

The Fading Lustre Of Buryat's Cultural Legacy

Amit Kumar

Ph.D. Candidate

Centre for Russian and Central Asian Studies

School of International Studies

Jawaharlal Nehru University,

New Delhi

India

Abstract: The present paper attempts to study the loss of rich cultural heritage by ethnic Buryats'—inherited from ancient Mongols. Religious and cultural practices of Buryat's have undergone tremendous transformation since they came in contact with Russians. On the one hand Buddhism made rapid expansion while Buryat's traditional religion 'Shamanism' is struggling for survival. Buryats' are also struggling to protect their linguistic identity which is facing threat being assimilated into the predominant Russian language. Apart from this, contemporary developments in Russia had invited global economic giants like China to expand their business in Buryatia that has caused resentment among the native Buryat population. Chinese business exploration in the Lake Baikal region has damaged the sanctity of the Lake Baikal and as a result has invited resentment from the native Buryats. Also, politics along pan-mongolism had led to formulation of more centralised policies from the Russian authority. In light of these political developments, the rich cultural legacy of Buryat is somewhere struggling for its survival. Therefore, the present research paper shall study all aspects associated with Buryats cultural legacy.

Key Words: Buryats, Shamanism, Buddhism, Culture, Ethnicity

INTRODUCTION

The dissolution of Soviet Union transformed the ethnic composition of the post Soviet Russia. The half of the Soviet population was ethnic Russians while remaining half was from other nationalities. In post Soviet Russia, nearly eighty percent population is of ethnic Russians and only ten percent population belongs to other cultural groups (The 2010 Census of Russia).

. The Republic of Buryatia and its titular nationality 'Buryat' shares ancestral lineage with ancient Mongols. This in some way opens scope for deep insight into rich and unique cultural heritage of Buryats'. They have unique cultural tradition inherited from the Mongols. However

in present time, native Buryat culture is facing the threat of getting assimilated into larger Slavic population. Also, the centralisation measure of post Soviet period has also reduced the multicultural space for ethnic groups (Krader 1954).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Buryat inherited cultural legacy from the Mongols. Their forefather settled across the Lake Baikal region and were practicing pastoral nomadism and hunting for sustenance (Krader 1954: 322). Forced settlement of the Tsarist era isolated Buryats' from their traditional occupation and forced them in agriculture. In Soviet period—Buryats were forcibly pushed from the mainland Russia to peripheries. The great purge and the collectivisation campaign at the end of 1920s, lead to large scale killing and migration of Buryats to other countries. Most of them also fled to isolated hideouts (Forsyth 1992).

Though, ethnic Russians outnumber Buryats in the Republic of Buryatia, however due to historical context, vividness of Buryat culture is more strong than Russian or any other culture. Academics, arts cultural fields are dominated by Buryats while industrial sector is predominantly occupied by Russians. Therefore, the concept of 'multiculturalism' is relevant in context of the Republic of Buryatia in particular and the Russian Federation in general. Though, the cultural composition of post Soviet Russia had changed considerably, however, it had not deterred the vividness of culture in the Russian society. Therefore, understanding Russian society in multicultural framework would be more suitable for arriving at valid generalisation (Remington 2012: 77).

The theoretical explanation of the concept 'multiculturalism' has been interpreted differently. In this context, Parekh (2000) bring out the normative explanation of 'multiculturalism' and bring out the gap between the normative explanation and the actual application of the concept. Society can be multicultural in theoretical sense; however it might fail to fulfill the criteria on normative terms. Society can be termed multicultural provided that two or more ethnic communities live in it. But, this is not the complete criteria for acquiring multicultural status. It is essential to ascertain the nature of normative social response of the larger community towards the minority groups. Here, the society can respond by either welcoming or cherishing the minority group or by assimilating them within the larger group (Parekh 2000: 1-11).

Another perspective has been developed by the Canadian Scholar Charles Taylor (1994) who warns that, "there is always an inherent danger of imposition of hegemonic culture on the minority community. The only option left with the minority group is to strongly oppose the imposition of dominant identity on them, failure to do so can result in continued exploitation of the small cultural groups by the majoritarian population" (Taylor 1994: 25-26).

Kymlica (2007) criticises the Western model of multiculturalism as in his view the minority culture has been hegemonised by the dominant groups. He suggests—“state should adopt group specific rights apart from upholding civil, political and social rights to its citizens. Group specific rights must be intended to recognise distinctive identities and aspirations of the ethnocultural groups. Similar policies have been adopted in most post-communist countries” (Kymlicka 2007: 61-76). As a result, various sub-state groups have contested this attempt to construct homogenous nation-building states, and have advocated instead a more multicultural model of the state (Ibid.).

The application of the concept multiculturalism in context of Buryatia provides essential base for ascertaining the normative social response of the larger group. The study of the multiculturalism in post Soviet Russian society has become more relevant due to transformed social composition (Remington 2012: 77).

Beside, the post Soviet Russia involved different strategies to govern the multicultural challenges. According to Smith (1999) in post Soviet Russia, “policies have been designed to eliminate multicultural challenges by creating a more homogenous national political space and other strategies aimed at managing the phenomena”. In reference to this he also indicates that, “eliminating multiculturalism is in one way or another associated with attempts to make national and political space geographically congruent” (Smith 1999: 130).

So, it would be essential to study the kind of approach adopted by the Russian government towards Buryats’. As mentioned before, Buryats share ancestral lineage with the ancient Mongols and they have inherited rich cultural tradition from them (Krader 1954: 330).

HISTORICAL LEGACY

According to Holland (2014) Buryats’ share ethnographical linkages to both Tibet and Mongolia. Over period of time Buryats’ migrated and settled in Buryatia and Empress Elizabeth gave official recognition to them in 1741. Till the beginning of the Bolshevik Revolution the Buryat culture grew rapidly (Holland 2014: 166).

The forefather of Buryat and Yakuts—*Kurykan* were the early tribe to inhabit the Lake Baikal region. Lake Baikal—located in Southern Siberia has sentimental value among Buryats. They share ancestral lineage with the ancient Mongol civilization. Buryats have been the early tribes to settle along the riverside to the east, south and west of Lake Baikal (Krader 1954: 322).

Traditionally Buryats have been pastoral nomads having mastery over hunting, which they were doing for sustenance. Their herds included; Cattle, Sheep, Goats, Camels and were travelling long distances in search for pastures. The traditional occupation of Buryat began to disappear during

the course of nineteenth century, when they came in contact with Russians. Gradually, they were forced into sedentary occupation (Ibid.).

SOCIAL AND CULTURAL DIMENSIONS

In terms of culture, the singularity of Buryatia's culture is the blending of Asian and European peoples. Values, ideals, tradition and standards of nomadic civilisation, northern wood hunters and European people, which are manifested in this culture, are closely connected with the Buryats' culture. All this has resulted in religious and cultural fusion. At the same time, the basic features of ethnic cultures have protected their distinctiveness and originality till today (Prokopyev 2007: 5).

The Russian culture in Buryatia has retained its traditional features due to the efforts of the representative of the Russian population—*Semeyskie* (old believers). The group of old believers have done a lot for generating mutual understanding between Buryat and Russians. Also, the cultural heritage of Buryatia has unique significance not only for Russia, but also for the world due to its being fundamental part of the global cultural heritage (Ibid.).

Buryats are spread in the Russian Federation, Mongolia, and China. Highest number of Buryats lives in Russia, as per 1989 Census, 421000 Buryats lived in Russia. Out of these, 249500 lived in the Republic of Buryatia, 77300 in Irkutsk Oblast, 66100 in Chita Oblast, and 2000 in Moscow. It is estimated that, 35444 Buryats lived in Mongolia. There is absence of exact number of Buryats in China because officially they are counted under the wider heading of Mongol in ethnic identity categories. According to Chogtu-yin Zhamsu's study in 1999, "there are more than 6000 Buryats in China, and majority of them lives in Shinehen District of the Hulun Buir League of Inner Mongolia" (Hurelbaatar 2000: 73).

Buryat's religious and cultural practices are absolutely different from others and the practice of Shamanism absolutely makes them separate from others cultures. Their belief in extra-mundane affairs and practice of ancestor worship keep them apart from predominant Russian culture. Buryats trace descent from single common ancestor. Theoretically, they are related by ties of 'agnatic consanguinity and there is close relationship between kinship and neighbourhood (Krader 1954: 322-323).

According to Krader (1954) "Closer the kinship relation between two Buryats, greater is their proximity to each other in residence". Buryat's clan, lineage and kin-village and other formation could be termed as diachronic or the vertical organisation of society. It could also be classified as ascending or descending in time because it depends up on a given paternal ancestor for definition. Relationship by agnation and the group membership depends up on tracing the ancestor in genealogical line. As per horizontal classification— the Buryat's society is divided in

to three categories; the aristocrat, the commoners, and the slaves. According to Krader (1954) “aristocrat and the commoner form the interrelating synchronic members of this formation. Slaves are not part of this formation rather they are included by capture” (Ibid.).

In Buryat tradition there is a threefold classification of spirit; the higher spirit which is known as *tengeri*, the middle spirit known as *boxoldoy* and the lower spirit which is referred as spirit for slaves. The human entity as a man has been classified into three categories; body, life and soul—body includes the physical part; life resides in the body and the soul which is invisible part of human life (Ibid: 326-330).

Shamanism has been their traditional religion and it is core to the Buryat’s identity. Every aspect of Buryat’s life is associated with their dead ancestors. Even disease in Buryat’s tradition has been associated with spirit world. Only Shaman possesses the power to cure any disease, and they also have the power to extend life by few years. For better health and for good fortune, Buryats usually go to the Shaman. They have deep faith in the power of Shaman (Krader 1975: 105-144).

The Buryat tradition can be identified through three key values; Shamanism, Lamaist Buddhism, and Epic- heroism. These were abandoned in past or were alive in clandestine way however, in present day Buryatia, there have been efforts to revitalise these traditional values (Hamayon 1998: 51-52). The old people are trying to bring back their old abandoned tradition by practicing Shamanism and for restoring their old tradition new monasteries are being reopened. Buryats’ national identity is being reorganised around the figure of Geser. The significant aspect of current revitalisation process is that despite having roots with Mongol world, no reference is made by Buryat to the Mongol Empire, or its founder Genghis Khan. It reflect that, Buryats have been indifferent to their past, and they want to isolate themselves from Mongol roots (Ibid.).

Despite revitalisation Shamanism does not survive as a strong traditional value of Buryat. Only the private aspect of Shamanism has been revitalised—today it is prevalent in cities as well as in the countryside. The present form of Shamanism is divinatory as well as therapeutical. This mean on the one hand it is related to human health while on another hand it relates to luck, love, fertility, success and achievement in business. (Ibid: 52-57).

For promoting sedentary agriculture among Buryats, the Soviet authority launched ‘ploughing up the pasture campaign in 1950s and 1960s. This campaign deeply impacted Buryat’s traditional occupation of animal rearing and hunting. As a consequence, the number of unemployed sedentary nomads and cattle grew substantially during nineteenth century. In the early twentieth century, large number of sedentary nomads got employed in agriculture that resulted in the substantial increase in the production. They also began to sell animal meat in the market. With

the increased numbers of animals, Buryats were forced to migrate to long distances in search of pasture for their animals (Kradin 2004: 97).

Increased number of cattle created another trouble for Buryats. Forced sedentary agriculture compelled Buryats to slaughter large number of cattle. The food shortage during Second World War caused large scale slaughter of animals for food. This led to decline in the number of animals by almost two-thirds. The ratio between sheep, goat and cattle became changed—the number of sheep and goat grew sharply while the number of cattle declined rapidly. This totally altered the herd structure of rural Buryats (Kradin 2004: 98).

The process of mass sedentarisation became accelerated during the rule of Khrushchev and later Brezhnev rule. The pattern of Buryat's traditional occupation changed and they began to sell meat and wool into the market. With the innovation of modern electronic products, Buryats were able to preserve their meat for longer period of time which was not possible earlier (Ibid.). Though the new technological innovations supported Buryats' business objective however, after the liberalisation of 1991, the whole business of wool and Sheep breeding became unprofitable. They became unable to support their other requirements of day to day life from the earnings made from meat selling. Suddenly large number of people employed in wool and meat business became jobless. The changing economic system also altered the social relationship of the Buryat society. This social relation was termed as Patriarchal Feudal in that the rich herders employed the poor assistant and exploited their labour for animal rearing. Apart from this, the Soviet programmes of Kolkhoz and collectivisation almost destroyed the traditional business of Buryats (Ibid: 102-103).

With regard to Buryat's primitive culture, the practice of bride price prevalent in late nineteenth and early twentieth century had been one unique aspect. In Russian language text it is referred as *kalym*. It was based on both custom and customary law—a part of Buryat culture and its codification by an increasingly present imperial authority. According to this practice, the bride price fixed by family elder was paid to the bride's family in the form of livestock. The poor Buryat who was unable to pay the bride price usually could bond themselves for six to eight years to wealthy herd owners, with the conviction that after that time the employer would help them marry (Newyear 2009: 5-10).

CONCLUSION

In Soviet as well as in the post Soviet period, the Russian state have been using 'nationalising state practices' as tool to counter the multicultural challenges. This means any multicultural challenge emanating from specific ethnic group was diluted by offering their leaders, high position in state power apparatus. Therefore, for the time being the challenges were circumvented. The Republic of Buryatia in 1992 attempted secession under the influence of Pan-

Mongolian identity which accelerated the crisis of stability in Russian society. Consequently, the 1993 Constitution created enough space for accommodating the regional diversities.

However, the post Soviet leadership foremost objective has been to create powerful and stable Russian state that in itself leaves less space for harbouring cultural diversities. Any attempted separatism can irked the Federal Government that can use it as legitimacy for using repressive measures against Buryats. So, the Republican head is under constitutional obligation to protect the sovereignty and integrity of the Russian Federation. Any outside influence should not be allowed to erode the social and cultural harmony of the Buryatia Republic. The Buryatia's ruling elite should refrain from any such activity that fosters separatist tendencies among the common Buryats.

REFERENCES[*indicates primary sources]

Forsyth, James (1992), *A History of the Peoples of Siberia: Russia's North Asian Colony, 1518-1990*, New York: Cambridge University Press

Hamayon, Robert N. (1998), "Shamanism, Buddhism and Epic Heroism: Which Supports the Identity of the post-Soviet Buryats?", *Central Asian Survey*, 17(1): 51-67.

Holland, Edward C. (2014), "Buddhism in Russia: Challenges and Choices in the post-Soviet period", *Religion, State and Society*, 42(2): 389-402.

Hurelbaatar, A. (2000), "An Introduction to the History and Religion of the Buryat Mongols of Shinehen in China", *Inner Asia*, 2(1): 73-116.

Krader, Lawrence (1954), "Buryat Religion and Society", *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*, 10(3): 322-351.

Krader, Lawrence (1975), "The Shamanist Tradition of the Buryats (Siberia)", *Anthropos*, 70(1/2): 105-144.

Kradin, Nikolay N. (2004), "The Transformation of Pastoralism in Buryatia: The Aginsky Steppe Example", *Inner Asia*, 6(1): 95-109.

Kymlicka, Will (2007), *Multicultural Odysseys*, United States: Oxford University Press.

Newyear, Tristra (2009), "Our Primitive Customs and Lord Kalyam: The Evolving Buryat Discourse on Bride Price", *Inner Asia*, 11(1): 5-22.

*Official Census of Russia (2017), "Official 2010 Census of the Russian Federation" 21(9), September, Russian Federation [Online: web] Accessed 21 September 2017, URL: http://www.gks.ru/free_doc/new_site/perepis2010/croc/perepis_itogi1612.htm.

Parekh, Bhikhu (2000), *Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural Diversity and Political Theory*, London: Macmillan.

Prokopyev (2007), “Culture of Buryatia: An Introduction”, *Himalayan and Central Asian Studies*, 11(3-4): 5-8.

Remington, Thomas F. (2012), *Politics in Russia*, United States: Pearson Education.

Smith, Graham (1999), *The Post Soviet States: Mapping the Politics of Transition*, New York: Oxford University Press.

Taylor, Charles (1994), *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.