

Prospects for Indian foreign policy initiatives in the Caucasus

Written by Dr.M.N. Rajesh - Arnav K Anjaria
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Abstract: The demise of the USSR has seen a new phase in Indo-Russian foreign relations mainly characterized by de-ideologization and an acknowledgement of the multi-character of the two societies. In this context, there are new possibilities for India to reach out to the Caucasus. This paper argues that there is a great reservoir of goodwill towards India via the Tibetan Government in Exile which is based in India from the people of Kalmykia.

The tiny region of Kalmykia in the Caucasus is relatively under researched and has good ties with India not at the governmental level but at the popular level on account of Tibetan Buddhism which is the dominant religion here this paper suggests that these contacts can be properly utilized and transformed as part of foreign policy initiative to chart out a new agenda in the Caucasus for India to get a foothold among a population where there is a great deal of goodwill for India. This paper argues that such a step can be feasible only when we acknowledge the nature of transnational contacts between people in certain Culture areas and in this case the Tibetan Culture Area.

Keywords: Kalmykia, India, Tibetan Culture Area, Tibetan Government in Exile, De-ideologization.

Prospects for Indian foreign policy initiatives in the Caucasus: Opportunities to promote engagement with the Tibetan Buddhist Network in the Autonomous Republic of Kalmykia

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China's engagement with central Asia is a new phenomenon and also a very aggressive one [\[1\]](#), but we do not find any such initiatives by India to engage with both Central Asia and the Caucasus on such a large-scale both in terms of foreign policy initiatives or people to people cooperation.

A simple search on the Internet regarding China in Central Asia would lead us to a large number of scholarly articles on this topic, focusing primarily on China's energy needs and the security question in Central Asia. Topping the agenda on the security question primarily, is the concern expressed over Islamic terrorism which has become a much discussed topic not just after September 11 but a decade before with China

keeping in mind the problem of the Uighurs in China's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous region [\[2\]](#)

At the same level a search on India and Central Asia on the internet would reveal only a few pages and a handful of scholarly articles concerning international relations while the vast majority of the articles and books tend to focus on the ancient links between India and central Asia that took place many centuries ago and are part of history.

Only recently there have been certain initiatives in India to engage with central Asia but most of these initiatives focus only on the major states like Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan. The establishment of the India Central Asia Foundation in New Delhi in 2005 is a clear move in this direction

[\[3\]](#)

This paper argues that there had been significant contacts between people and Institutions that constituted networks in the Caucasus that have a great potential to be revitalized like the Buddhist monastic networks of Kalmykia and the Foreign policy of India needs to take a proactive tilt in this direction. While the above mentioned aspect is generalized for Russia and is also an accepted fact represented in many studies which have shown that there is a great deal of genuine warmth and friendship between the people of India and Russia and this has therefore set the model for India's engagement with Russia and the CIS states [\[4\]](#). This is true of not only the Russian people but also the other nationalities and it is here that the Autonomous Republic of Kalmykia, part of which is situated in the north Caucasus comes into the picture.

Proceeding from this reservoir of goodwill, India can exploit this opportunity to forge new links and relations with the Caucasus region.

In this paper a particular case is made for engaging with the Kalmyk Autonomous Republic keeping in mind the constant moment of Kalmyks to India and their keen interest in Buddhism and India

[\[5\]](#)

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A new situation arose in the aftermath of the demise of the Soviet Union and the consequent emergence of the new republics of Central Asia. It would be too lengthy to recount the events leading to the emergence of the new states which have been the subject of many scholarly articles and books for over a decade.

At the macro level there are two noticeable changes in the contours of Indo-Russian relations, the first is the de-ideologization of the relations after the collapse of the USSR and secondly, this de-ideologization was accompanied by the recognition of the diverse nature of the social fabric in India, Russia and other parts of the world and the need to balance different linguistic, ethnic and religious groups

[6]

.The point of emphasis here is that while the focus has been on the emergence of new identities, ethnicities and religions, in the Caucasus the interest was mainly on Islam due to the rise of the Chechen separatists who practiced new forms of terrorism and were catapulted into the headlines and their acts also centered on grabbing maximum media attention

[7]

. After Chechnya, the neighboring republics of Dagestan, Ingushetia and Kabardino-Balkaria

[8]

were also familiar places in the newscasts and the newspapers the world over on account of the disturbed conditions there

[9]

. Even in the age of information we see that there are certain information black holes and in Russia they are the three autonomous republics- which are also the Buddhist enclaves in Russia, the Autonomous Republic of Kalmykia, the Autonomous Republic of Buryatiya and the autonomous republic of Tuva of which not much is known.

While the latter two republics are situated in Asia, it is Kalmykia that is located in Europe, bordering Georgia and is of strategic importance and also the subject of study of this paper. Part of Kalmykia lies in the Caucasus and therefore the choice of this theme.

The Caucasian region has always been represented as a tinderbox of ethnic identities always engaged in conflict with one another. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, demands for smaller, ethnically based nations in the Caucasus, both in Russian North Caucasus and in the newly independent nations of Transcaucasia, have given rise to a number of disturbances and armed rebellions [10]. This is the standard image of the Caucasus as a conflict prone area run by warlords and shadowy economies and always unstable [11].

In the case of Kalmykia we get an altogether different picture which makes this region unique and at the same time remote from the media and the standard image of conflicts that are prevalent in Caucasus. Firstly the dominant religion here is Buddhism There have been no instances of any large-scale clashes or conflicts in this part of north Caucasus which makes it in peaceful region.

Furthermore the uniqueness of Kalmykia is that it is the only Buddhist political entity in Europe [12]. Tibetan Buddhism is practiced here and after the demise of the Lamaist state in Tibet in 1959 on

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account of the Chinese invasion, Tibet was no longer one of the major sources for the cultural identity of the Kalmykia.

Till 1959 Lhasa was a reference point for all the Tibetan Buddhists in the vast Tibetan culture area that spanned from Kalmykia in the West to Arunachal Pradesh in India in the southeast. This vast culture area with a multitude of dialects language and ethnic groups was related by two factors, Tibetan Buddhism and the classical Tibetan language

[\[13\]](#)

The Tibetan culture area included present-day Tibet which is the core, Ladakh, Lahaul, Spiti and Kinnaur in the Western Himalayas of India, Sikkim and Tawang in Arunachal Pradesh in the eastern Himalayas of India.

In addition the adjoining regions of Bhutan and the northern regions of Nepal like Lo, Mustang, Manang and Dolpo constituted the Tibetan culture area

[\[14\]](#)

The bordering regions of Tibet Autonomous region in China like Gansu and Sichuan also have Tibetan minorities and Tibetanized people and this was part of Tibet prior to 1959

[\[15\]](#)

In Russia the three regions of Tuva, Buryatiya and Kalmykia are the traditional Tibetan culture regions of Russia.

The commonality in all these regions is the Tibetan Buddhism is the dominant religion and they were part of a wider world whose leader the Dalai Lama is venerated throughout the Tibetan Culture Area as the supreme symbol of Tibetan Buddhists.

The literary elite in all these regions are the lama's who are well versed in classical Tibetan which is the language of instruction in the monasteries and also the language in which the Scriptures of Tibetan Buddhism are written.

In addition to religious texts there were many other subjects like medicine that were of great interest to the lama's and continue to this day.

For higher studies most lamas used to go to the great monasteries situated in Tibet and after graduating from their local monasteries and returned to their native regions after studying there.

Thus we had separate hostels called

Khamtsens

for monks from different regions in the great monasteries of Lhasa prior to 1959

[\[16\]](#)

The decline of Lhasa and the demise of the Lamaist State shifted the focus of Tibetan Buddhism from Tibet

[\[17\]](#)

India is as a sovereign secular Socialist Republic with no support to any religion and therefore Tibetan Buddhists could not find a great hold here or a state as a patron. The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics was an atheist state and therefore could not patronize the lama's.

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Moreover, the Buddhists had suffered enormously under the rule of Joseph Stalin which even led to the deportation of the entire population of Kalmykia to Siberia

[\[18\]](#)

Nepal was a Hindu country and therefore did not show much interest in patronizing Buddhism. In these circumstances it was only the King of Bhutan who supported Tibetan Buddhism. Thus there developed great relations between the Tibetan Government in Exile and the kingdom of Bhutan

[\[19\]](#)

Tibetan Buddhists all over the world now looked towards the Dalai Lama and the Government In Exile as sources of cultural inspiration.

Since 1959 there have been a steady influx of Tibetan refugees to India and many of the great monasteries that were thriving before 1959 have been rebuilt in India reviving the traditions. Tibetan Buddhism also has become famous in the west as many of the monks have built networks all over the west

[\[20\]](#)

The demise of the Soviet Union in 1990 and the consequent revival of religion lead to the keen interest in the past. In such a situation in the three Buddhist republics of the erstwhile Soviet Union we see the significant rise of new monasteries and revival of interest in Tibetan language

[\[21\]](#)

The Tibetan language constituted the great tradition of the Tibetan culture area and was aptly remarked by a commentator in the 20th century as the Latin of Central Asia

[\[22\]](#)

Consequently small numbers of lamas from Kalmykia started trickling to Dharamsala, the seat of The Tibetan Government in Exile in India.

In the early part of the 20th century during the rule of HH The XIIIth Dalai Lama, his Holiness, Thubten Gyatso, there was a grand collaboration between Tibet and the Buddhist regions of Russia due to two factors. One of the most important personalities during this period Agvan Dorjiev, a Buryat Mongol lama was also the personal tutor of the 13th Dalai lama and was instrumental in signing the friendship treaty between Tibet and Mongolia. Dorjiev had also visited the Czar of Russia twice and because of his influence with the Czar, Buddhist temples were built in Russia and there was a keen interest in Tibetan Buddhism in Russia

[\[23\]](#)

Another factor was the flight of the XIIth Dalai Lama to Mongolia in 1904 on account of the British invasion which led to the growth of Buddhist consciousness in these regions

[\[24\]](#)

. Many new monasteries were founded and many Buddhist printing presses operated here

[\[25\]](#)

. All this was before 1917 and after the Russian Revolution and more specifically after World War II when Stalin deported the Kalmyks en masse to Siberia Buddhism received a great setback

[\[26\]](#)

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After the demise of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics the cultural hunger in Kalmykia is now articulated in the lavish support to the Buddhist monasteries. The birthday of the XIV Dalai Lama is one of the great events in Kalmykia that also led to the inauguration of new monasteries. The crux of this essay is concerned with how India can revitalize these existing links to have a foothold in the northern Caucasus region and successfully engage them.

Today we see the presence of Kalmyk students in India in Dharamsala motivated by interest in Tibet and Tibetan medicine and Buddhism [\[27\]](#) . Keeping this background in mind, the existence of a Buddhist network extending from India and spanning all over the Tibetan culture area as far as northern Caucasus there can be new vistas in Indian foreign policy particularly towards the Kalmyk region for fostering brotherhood between both these regions capitalizing on the fact that India is the birthplace of Buddhism and secondly the home of the Tibetan Government In Exile which is one of the cultural sources for the Kalmyk identity.

These can include one, cultural exchanges, two, visit of trade delegations, exchange of students and providing them with scholarships at the Central Institute of higher Tibetan Studies in India. Thirdly, easy passport access and arrangements for stay like the facilities provided for Sri Lankan Buddhists in the Buddhist circuit would go a long way in promoting cordiality.

Since India has a legacy of friendly relations with Russia that dates back to the days of the USSR and which is also permeated to the popular level where there is a great movement of people from Russia to India and vice versa even to this day particularly evident in the exchange of students and businessmen. This is made possible by the provision of many facilities that were set up as promotional efforts for joint cooperation between the two countries.

Such a situation can be replicated in the case of the Kalmyk Autonomous Republic whereby India can start an embassy or consulate at Elitsa, the capital of Kalmykia.

Such a rationale for having a different consular function exists in many countries that are vast, for example the Islamic Republic of Iran has an embassy at New Delhi and two consulates at

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Lucknow and Hyderabad, the choice of which is deliberate because of the presence of Shia population in both these towns.

Similarly since Tibetan Buddhism is the dominant religion in terms of numbers and following the establishment of a consulate would be a first step to spread Indian influence and a positive step in terms of foreign policy engagement in the northern Caucasus region.

This would also be helpful to engage in neighbouring regions like the Caspian Sea which is a very strategic region and also a region where China is trying to engage with.

The consular facility can also serve as a nodal point for other activities like the field of education which is seen large-scale exchanges between India and many other countries particularly the Central Asian republics and Russia in addition to Africa and the Arabian regions from where a large number of students come to India for higher education particularly technical education and the liberal arts. There is also a quota of seats for foreign students in some Indian universities. In addition to the above mentioned fields there are also some students who come for theological education particularly at Christian and Islamic theological centers.

Some of the great Islamic seminaries of India like the Deoband have been sources of the Islamic movements and thought in the wider Islamic world.

Recently, the idea of countering terrorism has led to a new phase of engagement with the seminaries like the introduction of computers and other modern methods of education and a similar effort is being promoted to deal with the interface between Islam and modernity

[\[28\]](#)

This is seen as a step that would engage with the students in the seminaries and prepare them for the modern world since there are large number of students from Afghanistan and other neighbouring regions.

Similar such moves towards modernization like the introduction of computers, digitization of texts and other associated developments are taking place in the Tibetan Buddhist monasteries under the aegis of the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives in Dharamsala. These monastic networks are reaping the benefit and only within India since other Tibetan culture areas are largely cut off as Tibet is under the control of China which has a strict visa system that does not allow for the easy movement of Tibetans to and from Chinese occupied Tibet.

Such a tie up with the monastic universities of India and the monastic system in Kalmykia you would lead to a greater interaction between the two regions. Further the interface between the new sciences and the knowledge economy is leading to fundamental research in many areas like the study of language, cognition and emotions where many Buddhist monasteries are the places for field work. The recent series of books by the Dalai Lama and a group of scientists and psychologists titled "Destructive Emotions" and another titled "Healing Emotions" is a good example and such an example can be replicated by involving the expertise of the Kalmyk monks.

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Similarly, many of the lama's in Kalmykia have forgotten the monastic practices and therefore they come for short term stay in India, which is made tough as they have to travel all the way to Moscow or St Petersburg to obtain a visa for travel to India. Visa on arrival in India or the opening of a consulate in the capital city Elitsa would make things much easier. The opening of new universities like the Nalanda Buddhist University which is a multi-million dollar Japanese funded initiative and the Gautam Buddha University near New Delhi have ample scope for interaction by resident scholars and students from Kalmykia.

In terms of tourism is a great interest among the Kalmyks to perform the Buddha Dhamma Yatra or pilgrimage to the eight sacred places associated with the life and the events of Buddha in India and Nepal [29]. This package includes seven places in India and one in Nepal and is of great significance to the Buddhists like Mecca is to the Muslims. The opening of a cultural centre in Elitsa would naturally lead to the increased delivery of cultural resources from India to Kalmykia and enhance diplomacy. If the government of India recognizes the potential of these regions in the multi-ethnic and multi cultural society of Russia then a policy targeted towards some of the ethnic minorities in Russia like the Kalmyks would give the Indian government a very strong foothold in the Caucasus and make it a major player the cultural scene of this autonomous republic.

Since this strategic region is bordering Georgia are and also lying on the Caspian Sea, it is a major threshold region where India's interests lie.

Other areas of cooperation would include tourism, trade and measures to counter terrorism in the region as part of global cooperation.

The countries near India like Turkmenistan and Tajikistan also have stakes in the Caspian region and depend a lot on India and the period of USSR saw the relations between these regions and India articulated more in terms of ideology in the background of the cold war and this period of de-ideologization presents a new phase and also an opportunity for India to engage with Kalmykia, Russia and by extension the Caucasus and Central Asia. The recognition of networks and cultural regions would give India's foreign policy a new twist.

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