sq. kms. and situated in the southern part of East Siberia to the southeast of Lake Baikal, the Republic of Buryatia has its borders touching Mongolia in the south, the Republic of Tuva in the southwest, the Irkutsk oblast in the northwest and the Chita oblast in the east. The major part (about 60 per cent of coastline) of the 636 kms long Lake Baikal, the deepest freshwater lake in the world, falls within the territory of Buryatia. The capital city of Ulan-Ude is the administrative, political, economic, and cultural centre of the Republic of Buryatia. It is one of the oldest and large cities of Siberia. Ulan Ude city is small, compact and well organised. On the main Arbat Street, there is a symbol of Ulan Ude city – the *Swayambo* placed above two dragons, which reminds of strong Indian cultural influence (Photo 1). On a visit to the Rimpoche Baksha Temple in Ulan Ude city on 27 September 2007, this author met a Buddhist Lama from Ladakh (India), who was spending over three months in this monastery (Photo 2). On the outskirts of Ulan Ude city, there is a traditional Buryat restaurant – *Yurt*, where one can have the ethnic Buryat cuisine and national music and dance. They make circular dance around *Ogun* (fire

place), which is placed in the centre of the restaurant. That *Ogun*, the Sanskrit term for fire is still in vogue here, only testifies to the continuing Indian connection with Buryatia.

Selenga, which is the largest river having a length of over 1,200 kms and flowing through Russia, Mongolia and Buryatia, falls in the Baikal Lake. Selenga river has strong flow of water and depth. It is like the Ganges of India and is an integral part of Buryat culture. So many national Buryat songs have been written about the Selenga. Well known Buryat artist Anna Subonova has composed and sung several songs eulogising the grandeur and essence of Selenga for Buryatia. Selenga river flows along the road to Baikal lake and the clouds of vapour over the course of the Selenga river present an extraordinary sight.

Buddhist lamas from Buryatia who had access to the rulers of Russia from the time of Empress Elizabeth (1741-1762), became influential at the Tsarist Russian courts of Alexander III and Nicholas II, through the efforts of Peter Alexandrovich Badmaev (1851-1919), a Buryat physician and practitioner of Tibetan medicine at the Court.<sup>1</sup> Well known Buryat Lama Agvan Dordji (Dordjiev) had gained substantial influence with the Dalai Lama in early 20<sup>th</sup> century. He was received by Nicholas II in October 1900 and in July 1901, Dordji proposed to the Tsar that “Russia should proclaim herself the champion of Asia and the defender of Buddhism”.<sup>2</sup>

In 1741, the Empress Elizabeth Petrovna issued an imperial decree “recognising Buddhism in Buryatia and 11 *datsans* which existed at that time were confirmed with 150 lamas in them”.<sup>3</sup> In 1764, Russian government appointed the Buryat lama Damba-darja Zayayev as the Chief Bandida Hambo Lama of all Buddhists living to the south

of Lake Baikal. He became the supreme official head of the Buddhist order in Buryatia as the first Bandida Hambo Lama (1766-1777).<sup>4</sup> And this tradition has continued till modern times. In 1811 the foremost Aginsky monastery with separate departments of philosophy, tantras and medicine, was set up. Its degrees were recognised. In 1853 Russia issued a decree on “the Status of the Lamaist Clergy in Eastern Siberia” which regulated the administrative and economic status of *datsans* and lamas until the 1917 Revolution. By 1917, there were 47 Buddhist monasteries (*datsans*) in Buryatia, each being a spiritual and cultural centre.

After the October Revolution of 1917 the Buryat-Mongol Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic was established in the year 1923. All Soviet and administrative personnel in Buryat Republic were initially recruited from lamas, ex-lamas and students of lamaist monasteries. These lamaist modernists projected Buddhism as atheistic and Buddha as a predecessor of Lenin. The leading Buryat historian Zhamtsarano stressed that “Gautam Buddha had given the world an accomplished system of Communism”. Though lamaism was crushed during Stalin’s period, a new generation of Buryat intellectuals who had grown up in the 1950s, now started writing in Russian and Mongolian languages about Mongolia and Mongols. Several Buryat poets such as Dondok, Dashi Dambaev, Lopsan Taphkaev and Bayar Dugarov played key role in the reawakening of Buryat Mongol consciousness. One Buddhist monastery became the centre of Buddhist preaching and practice and several Buryat lamas even represented the former Soviet Union at international peace conferences.

Gorbachev’s policy of *glasnost* and *perestroika* facilitated the revival of Buryat culture and traditions. In 1989 Bayar Dugarov

led a successful campaign for the celebration of the ancient Buryat holiday *Sagaalgaan* (New Year). In 1990 Dugarov and other Buryat cultural personalities initiated the five year celebrations of *Geser*, thus reviving the local heritage. In fact, the campaign to promote *Geser* as figure of national unity assumed an official character, following a decision to this effect by the Supreme Soviet of the Buryat Republic at its meeting on 15 November 1990. This decision led to the organisation of festivals dedicated to the *Geser* epic for which a special Geser Directorate was created by the government of Buryatia. It may be pointed out that the epic of heroic king Geser is recorded in poetry and prose throughout Central Asia, Tibet and Karakoram Himalayas. That the Tibetan, Mongolian, Buryat, Ladakhi and Balti singers maintain the oral tradition of singing *Geser*, shows the longevity of the cultural affinity between Indian Himalayas and Buryatia. On 27 March 1991, the Republic was named as the Republic of Buryatia of the Russian Federation. First All Buryat Congress was held on 22 February 1991 to discuss issues of the revival of Buryat language, culture and history. This was followed by the establishment of All-Buryat Cultural Association with the objective of promoting Buryat language, culture and contacts between Buryat Mongol areas. Buryatia is also witnessing the revival of Shamanism and Buddhism.

Despite having a long chequered history, Buryats have always demonstrated benevolence and respect to their neighbours, who arrived in the Baikal region at different periods of time. Notwithstanding their Russian education and training, Buryat intellectuals played key role in retaining the Buryat traditions and culture while modernising themselves. In this process of syncretisation, as a result of application of Russian science, technology, language, literature and culture in the traditional nomadic society of



Buryatia, the indigenous Buryats retained their local traditions and ethos adjusting themselves to the new wave of dominant Russian and later Soviet cultural and political influence. Even though the use of Russian language became widespread amongst the Buryats, they retained the indigenous Mongolian characteristics, nomadic lifestyle, Buddhist and Shamanist religion and traditions, Tibetan language, Buryat history and folklore. The majority of Buryats, though following Buddhism, remain attached to the Shamanist practices. The rites of birth, marriage, death and seasonal festivals have Shamanist characteristics, notwithstanding the participation by lamas and their recitation of sacred Buddhist texts. Today, cultural, religious and social traditions of different peoples in Buryatia are closely interwoven forming a unique pattern of peaceful coexistence. Buryats have maintained their Shamanist and mythical traditions and practices. Buddhism and Buddhist tradition which was brought to Buryatia from India, Tibet and Mongolia, forms the main base of its culture. The Buddhist philosophy, Tibetan system of medicine, astrology, language and printing of literature have not only survived but even developed in Buryatia.

Harsh climatic conditions, nomadic lifestyle, dependence on natural resources- forests, mountains, lakes etc., sparsely populated settlements situated at a distance from each other and other environmental factors played their role in the development of various rituals, traditions and culture of the Buryats. Thus we see the Buryats revering the elements of nature - earth, sun, moon, fire and water. Similarly collectivism, mutual help and hospitality are accorded importance in their day to day life. It is considered sinful to defile fire and water. Also one must not break trees, instead one should give them gifts by hanging coloured pieces of cloth on its branches. The practice of making offerings at *Beruz*a trees and tying

coloured pieces of cloth on the branches of trees is quite prevalent in Buryatia as in most parts of India (Photos 3 & 4). On both sides of the highway from Ulan Ude to Lake Baikal, the birch and pine trees are in abundance. Golden yellow leaves of birch trees provide a beautiful sight in autumn. On the way to Lake Baikal, visitors stop at a place and bow before the birch trees offering tea, bread, coins etc. Further moving towards Lake Baikal, they pay obeisance to *Usan Lopsan* - the god of Baikal, offering coins to its wooden statue (Photos 5, 6 & 7). They make three rounds from the left clockwise around the statue like the one we have in Hindu tradition. Buryats attach great importance to colours, certain numerals etc. White (*saagan*) is considered to be the colour of sanctity and well-being. Black symbolises danger, grief or death. Red is revered as it is related to fire, light and warmth and it is believed to bring power, joy and well-being. So we find *Ulaan* (red) in the words Ulaan-Baatar, Ulaan-Ude, Ulaan-Hongor etc. Yellow is associated with the Sun and gold and is given prominence in the palette of colours in Buddhism. Blue denotes the eternal sky and water. Green symbolises the earth, vegetation and growth.

Today there are eighteen Buddhist *datsans* (monasteries), twelve Buddhist communities, seventeen Orthodox temples and parish churches, seven ancient Russian Orthodox communities, and over twenty religious denominations and movements of various kinds in Buryatia. A temple complex called Jarun Khashor, which unites different Buddhist sects was opened in Kizhinga. The past several years have witnessed the revival of old traditions in Buryatia. Old *datsans* are being restored and new temples and Christian churches are being constructed. In July 1991, a jubilee was celebrated in Buryatia to mark 250 years of the official recognition of Buddhism in Russia and Dalai Lama was invited to Buryatia on this occasion,

which turned the event extraordinary and historic. People in Buryatia and Chita Oblast braved heavy rains and stood waiting to see the Dalai Lama. Buddhists of Mongolia and the Russian Federation, particularly the Republics of Buryatia, Kalmykia and Tuva, look towards the Dalai Lama as their spiritual leader. In early November 2007, about 400 Buddhists from Mongolia and the Russian Federation visited India and organised a week-long cultural festival in Dharmshala, the seat of the Dalai Lama and Tibetan Government-in-Exile. They held an exhibition showcasing Buddhist culture and traditions in the Russian Republics, besides having concerts and performances by visiting cultural groups. This was a major organised effort by the Buddhists of Buryatia and Tuva to revive their ancient historical and spiritual ties with the homeland of Buddha.

After 1990, several monasteries were renovated and new ones constructed at Tsugol, Gusinozersk, Kyrensk, Atzagat, Egituevsk, Murochinsk, Gegetui, Anninsk, Sanaginsk and Ust-Ordynsk.<sup>5</sup> A School for higher Buddhist studies was opened in 1991 at Ivolginsk *Datsan*, with a few students having enrolled there.

The combination of the influences of Buddhism, Shamanism of indigenous peoples, and *Staroobryadchestvo* (Old Russian Orthodox Christianity) has enriched the spiritual sphere of the society in Buryatia. The most ancient traditional religion of Buryats and Evenks has been Shamanism since ancient times. Both the Indo-Buddhist, Mongolian and Russian-European cultures and Shamanism, Buddhism and Christianity have played their role in the formation and development of Buryat culture through history. Due to its unique geographical location (being situated on the borders of Russia, Mongolia and China) and historical-cultural development,

Buryatia and Buryats present a unique synthesis of both culture of the East through Buddhism and Mongolian language and culture and that of the West through the medium of Russian language and culture. The three main value systems of the Buryats - Buddhism, Shamanism and epic-heroism (*Geser*) have become important for the preservation and promotion of Buryat ethno-cultural identity. Reopening of Buddhist monasteries, forging of close contacts with Mongolia and the Dalai Lama, renewal of shamanist practices and claims, and the promotion of heroic figure of *Geser* (Photo 8) signify the assertion of their distinct and indigenous identity by the Buryats.

This author alongwith a group of five Indian musicians participated in the International Festival on *Sounds of Eurasia*, which was organised by the East Siberian Academy of Culture and Arts and the Ministry of Culture and Mass Communications, Buryatia Republic of the Russian Federation at Ulan Ude from 25 September to 1 October 2007. It was a major event in renewing the age old cultural contacts between Buryatia and India. The only foreign participants in this Festival were the group of Indian musicians representing the Himalayan Research and Cultural Foundation, New Delhi (Mrs. Savita Bakshi – *Sitar*, Mr. R.K. Majumdar – *Santoor*, Mr. Anil Kaul – *Tabla*, Mr. Rakesh Anand – *Flute/Bansuri* and Mr. Ravinder Kaul – Comperer) which was led by this author. It was for the first time that any Indian cultural group visited Buryatia/East Siberia during the past several decades. This programme was the result of cooperation between the Himalayan Research and Cultural Foundation and East Siberia Academy of Culture and Arts (ESACA), for promoting Indo-Russian/India-Eurasia cultural contacts. The journal *Himalayan and Central Asian Studies* brought out a Special Buryatia Issue which was released on this occasion. The Festival received enthusiastic official and public response in Ulan Ude. On 25<sup>th</sup> September 2007,

the Indian delegation was accorded a ceremonial welcome before being formally received by the Rector, East Siberian Academy of Cultures and Arts. The inaugural ceremony which took place at the Ulan Ude Musical College, was attended by the cultural/literary elite of Ulan Ude, with over 600 people assembled in the Hall.

In his inaugural message, Mr. V.V. Nagovicin, President-Chairman of Government of Buryatia, expressed his happiness at this occasion as it provided “an opportunity to the people of the Republic to learn traditional instrumental music of Russia and India.” He was especially delighted at the publication of Buryatia Special Issue of *Himalayan and Central Asian Studies* by the Himalayan Research and Cultural Foundation which was released during this Festival. Mr. G.A. Aidaev, Mayor of Ulan Ude city, while speaking on the occasion of the Inauguration of the Festival on 25<sup>th</sup> September 2007, stated that “participation of our Indian friends in the Festival once again emphasises our kind fraternal ties”. Prof. R.I. Pschenichnikova, Rector, East Siberian State Academy of Culture and Arts, described the traditional music as a bridge between the past, present and future. This author described this festival as another link in the long chain of historico-cultural contacts. “And we are thus seeing history being enacted, as this composite cultural programme, academic presentations, artistic performances by well known and experienced artists from Buryatia, Khakassia, Krasnoyarsk, Chita and India symbolise common cultural traditions, values and aspirations of the people in this entire region”, he added.

The Festival concluded on Saturday, 29<sup>th</sup> September 2007. And in the evening, a formal ceremony was held at the main hall of Ulan Ude Musical College, where a Gala Concert of all the participants from India, Buryatia, Chita, Krasnoyarsk, Khakassia and other parts

of Siberia was held (Photo 9). All these artists and musicians from different cultural/ethnic backgrounds presented a fantastic musical programme which demonstrated both harmony and symphony between different musical traditions. Indian classical music of *Santoor*, *Sitar* and *Flute* accompanied the Russian *Balalaika*, *Buryat Chanz* and *Yatagan* and other instruments. The gala concert of all these artists and musicians, spell bound the audience with their musical performances.

## **ALTAI**

Altai has been variously described as ‘Gate to Shambhala’, ‘Pearl of Asia’, ‘Siberia’s Switzerland’, ‘The Golden Mountains’ and so on. The ‘Golden Mountains’ are revered by the Altaians, Buddhists and Burkhanists.<sup>6</sup> In 1988 UNESCO declared the Golden Mountains and the Mount Belukha a World Heritage site. The name Altai comes from Mongolian *Altan* which means golden. The Altai region spans over vast area at the junction of Russia, Kazakhstan, Mongolia and China. Altai is full of natural bounties – rivers and lakes, splendour of snowy peaks, luxuriant taiga, steppes, rich flora and fauna. Amazing natural landscapes, historical antiquity, rich mineral resources, agriculture and tourist attraction lend Altai a unique character. Bordered by Novosibirsk, Kemerovo Oblasts and Khakassia and Tuva Republics of Russia, Bayan-Olgii province of Mongolia, Kazakhstan and Altai Prefecture in Xinjiang region of China, Altai is situated in the centre of Eurasia. The area has witnessed criss-crossing of different ethnic and linguistic groups through history.

After the October revolution in Russia, the Oyrot Autonomous Oblast was established on 1 June 1922, as recognition of distinctness

of the Altai people. On 7 January 1948 the Oblast was renamed as Gorno-Altai Autonomous Oblast. And soon after the disintegration of the former Soviet Union, Gorno Altai Autonomous Oblast was reorganized in 1992 and split into two administrative units – Altai Krai and Altai Republic.<sup>7</sup> Whereas Altai Krai is dominated by the flat farmland and big industries, Altai Republic is mainly constituted of mountains and forests inhabited by the indigenous Altaian people. Barnaul is the administrative centre of Altai Krai, which is a part of Siberian Federal *Okrug* (District). Altai Republic is largely mountainous and covers an area of 92,600 sq. kms. Having a population of about 206,000, Altaians constitute over 35%, Russians being about 57% and Kazakhs about 6%. Gorno Altaisk is the administrative centre of Altai Republic, which is part of Siberian Federal District.

Nicholas Roerich described Altai as the centre of Eurasia being situated at “an equal distance from the four oceans”. And in the centre of the Altai is the northern point of the Central Asian mountain range, and the highest peak of Siberia – Belukha (4,506 metres). To Roerich Mount Balukha symbolized Shambhala. Roerich painted Belukha several times. He “viewed Belukha as a local counterpart to Mount Kailas”,<sup>8</sup> the holy peak in Tibet. To Roerich “Belukha and Kailas were geographic and metaphysical twins”.<sup>9</sup> During his Central Asian expedition (1925-28), Roerich studied antiquities, traditions, customs, medicinal herbs and the history of migrations of peoples. Roerich wrote: “The Katun is affable. The blue mountains are clear. The Belukha mountain is white. The flowers are bright and the green herbs and ciders are soothing”. The region is blessed with rivers, lakes, hot springs, forests and significant minerals reserves. The main rivers are Biya and Katun which originate in the mountains and flow northwards. The Katun river is central to the spirituality

and culture of the Altaians, who like in India conduct several rituals in reverence of the river.

I visited Altai twice in June 2014 and June 2015. Notwithstanding the preponderance of the Russian population, an aura of Asianness pervades in this part of Russia.<sup>10</sup> The ethnic Russians here strongly identify with the Altaians and are keen to protect local environment, nature and culture. The Russians here are quite friendly, straightforward and nourish deep affection and ideological/civilisational affinity with India. The concept of 'Altai-Himalayas' – the close geocultural and spiritual affinity between the two great mountain systems and cultures, was a common issue brought in for academic discussion between Indian and Altai specialists.<sup>11</sup> I visited the painting exhibition of Ms. Larisa Pastushkova, who has done a lot of paintings devoted to India, Tibet, Nepal and Mongolia. One could see that the people here have some sort of deep cultural and spiritual affinity with India.<sup>12</sup>

Prof. A.V. Ivanov stressed the need to strengthen the historical-cultural heritage of Eurasia to save the region from the adverse affects of western social and political influences. He called upon Russia to take into account the historical-cultural background of its Asiatic space. This author gave a call for reviving the civilisational links between India and Eurasia. He stated that Buddhism provides a direct link between India and the peoples of Siberia (Buryatia, Inkutsk, Tuva, Altai etc), who have distinct historico-cultural similarities with the Indian Himalayas particularly due to common traditions and Buddhist culture. He stressed the need to have collaborative research to study in depth various aspects of ancient history, race movements and archaeological remains in India and Siberia, common sources and roots of Indic and Siberian culture.



Prof. M.A. Shishin described India as a core part of the Eurasian concept. He believed that the power of spirituality will integrate Eurasia.<sup>13</sup>

On 28<sup>th</sup> June 2014, I alongwith Dr. Irina Zherinosenko - the culturologist and Associate Professor at Altai State Technical University, Barnaul, Danil Mamyev - Director of the Karakol National Park, Alfred - the ace videographer and Vitaly - the legal consultant and culturologist left Barnaul in Lexus SUV for Gorno Altai. The journey took about 12 hours and after crossing the Ob river we passed through lush green grassfields, pine and birch trees lining the road and wheat, mustard fields on the way. The area is sparsely populated and the highway is well maintained. We stopped over at Biysk town, which is about 200 kms from Barnaul. It is here that the rivers Katun and Biya join to form the Ob river. We reached Onguday, the main town of Altai Republic in the evening and went to the rest house in Uch Enmek.

The Karakol valley is home to several villages, many ancient burials and the sacred mountain of Uch Enmek (Sumeru). The Valley is the heart of the Uch Enmek Nature Park, being managed by Danil Mamyev. A geologist by training and having over 30 years experience in environmental field and indigenous issues, Danil Mamyev is the initiator and moving spirit behind the development and functioning of the Karakol Ethno-National Park. He has been an ardent promoter of traditional culture, customs and beliefs of the indigenous Altai people, at the same time being very committed to preservation of the local environment.

Uch Emmek – the Karakol National Park is spanned over a big area. Several yurts have been erected here for the tourists. We stayed in

the yurts for the night. However, new modern building of guest house with all facilities started operating soon after our arrival. Danil, the founder Director of the Karakol Park, explained the sanctity of this place and its surroundings. The aura of sacredness prevails here.<sup>14</sup> No trace of garbage is found inside the Park or its surroundings, everything being put in the designated bins. There is a separate kitchen in the park, where we and other guests had dinner. A fire place is marked by a tripod in the kitchen dining hall and is considered to be the sacred space. Hot bath and steam sauna in the *bania* provided in the Park, enable the guests to relax after tiresome journey and treks.

## **Pilgrimage to Mount Sumeru**

Mount Meru is a sacred mountain in Hindu, Jain as well as Buddhist cosmology and is considered to be the center of all the physical, metaphysical and spiritual universes. Meru is also called Sumeru in Sanskrit. Roerich believed “Belukha and Kailash to be earthly manifestations of Mount Meru (Sumeru), the sacred mountain, which through a process of syncretism, can be found in a number of Siberian and Central Asian shamanic traditions. Roerich saw Belukha-Kailas-Meru as a reflection of what he felt was a universal tendency of all faiths to create central cosmological structures that were vertical in nature – be they mountains, trees or built structures. Whatever its physical form, any such *axis mundi* around which the universe revolved, linked the earthly world with heaven above, and also with whatever underground realm existed below.”<sup>15</sup>

According to Puranas, Meru is the home or seat of the gods. A 4<sup>th</sup> century Sanskrit dictionary *Amarkosha* (1.49) describes Meru/Sumeru as ‘Golden Mountains’, the mountain of jewels and the

abode of gods (*Meru: Sumeru hemadri-Ratansanuh Suralayah*).<sup>16</sup> According to *Itihasik Sthanwali* (a historical dictionary of place names) north Meru is situated near Siberia.<sup>17</sup> In his book *The Arctic Home in the Vedas*, Bal Gangadhar Tilak concludes that “the ancestors of the Vedic Rishis lived in an Arctic home in inter-Glacial times.”<sup>18</sup> According to Tilak, “Mount Meru is the terrestrial North Pole of our astronomers”.<sup>19</sup> The *Surya-Siddhanta* states that Mount Meru lies in ‘the middle of the Earth’. *Narpatijayacharya*, a 9<sup>th</sup> century text, mentions Sumeru to be in the middle of the Earth. Varahmihira in his *Panch-siddhantika* states Mount Meru to be at the North Pole. This description in the ancient Indian text tallies with the belief firmly held by the indigenous Altaians even today. The Puranas and Hindu epics, often state that Surya, i.e. the sun-god, alongwith its planets and stars together as one unit, circumambulate Mount Meru every day. According to Tilak, Mount Meru is described in the Vedic literature, as the seat of seven *Adityas* in the *Taittiriya Aranyaka*, while the eighth *Aditya* namely Kashyapa is said never to leave the great Meru or Mahameru.<sup>20</sup> Kashyapa is further described as communicating light to the seven *Adityas*, and himself perpetually illuminating the great mountain.<sup>21</sup>

Bal Gangadhar Tilak , popularly known as Lok Manya Tilak, published his book *The Arctic Home in the Vedas* from Pune in 1903. It was a sequel to his *Orion or Researches into the Antiquity of the Vedas*, which was published earlier in 1894. Tilak was a mathematician turned astronomer, historian, journalist, philosopher and an enlightened leader and fighter for India’s independence from the British colonial rule. In this book Tilak propounded the idea that the North Pole was the original home of the Aryans during the pre-glacial period, which they had to leave due to the ice deluge and had to migrate to the northern parts of Europe and Asia in search

of lands for new settlements. Tilak who studied and interpreted certain Vedic hymns, Vedic chronology and Vedic calendars, discusses the antiquity of the Vedas, of the Aryans and their possible original home as being somewhere near the Arctic (North Pole). My personal experiences at Sumeru Parvat testify to the veracity of the few statements made by Bal Bangadhar Tilak about Sumeru in his book *The Arctic Home of the Vedas*. Having never travelled as far as Sumeru, Tailak's imagination, vision and knowledge was extraordinary. His works and contribution need to be studied by the professional historians, astronomers and philosophers in depth and disseminated widely.

Prof. K.S. Valdiya, former Professor of Geodynamics at Jawaharlal Nehru Centre for Advanced Scientific Research, Bangalore, has interpreted the historical data provided by ancient Indian *Puranas* and epics to identify and pinpoint the ancient geography of India. While pointing to the position of *Bharatvarsh* (India), Valdiya cites *Kurma Puran* (43) and *Vishnu Puran* (Part 2,2) as stating that "in the middle of *Jambudweep* is situated the many-splendoured Meru, the focal point of the world of the Puran people".<sup>22</sup> And "*Bharatvarsh* lay south of the Meru masiff, across the arch-shaped Himalaya mountain belt".<sup>23</sup> Valdiya also cites *Markandeya Puran*, *Varah Puran*, *Matsya Puran*, *Devi Puran*, *Kurma Puran* and *Mahabharat* to pinpoint the northern neighbours of *Bharatvarsh*. He writes, "Northwest of *Bharatvarsh*, across the Himalaya, was a country known as *Ilavritvarsha* following a bow-shaped terrain around the Meru massif of great height and tremendous splendor."<sup>24</sup> And the "countries neighbouring *Ilavritvarsh* are *Bhadrashwavarsh* in the east, *Hiranyavarsh* in the northeast, *Kimpurushvarsh* in the southeast, *Bharatvarsh* in the south, *Harivarsh* in the southwest, *Ketumalavarsh* in the west, *Ramyakvarsh* in the northwest and

*Kuruvarsh* in the north”.<sup>25</sup> According to Valdiya this configuration places “Meru at the centre of *Jambudweep* in the Pamir massif in Central Asia”.<sup>26</sup> He identifies the countries described as *Ilavritvarsh*, *Ketumalavarsh*, *Harivarsh*, *Bhadrashwavarsh*, *Hiranyavarsh*, *Ramyakvarsh* and *Kuruvarsh* as the Central Asian countries of Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Xinjiang, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan.<sup>27</sup>

On the basis of the Puranic description of the northern neighbouring territories of India, Professor Valdiya’s interpretation and my extensive field visits in Central Asia, Siberia and the Altai—the Sumeru Parvat can easily be identified to be in *Hiranyavarsh* of the Puranas and not near the Pamir massif (*Ilavritvarsh*). Quite interestingly a publication of Dandi Swami Shri Jaybodh Ashram titled *Avichal Prabhat Granth* (published in Delhi, India) describes the approximate geographical situation of Kalap Gram, which is stated to be bounded by mountains of which Sumeru is one gate. It further states that Kalap Gram is full of small and big trees, flowers, pure cold water and natural beauty.<sup>28</sup> This publication describes this place as a divine abode of gods, where great sages including Narayan Markanday, Ved Vyas, Diptiman, Galav, Ashwathama, Kripacharya, Parshuram etc. come from the sky to meet and meditate.<sup>29</sup> This only testifies to the general belief among the Hindus of India about the sacredness of Sumeru and it being the abode of gods. That this belief is also prevalent even today among the Altaians in Altai territory – the actual place of Sumeru, bears ample testimony to the existence of the sacred space of Sumeru in Altai and its spiritual importance for Hindus, Buddhists and the indigenous people of Altai.

We left the Karakol Park guest house for the Sumeru mountain in the morning of 29 June 2014. I found all the five of us (myself, Dr. Irina,

Danil, Alfred and Vitaly) having similar thoughts and actions on spirituality, sanctity of Sumeru Parvat, lakes and natural bounties, need to preserve the environment of these spaces, and to promote indigenous cultural heritage. On the way we saw the remains of Scythian Kurgan burial complexes, which were earlier excavated by the Soviet archaeologists. Their finds are preserved in the Hermitage Museum at St. Petersburg. On reaching the base camp, we parked the jeep here and packed our food stuff , accessories and load on six horses. The horseman Churla and Danil led our way on horses towards Sumeru Parvat. On reaching the forest, we dismounted and performed a ritual by tying white bands to the pine trees seeking nature's blessings for our onward strenuous trek to Sumeru Parvat (Photos 10 & 11). After about three hours ride, we stopped due to sudden and heavy rains. We pitched the tents in the forest, lit fire, cooked our night meals and went to sleep. A small stream flows aside at the hill, top of which is laden with snow. Strong winds and heavy rains accompanied by lightning continued through the night, reminding of the difficulty of reaching the destination.

Next day (30 June 2014) too was cloudy. Yet we packed up and moved towards the mountains in a zigzag fashion, as several mounts had to be covered one after another. The horse was very intelligent choosing the right path amidst the sharp edged stones and wet lands. Wearing our raincoats, we moved on inspite of heavy rains. After a ride of five hours, we camped at the point, from where Sumeru Parvat is visible. We pitched our tents and lit fire. After having tea and simple dinner (*grechka*, *kasha* etc), we retired for the night sleep, which was disturbed by strong winds almost sweeping our tents. Sunny weather greeted us on the Tuesday morning of 1<sup>st</sup> July 2014, which allowed a clear view of Sumeru. We did not pack our tents and left our stuff at the camp. We did not ride the horses, as it is the tradition

to go to Sumeru from this point on foot as a mark of reverence to the holy place. The path was laden with sharp edged stones and difficult mountain terrain, too difficult for the horses.

We stopped at the Altar place before moving towards Sumeru. Danil (the leader and master of ritual ceremonies) performed the traditional rituals, tying white bands to the Altar, made a fire to which *sampa* (barley flour), ghee, herbs etc. were offered. Milk was also fed to the fire, by each one of us. The flame of the fire was good, indicating the approval of the spirits for our pilgrimage to Sumeru. We also did *parikrama* making rounds of the Altar and fire. This tradition closely resembles to that of a *yagna* by Hindus in India. Danil offered milk to sky, earth and around to the spirits. He stated that good wind blew after his ritual, which was a positive signal of the acceptance of our offerings by the spirits.

Sumeru and its surrounding territory have been considered sacred by the Altaian people since ancient times. Altai people have powerful emotional connection with this sacred territory and have kept this place secluded from public exposure. Even the photograph of Sumeru has not been popularized, which is not the case with Belukha. When Nicholas Roerich climbed Balukha mountains, he mistook it as Sumeru. Later on he wished to get to Sumeru, but he did not receive the Soviet visa in time. And when his visa reportedly arrived, Roerich had passed away in Kulu (India) two weeks earlier. Altai people believe that Sumeru, locally called Uch Enmek, is the abode of holy *chakras*, which regulate this earth. And my experience at Sumeru testifies to this belief.

We reached Sumeru (about 2,600 metres high) in the afternoon of 1<sup>st</sup> July 2014. It is barren devoid of any trees etc. On the top, there are

three peaks connected with each other. Altaians call these peaks as the three antennae connecting the earth with the cosmos, and imparting energy to this world. There are several lakes around Sumeru and several fresh water streams originating from the mountains. At the foothill of Sumeru, there is a beautiful lake covered with ice and clean water. The Altai people do not have any tradition of written scriptures. Their rituals and traditions are in the oral form, having passed on from generation to generation by word of mouth only. According to Danil, knowledge of these rites and traditions comes to the chosen few from the spirits of the land, from earth and sky. Fire and wind are considered to be sacred. Danil is the only chosen Altaian master who can make or lead pilgrims to Sumeru. Churla, the horseman, is his junior follower and is still learning the Altaian rituals. After spending few hours at the foot of Sumeru and on the banks of the lake, we moved back to our camp and retired in our tents after having tea and dinner. And next morning we started our return journey to our base camp at Karakol park. The horses being keen to reach home early, were a bit faster in our descent.

On Thursday, 3<sup>rd</sup> July 2014, we visited various places in the Karakol Valley to see ancient objects. Danil has developed the Park in a manner that the main Altaian symbols and objects like the traditional Altai home *Ail*, fire place, wooden poles having several knots denoting the three words – sky, earth and below the earth, are preserved and showcased here. We tie white bands to the tree. Different ethnic groups. Mongols, Tuvans, Altaians etc. have their separate fire places, to make their fire rituals. Later on, the ashes are brought and put together at a central fire place. A triangle made of three poles standing in a corner of the Park, denotes smaller Mongolian mountain. Later we moved on the road, and saw ancient petroglyphs having marks of deer and some runic script on the rocks



believed to be about 4,000 years old, lying in the open alongside the roads. Altai people believe in spirits, fire, wind and sky. They attach great value to horse and as a mark of respect they do not throw the bones of a dead horse on the ground, but keep them on the trees.

Moving further on, we reached a hill with dense forest, where a *Chortan* in chiseled stone has been erected over the ashes of a Buddhist lama who had come back to Altai preaching Buddhism and died at the age of 108 years (Photo 12). However, the Altai people believe more in Burkhanism – a mix of Shamanism and Buddhism. On the way, we could see Sumeru at various points, which according to Dr. Irina is a good sign as Sumeru remains generally shrouded under the clouds.

We then went to Verkhniy Uymon, which is an old Altai settlement of Old Believers. During his Central Asian Expedition (1925-28), Nicholas Roerich had stayed at an Old Believer Vakhramey Atemanov's house in Verkhniy Oymon. On the completion of the Central Asian Expedition, Roerich planned to come back to Altai and settle in Verkhniy Uymon. Nicholas Roerich had told to Uymon dwellers, "Golden is this locality, in five years I'll be here". Roerich believed Altai to be the centre of Eurasia, stating it to be at "an equal distance from the four oceans". The northernmost point of the Central Asian mountain range – the highest peak of Siberia-Belukha is here in the centre of Altai. The old traditional Siberian house where Roerich stayed has been restored by the Siberian Roerich Society and turned into a memorial house museum of Nicholas Roerich (Photos 13 & 14). Now it is a cultural and historical sight not only of the village Oymon but of the whole Altai region, drawing crowds of visitors here. This Museum is included in the list of the monuments of the Altai culture and an important destination point

of domestic and foreign tourists. After entering the museum, there is a separate shop selling Roerich's books, video films, reproductions of his paintings, souvenirs etc. The museum has rare collections of Roerich's photographs, works, books, paintings, Roerich Pact etc. We took a collective photograph holding aloft the Banner of Peace, in front of the main building of the Roerich Memorial House and Museum.

Quite nearby there is a small old house, which has been turned into a museum about Old Believers, who migrated to Siberia in the 18<sup>th</sup> century to escape persecution during the reforms in Russia carried out by Orthodox Church. This house is about 150 years old, belonging to an old lady. Various artefacts, spun cloth items, bands etc. traditionally used by the Old Believers, are preserved here. The lady incharge explained extempore and passionately for over an hour the life style, culture and beliefs of Old Believers, in a poetic fashion. It was interesting to note Swastika symbols spun in the clothing and embroidered items of the Old Believers, which leads one to believe the prevalence of ancient Vedic customs and traditions in this part of Russia.

On our way back to Onguday we saw few caves in the hills, where in old times some people are believed to have meditated. It may be relevant to point out here that a popular myth associated with Kalaroos caves located in Kupwara district, some 90 kms. from summer capital Srinagar, Kashmir, is that these caves are secret tunnels to Russia. There is a mammoth stone called Satbaran, meaning seven doors. Local belief is that it was the temple built by Pandavas. Though few persons have ventured to go for some distance inside the cave, nobody has dared to go till the end. Any possible connection between the caves in Altai and the Kalaroos cave is a

subject of further investigation by the scientists and archaeologists.

Vegetarianism and yoga are becoming popular in Russia. There are three Indian restaurants including one vegetarian one in Novosibirsk. There is a natural affection among the Russians, particularly the older generation, for India, Indian culture and philosophy. I met several old Russians at Verkhiny Oymon, who hugged me warmly on hearing that I am from India. One such family had spent few years in Aerovile, Pondicherry and they even named their son, who was born in Pondicherry, after the great Indian sage Vashisht. <sup>30</sup>

Next day (6<sup>th</sup> July 2014) we left the guest house at the Park to visit Kol Baktash kurgan near Inya village, about 100 kms away from the Park. There are many petroglyphs of the deer, ancient big homed cows (stated to have existed about 30,000 years ago), shamans performing their rituals, sun etc. A group of visitors from Yakutia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkey were also there to see their ancient heritage. They spoke and understood each other's languages (in Turki dialect). On the way to Kol Baktash we stopped at several places and also saw a big rock along the bank of Katun river believed to be the abode of local spirits. Moving further, we stopped near the Yelman stream, and climbed a hill on foot to see the ruins of ancient sun temple, believed to have existed over 10,000 years ago. There are two layers of stone walls with an entrance marked by two vertical stones ((Photo 15). The Altai sacred bush *Archin* is sufficiently found here on the rocks. Local Altaian people first make their ritual prayers and then pluck *Archin* for use in their ceremonies including the fire rituals.

We moved on to stop at a place where Chui river coming from the direction of Mongolia joins Katun river (originating from Belukha).

This point being the meeting place of two rivers is held sacred by the Altaians. They tie white and blue ribbons to bushes nearby. A group of Kyrgyz tourists was also doing the same here. This tradition is quite similar to the Hindu tradition of holding the *Sangam* of rivers as holy, as we witness in Allahabad where the rivers Yamuna, Ganges and Saraswati meet or at Shadipur (also called Prayag) in Kashmir where rivers Jhelum and Indus meet.

Moving on, we reached a site where three big ancient stones are preserved. Two stones have distinct marks of two lines making three sub-divisions – sky, earth and below the earth (Photo 16). The Altaians believe in three-world cosmology (upper, middle and under world), pray to many spirits and hold mountains, lakes, trees, and fire as sacred. This is in many ways similar to Vedic and Hindu beliefs prevalent in India even today.

In the evening we returned to our guest house in the Karakol Park. A local Altai folk singer (*Kaichi*) treated us with his folk songs playing local instruments – flute, two stringed instrument etc. He recited *Om Mani Padme Hum* and also an ode to the holy Sumeru. Around 10 pm, after dinner, Danil performed the closing ceremony/ thanks giving fire ritual in an *Ail*, in the Park. He lit fire, performed traditional rituals, offered milk, vodka and ghee to the fire. Each one of us did the same. The fire was very good, smokeless with full flame rising to the top of the *Ail*, thereby signalling the auspicious culmination of our pilgrimage to Sumeru.

I got another opportunity to make another pilgrimage to Sumeru in June 2015. This time I was invited to perform few fire rituals which I did at the Karakol Park (the base camp) before commencing our journey, at Sumeru near the white lake and later again at Karakol

after the successful culmination of our pilgrimage for thanks giving. This time we took a different route to Sumeru from the previous journey in 2014, so that we could see the two lakes , one black water and the other with white water. In fact a well educated Pandit had informed me at Delhi about the existence of the two lakes, which he said that a dip in the black water lake would wash one's sins and the dip in white water lake would bless. Since both the lakes were too deep surrounded by the bushes and marshes, one could not reach there . This time again, we returned to our base camp at Karakol Park following a longish route so that we could do full circumambulation (*parikrama*) of Sumeru Parvat. This time my pilgrimage was spiritually fulfilling and one could visualise Tilak's description of Sumeru perfectly matching with the reality (though Tilak had not personally visited Sumeru).

## **KHAKASSIA**

Covering an area of 61,900 sq. kms. in eastern part of Siberia, the Republic of Khakassia of the Russian Federation is situated in the valleys of the Abakan and Yenisei rivers. Besides occupying the Minusinsk Basin, it also occupies part of the Chulym-Yenisei Valley. Khakassia has its borders touching Krasnoyarsk Territory in the north and east, Republics of Tuva and Altai in the south and southwest and Kemerovskaya Oblast in the west. Khakassia is known as the 'archaeological Mecca' due to it being a repository of archaeological sites and rich historical and cultural heritage. Huge steles are preserved and displayed at the national museum of Khakassia at Abakan, many of these long stele having engravings of sun, moon, three eyes etc (Photos 17 & 18). If there is any Indian connection of these runic inscriptions and petroglyphs so abundant in Khakassia, is a subject to be investigated by the Indian archaeologists. From

ancient times, Khakassia maintained trade and cultural relations with Russia, Mongolia, China, Tibet and Central Asia.

Khakass people revere mountains, lakes, *beruza* (birch) and pine trees. On the outskirts of Abakan, a small museum housed in a *yurt* has a big ancient stone locally known as Old Mother Stone, which has a mark of third eye and trident (Photo 19). This stone is venerated by Khakas people, particularly the women who come to seek its blessings for bearing children. Several dolls, milk etc offered to the stone. Believed to be over 2,000 years old, there are three segments visible on the stone denoting three worlds - sky, earth and below the earth. About 30 to 40 per cent of Khakas people still follow/practice shamanism. This author witnessed the performance of a Shamanist ritual in Abakan (in August 2009). Khakas shamans (both male and female) who were dressed for that occasion in flowing robes laced with threads and bird feathers, were dancing/going around a fire citing verses/rhymes and softly beating their drum. Some Khakas participants even put some flour in the fire. Small bands of cloth (red, blue and white) were tied to a big *beruza* tree (Photo 20). *Beruza* is held sacred in Siberia, in the same way as is done in India. Smoke of incense burnt in a bowl is waved/touched by the people, a practice common in India.

On the way to the Kazanovka village open air museum, one found so many rock carvings. Victorina, Director of this museum pointed to a hill top near the bank of Askis river, which about a century ago had a big stone. People used to visit this place in large numbers believing that this stone had healing powers. There was a cave under the stone having two small stones. This stone was stated to have been destroyed during Khrushchev's time as idol worship was anathema to the Soviet communist ideology. It is believed that Magnashev

family, whose family deity was this hill top stone, killed themselves after the destruction of this stone. In Khakassia, as in parts of Indian Himalayas, each clan has its own family/clan deity/stone, which is revered by them. Victorina also took us to one semi-white stone lying in a big steppe land which is believed to have healing powers. This author saw a number of men and women coming in their cars to seek blessings of the stone (Photo 21). They removed their shoes and went around three times and hugged this stone offering money at its feet. Victorina explained that the stone, believed to be over 2,000 years old, has three eyes which have become somewhat invisible due to vagaries of nature over this long period of time.

## **Nicholas Roerich: The Bridge between Eurasia and the Himalayas**

Nickolas Konstantinovich Roerich, who was born in St. Petersburg, Russia on 9 October 1874, became a world renowned painter, philosopher, historian, archeologist, writer, traveler and founder of an international movement for the preservation and promotion of cultural heritage. Even during his student years at the Petersburg Academy of Arts, Nicholas Roerich became involved in various archeological expeditions in various regions of Russia. He was a prolific artist having created thousands of paintings. His paintings are known for distinct Roerich style with deep historical and philosophical content, colour purity and simplicity of expression.

N. Roerich's quest for understanding of philosophy, universal values of humanism and ethics led him to also study philosophy of the East and the works of great Indian thinkers and writers – Ramakrishna, Vivekananda and Rabindra Nath Tagore. Roerich became interested

in the study of common roots and values of Russian and Indian cultures seeking to correlate their history, mythology, folklore and traditions.

In this pursuit, Roerich and his family travelled to India in 1923 taking his abode in Kullu Valley in the lap of the Himalaya mountains. From here Roerich began his famous expedition (1923-28) to Central Asia traversing high mountains and unexplored paths through Sikkim, Kashmir, Ladakh, Xinjiang (China), Russia, Siberia, Altai, Mongolia, Tibet etc. Roerich expedition is not only known as one of the major expeditions in Central Asia and trans-Himalayas, but it has also contributed immensely to the development of Russian Oriental studies, with particular focus on Central Asia. Roerich's books—*Heart of Asia* (Southbury, 1929), *Altai Himalayas* (Moscow, 1974) and *Himalayas: Abode of Light* (Bombay, 1947) are outstanding works in this field. Roerich also made a distinct contribution to the understanding of Himalayan culture and spiritualism through his paintings series *Himalayas*, *Maytreya*, *Sikkim's Path* etc.

Nicholas Roerich conducted another expedition in the years 1934-35, in Inner Mongolia, Manchuria and China with the objective of collecting seeds of plants which prevent the destruction of soil. This mission showed his great concern for the denuding of forests and vegetation.

Nicholas Roerich broadened the view of culture which includes the cosmic evolution of mankind, ethics and spiritual experiences of man, beauty, knowledge, science, art, education, history and traditions. He propagated peace through culture, which encompassed art, science and religion. The creative artist in him prepared the Banner of Peace which became the symbol of the unity of mankind and



its cultures. The Banner represented three spheres within a circle, in amaranth colour, on a white background; the spheres meaning the past, present and future achievements of humanity surrounded by the circle of Infinite. In the words of N. Roerich, “What the Red Cross flag is for the preservation of physical health, our Banner of Peace is the protector of spiritual health of humanity”.

Nicholas Roerich passed away in Kullu Valley in India on 13 December 1947, where he was cremated. The Institute of Himalayan Studies, *Urusvati* in Kullu valley of Western Himalayas, which was founded by N. Roerich, is a living monument bearing testimony to his multi-faceted contribution. Nicholas Roerich promoted international peace and understanding through culture, cross-country exchanges and knowledge

## TUVA

Covering an area of 170,500 sq. kms. and bordered by Mongolia in the south, Altai to the west, Khakassia, Krasnoyarsk, Irkutsk and Buryatia republics of Russian Federation in the north, Tuva is recognised as the geographical centre of Asia. Notwithstanding the domination of Mongolia over Tuva from 13<sup>th</sup> to early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries and subsequent Chinese sovereignty over Tuva till 1911, Tuva and its people retained their indigenous traditions, culture and religion. Over 80 per cent of the total population (300,000) are Buddhists. In spite of being adherents of Mahayana Buddhism, Tuvans continue to believe in native shamanism. Tuvans often go to shamans for healing their ailments and to seek remedies to their problems. And shamans do visit Buddhist monasteries to offer prayers. Both beliefs co-exist here following the basic principles of respect for and harmony with nature.<sup>31</sup>

I arrived at Kyzyl, the capital city of Tuva on the evening of 29 October 2016, travelling by taxi from Abakan, the capital city of Khakassia. Many taxis ply daily between Abakan and Kyzyl with passengers. The 450 kms long highway is well maintained and snow clearing machines clear the snow promptly. The highway is lined by pine and *beruza* trees and the snow on trees and around makes it a picturesque sight.

Tuva was incorporated in the former Soviet Union in 1944, after overcoming Chinese claims over it. As per official data, in 1929 there were 25 Buddhist monasteries (*khuree*), 4,813 lamas and 487 shamans in Tuva<sup>32</sup>. During the Soviet period, religion remained suppressed and Buddhist monasteries were closed and destroyed. In 1937, there were only 5 monasteries, 67 lamas and 30 shamans in Tuva, the practice of religion and beliefs having been confined to individual homes. The lamas and shamans suffered due to the Soviet anti-religious policy. However, both managed to continue their religious activities underground.

After the disintegration of former USSR, there has been unprecedented resurgence of indigenous language, culture, beliefs and Buddhism in Tuva. About 20 Buddhist prayer houses (*dugan*) and 15 Buddhist monasteries (*khuree*) have been built in Tuva. The visit of Dalai Lama to Tuva in 1992 gave big impetus to the revival of Buddhist practices, publication of Buddhist texts, construction of monasteries and so on. The people of Tuva came in huge numbers to have a glimpse of Dalai Lama. During this visit Dalai Lama offered prayers at Hayirakan mountain about 105 kms. from Kyzyl and suggested a spot for building a replica of the ancient Buddhist shrine alongwith the carving of ancient Buddha rock engraving, so that the ancient shrine is recreated (Photo 22). Work has already begun on

this site and is expected to be completed soon. This site is located up in the mountains where water cannot reach and flood the new rock-cut Buddhist shrine. Tuvans hold this mountain as sacred and there are many mystic legends associated with Hayirakan. Tuvans come to this place offering prayers to Buddha and take back with them fistful of the sacred land's earth.<sup>33</sup>

Overlooking the capital Kyzyl and located on the right bank of the Yenisei river, stands 1,002 meters high mountain Dogee. Tuvans consider this mountain sacred and offer prayers. There are numerous pyramids built of stone with a pole in the center, hung *chalama* (band of cloth) , *kadako* (silk scarves) as well as the remains of fire on this mountain. In the year 2006, the Buddhist mantra *Om Mani Padme Hum* was built of stones on the hill Dogee. The 120 metres long sacred mantra was painted with 500 kgs. of white colour and sanctified <sup>34</sup>(Photo 23).

Construction of a new central Buddhist monastery in Kyzyl began in 2014 at a spot identified by Dalai Lama. Dr. Kaadyrool Bichildey, former Minister of Education and Science of Tuva and a Buddhist himself, has been leading the movement for restoring the historical, cultural , linguistic and Buddhist heritage of Tuva. Many Tuvan Buddhists make their donations to raise funds for these projects, which also get support from the government of Tuva. The federal government of Russia is tolerant of this process and many Tuvans feel free today as they can practice their religion and culture. A festival of music and culture *Ustuu Hurae* began to be held in 1999, when reconstruction of the ruins of an ancient Buddhist temple in Chadan was started. The festival , usually held in August, showcases the simplicity of life in tents, natural atmosphere, music, tolerance and kindness in Tuva. <sup>35</sup>

Tuvan shamans have also become popular now, with many tourists visiting them from abroad. Shamans' hymns and *algyshe*s (wishful songs) have been translated into German and English languages. Shamans also perform their ritual ceremonies. The cult of *ovaa* (spirit guardians of a place) and *eeren* (protectors of the family) , both being shamanist traditions, have been adopted by Tuvan Buddhists. Shamanism is flourishing alongside Buddhism. There is a central shamanist organisation in Kyzyl , with local branches in different parts of Tuva. In 1993 first Tuvan-American conference of Shamanism was held in Tuva with participants from USA, Canada, Finland besides Tuvan academics and members of shaman society *Dungur* (drum) .The Tuvan government has also set up a research centre for the study of shamanism, providing land and buildings for the shamanist organisation.<sup>36</sup>

In the Chaa-Hol district , about 100 kms. from Kyzyl, there is an ancient image of Buddha (13<sup>th</sup> century AD) in a carved rock niche (Photo 24). After the Sayano-Shushensk hydel power station became operational, the rock niche submerged in the dam water. However, the niche with a bas-relief image of Buddha and his two pupils , has been recreated on the hill, 99 metres above the sea to protect it from any flood waters.<sup>37</sup> This has been possible due to Bicheledey's efforts. He has also spearheaded the campaign for the preservation and promotion of Tuvan language, history and culture.

First November is now celebrated as the Day of Tuvan language. As per language law adopted in 1990s, both Russian and Tuvan languages enjoy equal status. Tuvan Academy of Culture has been established. Tuvan language belongs to Altai family of the Turkic language group. It is also good neighbour of Mongolian language. Earlier Tuvan language had old Mongolian script. Later it adopted

Latin script. After joining the former Soviet Union, it adopted Cyrillic script. Local experts believe that Cyrillic script does not fit Tuvan language, as it does not reflect all sounds. Tuvans believe that moves for the preservation and promotion of Tuvan language and heritage should not be viewed as any separatist tendency.<sup>38</sup> A symbol of Tuvan letter has been erected at Beldir Keji, near Shaganar. A Buddhist monastery, a symbol of Tengrism and an image of Buddha have been built here. A huge cultural complex has come up at this place. In short, Tuva is experiencing an organised revival of its indigenous language, culture, traditions and beliefs of Buddhism and shamanism.

## Conclusion

In view of the above statements, there is need for collaborative research to study in depth various aspects of ancient history, culture, race movements and archaeological remains in India and Eurasia, common sources and roots of Indic and Siberian cultures and civilisations. That the concept of three worlds, third eye and trident were embodied in ancient stones of over 2,000 years old and which were and continue to be revered both in Khakassia and Altai, has direct resemblance to the tradition and cosmic philosophy prevalent in India even today. Similarly the practice of treating lakes, springs, mountains and *beruza* trees sacred in Eurasia is quite similar to the Indian tradition and practice. The Altaian, Tuvian and other indigenous peoples perform fire ceremonies and also haircuts of young children (*mundan*) in the same manner as Hindus do in India. The Altaian people also believe in Seven Stars (*Sapt Rishi* in India) and Seven *Kans* in Altai. There is also a tradition of placing amulets at the time of laying a foundation stone of a house in Buryatia, Tuva and Altai. This practice is quite similar to that prevailing in India. It,

therefore, becomes necessary to identify common traditions, beliefs and practices among the peoples of Siberia and India.

Resurgence of Buddhism in Buryatia, Tuva (in Siberia) and Kalmykia Republics of Russian Federation accompanied with the urge of Buddhist devotees in Russia to visit the Buddhist centres of pilgrimage in India, is bringing this otherwise peripheral region closer to India in civilisational and ideological terms. On an average about 1,000 Buddhist devotees, mainly youth, from Russia (Kalmykia, Buryatia, Tuva, Moscow, St. Petersburg etc.) visit India each year to make their pilgrimage to Bodh Gaya, Sarnath, Varanasi etc. or to attend the sermons by Dalai Lama at Dharamshala. The Kalachakra ceremony by Dalai Lama attracts even more devotees. Many young students from Tuva and Kalmykia visit India to study Buddhism and Tibetan language. Many people particularly in Tuva and Buryatia have Indian names like Rita, Sanjay, Sanjeev, Ramesh, Padma, Indira, Vashishta etc. Indian classics *Panchtantra* and famous stories of Birbal, the wise minister of Mughal emperor Akbar, have left their imprint on the folklore of Tuva and adjoining regions, mainly due to the penetration of Buddhism and Buddhist lamas from India. Currently, over fifty Buddhist lamas from India, mainly Tibetans trained in Karnataka, Dharmshala etc. are staying and offering their services in various monasteries in Tuva and Buryatia. Revival of Buddhism in Siberia has direct relevance for India for restoring its lost linkages. India on its part needs to restore and turn its vast fund of ancient historical Buddhist sites into centres of international cultural tourism. This will attract tourists as well as pilgrims from our neighbours in Eurasia. Siberia is a corridor through which cultural and civilisational interaction can be reinforced.



**(Photo 1)** The author standing in front of Swayambo placed above two dragons (symbol of Ulan Ude city) at Arbat Street, Ulan Ude, Buryatia



**(Photo 2)** A Ladakhi Lama at Rimpoche Baksha Temple in Ulan Ude, Buryatia



**(Photo 3)** Offerings made at birch trees (Buryatia)



**(Photo 4)** Coloured cloth tied to birch trees (Buryatia)





(Photo 5) Notice Board describing Usan Lopson near the Baikal Lake



(Photo 6) The author (third from the left) standing in front of Usan Lopson (the God of Baikal Lake), Buryatia



(Photo 7) Author standing third from left making offerings at Baikal Lake



(Photo 8) Statue of Geser seated on horse, Ulan Ude, Buryatia



(Photo 9) A View of the Gala concert, Ulan Ude, Buryatia (29-9-2007)



(Photo 10) View of Sumeru Parvat, Gorno Altai (29 June 2014)



**(Photo 11)** On the way to Sumeru (in the circle) (30 June 2014)



**(Photo 12)** Chortan at Karakul Valley, Gorno Altai (3 July 2014)



(Photo 13) N. Roerich Memorial House, Verkhniy Uymon,  
Gorno Altai (4 July 2014)



(Photo 14) Holding Banner of Peace at Roerich House,  
Verkhniy Uymon (4 July 2014)



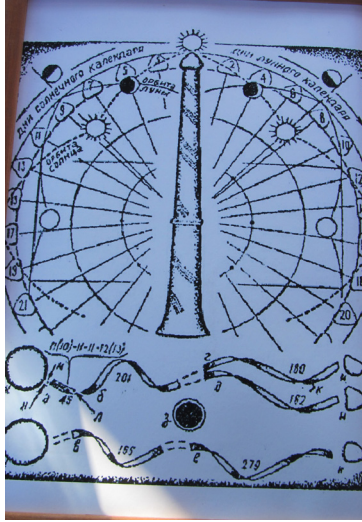
**(Photo 15)** Stone gate at the ruins of ancient temple near Yelman Stream, Gorno Altai (6 July 2014)



**(Photo 16)** Ancient stones, Gorno Altai (6 July 2014)



**(Photo 17)** Stele at National Museum, Abakan, Khakassia



(Photo 18) Drawing of Ancient Pillar with symbols of Sun etc. found in Khakassia



(Photo 19) Mother Stone near Abakan, Khakassia



**(Photo 20)** Khakass people tying ribbons to Beruza tree in Abakan



**(Photo 21)** People pay reverence at ancient stone near Abakan,  
Khakassia, Russia





**(Photo 22)** Dalai Lama identified this spot for Buddhist shrine at foothills of Hayirkan mountain, Tuva



**(Photo 23)** Buddhist mantra Om Mani Pdme Hum built of stones on Dogee hill, Kyzyl (Tuva)



(Photo 24) Burgaan Daa Buddhist Shrine, Chaa-Hol, Tuva

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### **VIVEKANANDA INTERNATIONAL FOUNDATION**

3, San Martin Marg, Chanakyapuri, New Delhi – 110021

Phone: +91-11-24121764, 24106698

Email: [info@vifindia.org](mailto:info@vifindia.org),

Website: <https://www.vifindia.org>

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