

# Multiculturalism and Socio-Cultural Practices of Buryats in the Post Soviet Period

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## **Abstract:**

*The post Soviet social composition of Russian society is quite different from the Soviet period. During Soviet period, nearly half of the population was ethnic Russians while remaining half was formed of various other cultural groups. Nevertheless, the social complexities of post Soviet Russia had changed considerably. Nearly eighty percent population is ethnic Russians and only a small segment of twenty percent population comprises other nationalities. The Republic of Buryatia and its most significant nationality 'Buryats' share ancestral lineage with ancient Mongol Empire, that in some way gives opportunity for deep insights into rich and unique cultural heritage of Buryats. Consequently, the present research study looks into the distinctive cultural tradition and social practices of Buryat and attempts to draw their ancestral lineage since Mongols to their post Soviet settlements in Buryatia Republic. It also examines the nature of impact on Buryats' cultural practices due to shrinking multicultural space in post Soviet Russia. Finally, the present paper also looks into the degree of multicultural space provided by the Russia's mainstream society towards preserving and sustaining Buryat ancient cultural practices.*

## **Keywords:**

*Post Soviet; Multiculturalism; Socio-Cultural Practices; Practices of Buryats*

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Multiculturalism as a concept appeals when it is limited to academic debates and discourse and generally its academic glittering gradually fades away when the concept undergoes empirical test. The sense of this argument is that, usability or the practical application of the concept ‘multiculturalism’ is not as even as academic discourses. There are numerous examples through which it can be validated that, to theories multiculturalism is one thing and to practice it is quite another. However, multiculturalism cannot be limited on mere presence of two or more ethnic communities; it is much broader than that. Multiculturalism concerns with normative social response towards other cultural groups. It is about the kind of response or acceptability offered to other cultural groups. Put it simply, whether particular society welcomes and cherishes the presence of other groups or it assimilates them into the mainstream culture (Parekh 2000: 1-11). Therefore, theoretical consideration is not sufficient enough to explain the concept of multiculturalism, its empirical study and usability needs to be studied prior to generating any valid argument of the concept ‘multiculturalism’ (Ibid.).

Going by the definition of Bikhu Parekh (2000) who perceives multiculturalism in terms of “normative social response”, invalidates the multicultural claim of the British society. Any privileged or predominant position to Britain’s traditional culture based on Conservatives choices only refutes the ethos of multiculturalism. Therefore, study and evaluation of dominant group’s response towards different minority communities is crucial for theorising the concept of multiculturalism (Ibid.).

Charles Taylor (1994) emphasises 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). It has also been suggested by some scholars that, “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.).

Apart from general description of the concept ‘multiculturalism’, the contextualisation of the idea becomes essential for verifying the genuineness of a particular society. Viewed in this light, the Russian Federation in general and Buryatia Republic in particular advances favourable base for studying the normative social response of the majority ethnic group. The social complexities of post Soviet Russia has also become an important tool of analysis for studying multiculturalism. Social composition of Soviet Russia was more diverse in comparison to post Soviet Russia. Nearly fifty percent population of Soviet Russia was ethnic Russians and the remaining half comprised of different cultural groups (Remington 2012: 77). It has been observed that, approximately eighty percent population of Russia is ethnic Russians while remaining small segment belongs to other ethnic communities. So in terms of demography, the post Soviet Russia presents a gloomy example of shrinking multicultural space. Despite this the majority ethnic Russian still possess the choice to cherish and welcome the presence of other cultural groups. However, extension of kindness is subjected to empirical verification (Remington 2012: 77).

Additionally, the post Soviet Russia has applied various strategies to govern the multicultural challenges. Primarily, 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 Smith (1999) indicates that, “eliminating multiculturalism is in one way or another associated with attempts to make national and political space geographically congruent” (Smith 1999: 130).

Seen in this light, it would be imperative to analyse the kind of approach adopted by the Russian Federation for managing multicultural threat coming from the various cultural communities and especially towards the Buryat people. The Republic of Buryatia and its key occupant i.e. the ‘Buryats’, share ancestral lineage with Mongols and inherit rich cultural tradition from them. Their culture is unique not only in terms of ethnic distinctiveness which separates them from

other cultural groups, rather also because they strongly believe in extramundane affairs and practice ‘Shamanism’ that are infrequent in other cultural groups (Krader 1954: 330). Equally these practices are totally antagonistic to modern way of living. Therefore, such unique ethnic community who are absolutely distinct from others can help in establishing the actual nature of Russia’s society, which means scientifically ascertaining the multicultural representation of Russia’s society especially in academic discourses (Ibid.).

### **CONSTITUTIONAL PROVISIONS**

Chapter three, from Article 65 to the Article 79, of the Russian Constitution assigns provisions with regard to federal power relations between the Russian federation and the subjects of the Russia. The chapter three mentions the name of all subjects of the Russian Federation, and this Chapter is entitled as “Russian Federation” in the Constitution. Apart from including the names of federal subjects, the Chapter three begins by defining the status of republic in the Constitution” (The Constitution of the Russian Federation December 25, 1993). Specifically Article 66 in first part states that, “the status of a Republic shall be determined by the Constitution of the Russian Federation and by the Constitution of the Republic” (Ibid.). Further in second part of the same article, the Constitution advances, “The status of a Territory, Region, City of federal importance, Autonomous region and Autonomous area shall be defined by the Constitution of the Russian Federation and by the Statute of the Territory, Region, City of federal importance, Autonomous regions and autonomous area adopted by the legislative (representative) body of the relevant Russian Federation” (Ibid.). With regards to territory of the Russian Federation, the first part of Article 67 states that “the territory of the Russian Federation shall include the territories of its subjects, internal and territorial sea waters and air space above them” (Ibid). With regard to use of Russian language and protection of native languages, the Constitution of Russia in Article 68 (part one) declares that “the state language of the Russian Federation throughout its territory shall be the Russian language” (Ibid). The second part of the Article 68 includes, “Republics shall have the right to introduce their own state languages in state bodies, bodies of self-government and institutions of Republics they shall be used equally with the state language of the Russian Federation” (Ibid). Finally, the last part of Article 68 states, “the Russian Federation shall guarantee to all its peoples the right to preserve a native language,

create conditions for its learning and development” (The Constitution of the Russian Federation, December 25, 1993).

The section two of the Constitution of Russia entitled as “treaty on the separation of the terms of reference and power between the federal bodies of state power of the Russian Federation and the bodies of power of the sovereign Republics within the Russian Federation”, (Ibid.) outlines the jurisdiction of the Republics. According to part one of the Article three of the Constitution “The Republics (States) within the Russian Federation shall have unlimited state (legislative, executive, judicial) power throughout the territory except the powers transferred (assigned) to the jurisdiction of the federal bodies of state power of the Russian Federation under this Treaty. The territory and status of a Republic within the Russian Federation may not be changed without its consent” (Ibid.).

Similarly, the part two of the same article states that, “the Republics within the Russian Federation may be independent parties to inter-national and foreign economic relations, agreements with other Republics, Territories, Regions, the Autonomous Regions, Autonomous Areas of the Russian Federation if it does not contradict the Constitution and laws of the Russian Federation and this Treaty (Ibid.). The coordination of international and foreign economic relations of the Republics within the Russian Federation shall be implemented by the federal bodies of state power of the Russian Federation together with the Republics within the Russian Federation” (Ibid.). The second section of the Russian Constitution precisely delimits the powers of the Russian republics in extensive manner (Ibid.).

## **HISTORY OF BURYATIA**

The Constitution makers of Russia were totally convinced about the diverse composition of its population, and therefore ethnonational basis was accepted for designing the federal structure. The Constitution of Russia recognised linguistic, cultural and religious multiplicity of its population and provided for full protection of these. The name of the ‘Buryatia Republic’ is entitled in Buryat’s community name despite the fact that ethnic Russians outnumber Buryats. This gesture itself is a testimony of Constitutional recognition of ethnic communities in general and Buryat community in particular. In terms of number, Buryat ethnic group forms thirty

percent of the total population while ethnic Russian constitutes sixty-six percent of total Buryatias population. Despite this, Buryats are strong political force of the republic and occupy key political portfolio in the republic (Krader 1954: 322).

The ethnographical linkages of Buryat can be traced back to both Tibet and Mongolia. Over a period of time these ethnic groups migrated and settled in Buryatia and in 1741, the Empress Elizabeth recognised the presence of Buryats. From 1741 to till the beginning of the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 the Buryat culture grew at faster place (Holland 2014:166). According to Krader, the historical origin of ethnic Buryats can be drawn from the ancient Mongol Empire, with whom they share ancestral lineage. Buryats are northern most Mongol speaking people, occupying the Steppe and riversides to the east, south and west of Lake Baikal. Notably, Lake Baikal located in southern Siberia has a long history of human habitation and shares prime association with Buryats origin. The forefathers of Buryats and Yakuts ethnic groups, known as *Kurykan* were the early tribe who inhabited the Lake Baikal region. As mentioned before, Buryats are descendent of Mongol and their origin can be traced from ancient Mongol Civilisation (Krader 1954: 322).

Buryats had traditionally been pastoral nomads without having any fixed settlement and were travelling to long distances in search of pasture for their animals. Their herds consist of Cattle, Sheep, Goats, Horses and Camels however; this traditional occupation began to disappear during the course of nineteenth century. At this point of time, Buryats came in contact with Russians, who gradually forced them to learn the techniques of agriculture so that their dependency on long distance pastures could be reduced. As a result, gradually they developed sedentary agricultural practices which forced them to settle at one place and earn their livelihood. Though, Buryats settled at one place but they completely lost their traditional occupation of mastery over hunting for livelihood and pastoralism (Ibid.).

In terms of demographic distribution of Buryats, they are not concentrated in Russian Federation only. Buryats can also be located in Mongolia (in the North of Khentei *aimag*) and in the Peoples Republic of China (Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region). In the Russian Federation Buryats are settled in the three compact groups; in the Republic of Buryatia, in Irkutsk Oblast (Ust-Ordinsk

Buryat Autonomous District) and in Chita Oblast (Aginsk Buryat Autonomous District) and they are also dispersed over several other regions of Russia. According to the 1989 Census, the total number of Buryats in the Soviet Union was 421,600, out of this 249,500 Buryats lived in Buryat Republic (24 percent of the entire population of the Republic), in Irkutsk Oblast there were 77,300, in Chita Oblast 66,100, and in Moscow Oblast and in the city of Moscow about 2000 Buryats lived (Zhukovskaya 1995: 25-42). According to the 1989 Census, the population of Buryatia numbered 1,038,000. Among them there were 726,200 Russians, 249,500 Buryats, 22,800 Ukrainians, 10,400 Tatars, 5,300 Bielorrussians, 2,200 Armenians, 2,100 Germans, and 1,689 Evenks. Altogether people of 112 nationalities are represented on the territory of Buryatia (Ibid.).

Besides, the official 2010 Census of Russia estimates the total population of Buryatia on January 1, 2013 was 971.8000, and the average population density was 3.0 per kilometer square. The national composition of Buryatia as per 2010 census includes: Russians 66.1 percent, Buryats 30 percent, Ukrainians 0.6 percent, and others 3.3 percent. The small minority groups of Evenks (0.3%) and Soyots (0.4%) also live in the republic (Republic of Buryatia: portal of the bodies of state power 2018)

## **SOCIAL ORGANISATION AND CULTURAL PRACTICES**

In terms of culture, the uniqueness of Buryatia's culture is the fusion of Asian and European peoples. Values, ideals, tradition and standards of nomadic civilisation, northern wood hunters and European people, which are reflected in this culture, are closely interwoven with the Buryats' culture. All this has resulted in religious and cultural syncretism. At the same time, the basic features of ethnic cultures have preserved their originality and primitiveness till today (Prokopyev 2007:5). The Russian culture in Buryatia has retained its traditional features due to the efforts of the representatives of the Russian population- *Semeyskie* (old believers). They have done a lot for generating mutual understanding between Buryat and Russians. Besides, the cultural heritage of Buryatia has unique importance not only for Russia, but also for the world due to its being an integral part of the global cultural heritage (Ibid.).

Present day Buryats are scattered into three countries namely, 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. Apart from this, as per 1989 Census 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 Zhamtsu'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).

Buryats' unique cultural practice is identical to Mongols but totally differ from Russian mainstream culture. In fact every culture is unique but with regard to Buryat, their belief in extra-mundane affairs and practice of Shamanism, separates them from any prevailing mainstream culture in the world. All Buryats trace descent from single common ancestors. Theoretically, all Buryats are related by ties of 'agnatic consanguinity'. There is close relationship between kinship and neighbourhood (Krader 1954: 322-323). Closer the kinship relation between two Buryats, greater is their proximity to each other in residence. Buryats' clan, lineage and kin-village and other formation can be termed as diachronic or the vertical organisation of society. It can also be described 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 ancestors in genealogical line. In terms of horizontal classification, the Buryat society is divided in to three categories, the aristocrat, the commoners, and the slaves. 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.).

Apart from the social classification, the next interesting aspect of Buryat society is their highly complex Religious formation. 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. Even the human entity as a man, has been classified into three categories. The threefold classification of man includes 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).

Buryat people practices extremely traditional method of religious practices. For example, disease in Buryats' tradition has been associated with spirit world and the Shaman possesses, not only the power to cure any disease, rather also have the power to extend life by few years. For better health or curing any disease and for good fortune, Buryats usually go to the Shaman. They carry a very deep faith in the power of Shaman (Krader 1975: 105-144). The three key values of identifying Buryat tradition has been, Shamanism, Lamaist Buddhism, and Epic- heroism. These three values has been abandoned in past or were alive in clandestine way. However, in contemporary Buryatia, there have been efforts to revitalise these traditional values (Hamayon 1998: 51-52). The old people are still practicing long abandoned practices of Shamanism and for restoring their old tradition new monasteries are being reopened. Buryats' national identity is being reorganised around the figure of Geser. One important aspects 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 Chinggis Khan. It appears that Buryats have been indifferent to their past, and they want to detach themselves from their Mongol roots (Ibid.).

The first value, i.e. Shamanism does not survive as a strong traditional value of Buryat, only the private aspect of Shamanism has been revitalised today. It is present in cities as well as in the countryside. The present form of Shamanism is divinatory as well as therapeutical, which means on the one hand it is related to human health while on the another hand it relates to luck, love, fertility, success and achievement in business. Shamanistic practices are not present in a fixed text form. It totally depends upon the competency and skill of the individual Shaman. Each Shaman has their own way of doing things and dealing with the individual cases. The efficacy of Shamanic practices depends upon the individual capacity of the Shaman (Ibid.1998: 52-57).

Additionally, to bring the Shamanic doctrine into written form shall only kill its true essence. Therefore, Shamanism has only marginal presence in Buryats' life. Another aspect to the second values of the Buryats, i.e. Buddhism, which faced enormous changes, however, transformations were not enough to separate it from traditional backwardness. Since the pre revolutionary time Buddhism in Buryatia has remained superficial. It mainly remained linked to social, political and economic motivations. Buddhism was not able to assure a true penetration of the doctrine into

popular thought. However, this revival was never been able to free the people from having recourse to Shamanic curses and divinations (Ibid.).

In the 1950s and the 1960s, the Soviet government launched a campaign regarding ploughing up of the pastures. The Soviet system also promoted sedentarisation during this period. Policies concerning sedenterisation and ploughing campaign deeply impacted their traditional occupation. During the nineteenth century, the number of humans as well as of the cattles grew substantially. In early twentieth century the influence of Russian economy on Buryat's economy became more powerful. The number of sedentary nomads increased, agriculture also arose and the Buryat people began to sell the meat in the market. Along with this the composition of the herd also changed and the number of cattle increased substantially. With the increased numbers of animals, Buryats were forced to migrate to long distances in search of pastures for their animals (Kradin 2004: 97).

Because of the slaughtering of large number of animals, especially of the sheep and cattle during the Second World War for food, the total number of animals decreased by almost two-thirds. As a result, the ratio between the sheep, goat and cattle changed, essentially the number of sheep and goats grew sharply while cattles' number decreased gradually. This new herd structure was retained over the second half of the twentieth century and afterward, priority was shifted in favour of the high yielding varieties of the animals (Kradin 2004: 98). During the rule of Khrushchev and later Brezhnev, the process of mass sedentaristion began. Now the pattern of Buryats traditional occupation changed and they began to sell meat and wool into the market. Also, with the advent of modern electronic goods, Buryats were able to preserve their extra meat for longer period of time that used to be not possible before (Ibid.).

The new technological innovations supported Buryats' business objective. However, after the liberalisation of 1991, the whole business of wool and Sheep breeding became unprofitable. Buryats were not able to support their other requirements of day to day life from the earnings made from meat selling. A large number of people employed in wool and meat business became unemployed. With the changing economic system a new pattern of social relationship developed in the Buryat society. This social relation was termed as Patriarchal Feudal, in which the rich

herders employed the poor assistant and exploited their labour for animal rearing. Additionally, the Soviet programmes of Kolkhoz and collectivisation deeply impacted the traditional business of Buryats (Ibid. 2004: 102-103).

In addition to this, one interesting aspect that needs to be added here in terms of Buryats primitive culture was the practice of bride price in late nineteenth and early twentieth century. In Russian language text it is referred as *kalym*, which was both custom and customary law, a part of Buryat culture and its codification by an increasingly present imperial authority. With increase in monetisation and economic integration, the proportion of livestock in bride price payment was replaced by cash especially among Buryats living within the close economic circle of trade centers. But less fortunate or the less well-off Buryats were forced to borrow money at high interest rates from local wealthy personality to find a bride for their son. Instead, young men 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). Though in subsequent period the practice of bride price faced strong denunciation through academic writings and major plays, yet it remained significant part of discourse and discussions during the soviet period as well (Ibid: 10-19).

### **BURYAT'S POST SOVIET IDENTITY**

The rise in ethno-nationalism and the concerning issues has been evident in post Soviet period. For example, increasing economic opportunity in Tatarstan Republic naturally attracts people from North Caucasus and Central Asian republics that share a porous border with Afghanistan. So the radicalisation of Tatarstan region is attributed to the rising outside influence (Graney 2016: 1-3).

Buryats post Soviet identity was inherited from Soviet period. Limitations on their cultural identity began to be imposed from pre-Soviet to Soviet and till date it has become ongoing process. For example, during Soviet period Buryat literature faced strict censorship from the Soviet authority. Buryat authors were not allowed to write freely, rather, their writing was stiffly monitored by the state. Literature was used to promote soviet modernising projects in republic of Buryatia in 1950s to 1970s. In schools, only that part of history was allowed that glorified the

Soviet rule and their contribution towards modernising Buryatia. So, Chakars mentions that “Buryat literature was not simply the creation of Buryat writers. Local party and government officials, censors, editors, publishers, and other made a substantial contribution to the direction, promotion, and content of Buryat literature” (Chakars 2009: 47). Commonly, Buryat literature was guided by censors and other authorities who wanted to show the progressive nature of Soviet Buryat life. So, in gradual period of time or in post Soviet period, a new generation of Buryats emerged who was well used to with the Russian language and culture than their own primitive traditions (Ibid.).

The formation of Buryat identity began with the origin of Buryat intelligentsia who themselves were the product of general-cultural historical processes and specific conditions in which the development of Buryat society took place. The two important factors i.e. influence of Central Asian Culture and Buddhism on the hand and the economic and socio-political structure of the Russian state, on the other hand played vital role in formation of Buryat identity. The integration of Buryat and Russian into a unified state system, which in historical conditions, led to inevitable Russification of the Buryats. The socio-economic development in the second-half of nineteenth century Russia destroyed the traditional way of living of Buryats’. Construction of Trans-Siberian railway and mild level of urbanisation gave powerful impetus to the colonisation movement. Russians began to settle in various regions of Russia, including Southern Siberia. Also, this was the period in which modern Russian nationalism began to emerge and the growth of conviction in Russian intelligentsia that ethnic heterogeneity would impede the formation of strong Russian state (Baldano 2011: 239-240).

Border settlement between Russia and China isolated Buryats from direct contacts with important religious authorities like Dalai Lama and Bogdo-Gegen. However, the eastern Buryats remained under the influence of Mongolian Buddhism and therefore, the influence of Buddhism is maximum in this part of Buryatia. There is nominal conversion to Christianity in Western Buryats and essentially they had remained under the influence of Shamanism (Ibid. 340-341).

Keeping these considerations in mind, the Constitution makers of the Russian Federation incorporated provisions that were meant to acknowledge differences of its population. The

Constitution of Russia in Chapter Three (The Federal Structure) and Article 68 provides that, first; “the Russian language shall be the state language on the entire territory of the Russian Federation”, however, after making Russian language as state language, the same article in second part states that, “the Republics shall have the right to establish their own languages. In state government bodies, local self government bodies and state institutions of republics they shall be used together with the state language of the Russian Federation” (The Official Constitution of the Russian Federation 2018).

The last part of Article 68 states that, “the Russian Federation shall guarantee all of its peoples the right to preserve their native language and to create conditions for its study and development”. Nevertheless, these were the developments of post soviet Russia when the country was faced with twin challenge of preserving its territorial integrity and sovereignty. It was clear in the minds of the framers of Constitution that differences of its population must be acknowledged in the Federal Constitution in order to avoid any further breakdown of the country (Ibid.).

Mainly, it was believed that the end of Cold War would result in bringing global peace and stability. But latest results shows that ethno- national conflict have never been as high as evident in contemporary times. Many of today’s ethnic-nationalist conflicts are strongly influenced by revitalised religious movements particularly of fundamentalist variety (Humphries et.al. 2005: 208-210). Whatever issues of ethnic conflict figures in Russia today is completely because of complex ethnic composition of Russian society. The rich diversity of Russian society means that much of the population has multiple identities with overlapping ethnicity, religion, culture and language. While there remains a devastating potential for Russia to split up, however, majority of Russia’s republics lack a clear demographic basis to aspirations for independence, and till date, a trigger mechanism for disintegration has been lacking. Territories where the titular nationalities are the strongest can be found mainly on the borders. In this regard Sakwa further adds that “the independence of some of the republics at the margins of the federation, like Chechnya or Tyva, might not destabilise the fragile unity of the country; whereas the secession of a republic in the heartlands, like Tatarstan, could stimulate a snowball effect tearing the unity of the federation apart” (Sakwa 2002: 212).

The second issue that figured in post Soviet period relates to the symmetry and asymmetry in federal power division. This aspect is important because, asymmetrical power division directly relates to the question of equality and differentiation and it directly impacted the position of Russia's federal subjects. However in Russia's case, the asymmetrical power division is embedded in its origin. Several efforts from the policy makers tried to remove the discrepancies in federal power division but all efforts failed to deliver any promising result. One among such efforts was the recommendation of November 1990 Parliamentary Commission, according to which Russia's constitutional units would be based on 50 or so non-ethnic based constituent units (Smith 1998: 1397). As per this scheme, the Russian Oblasti was to be transformed into republics, and citizens regardless of their place of residence would be entitled to equal rights. This treaty, initially was adopted as a stop gap measure and was intended to appease the regions, finally, it became the basis for both upcoming federal treaty and for new Constitution. The treaty attracted considerable opposition from the regions on several grounds. Asymmetrical power divisions have created lots of tension between the units and the federal government, especially the resource rich regions has used it as a tool to bargain with the centre (Ibid.).

The major challenge to ethnic nationalities in general and Buryats in particular emerged after the collapse of Soviet Union. Soon after the disintegration, policymakers were faced with the challenge of safeguarding Russia from further breakdown and for that even they went ahead with streamlining the population. Nevertheless, during the period of Yeltsin regions did not face trouble, because in order to gain support of the regions he gave full sovereignty to the regions. He at one point of time said "grab all the sovereignty you can swallow" (Kaloudis 2007: 140). Republics and regions now began to enjoy total control over natural resources present within their territory and local taxes came under their jurisdiction. Industrial and agricultural production, public order and so on belonged to the regions. Not even a small portion of local revenue was transferred to the Federal Government. This contributed in raising centrifugal tendencies among some regions and demands of total freedom from some republics became important challenge to the territorial integrity of the Russian Federation (Ibid.).

Yeltsin approach was to strike a balance between the privileges and the rights of the regions, and this was clearly reflected in the Federal Treaty of 31 March 1992. The treaty provided ample

privileges to the region and special rights to the republics. Republics were allowed have their own constitution and laws, elect their own Soviets (legislature), supreme court, and as per their choice they were permitted to choose their president as well. All these were the attributes of a full statehood and somewhere part of Yeltsin appeasement policy towards the units of federation (Sakwa2002: 219-220).

In a way Yeltsin's move became problematic for Russia as it fostered cultural revivalism in regions like Buryatia. By striking Buryats' 'Pan- Mongolian'<sup>1</sup> identity, the intellectuals of this school touched upon their Mongolian origin and gave them adequate reason to integrate. This Pan-Mongolism was also used for political benefit, as an outcome in 1992 a non-governmental political organisation "Negedel" was created that attempted to propagate secession of Buryatia from Russia. It tried to consolidate Mongolian peoples and create Central Asian confederation that would include Buryatia, Mongolia, Tyva, Kalmykia and two autonomous regions of China (Baldano 2011: 330-331).

## **RECENT TRENDS IN SOCIO-CULTURAL DEVELOPMENTS**

Situation changed with the arrival of Putin in Russia's coercive state apparatus. All the traditional privileges enjoyed by the federal units were taken away and he pursued to bring centralisation and discipline in Russia's political system. Putin's centralisation measures became major threat for regions and republics and for the ethnic communities who enjoyed special privileges during the Yeltsin period. Recentralisation was the top priority of Putin. He imposed greater unity in centre-state relations and ensured that regional government adhered to the federal laws. He began with the reform of Federation Council and there he stripped the regional governors and the parliamentary speakers of their seats. This was, in fact, first move towards bringing in centralisation in the Russian political system. Through another law, Putin empowered himself the power to remove a sitting governor if a court found that the governor had refused to bring his actions into line with the federal constitution (Remington 2008: 78-81).

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<sup>1</sup> Pan-Mongolian doctrine refers to the unification of Mongolia with Inner Mongolia, Buryatia, Kalmykia and Tyva Mongols which would led to the restoration of the historical region of Mongolian habitat and turn a new country into truly independent and sovereign state (Baldano 2011: 327-328).

Additionally, Buryats not only faced challenges from ethnonational conflict occurring in other parts of Russia, but gradually lost some of its traditional cultural practices with Russia's contact. The acculturative process of Buryats began since seventeenth century when for the first time Russian explorers and colonialist came in contact with Buryats and from then this has become ongoing process (Krader 1954: 322).

## **CONCLUSION**

In Soviet as well as the post Soviet period, the Russian state have been using 'nationalising state practices' as strategy to counter the multicultural challenges. In basic sense, this means any multicultural challenge emanating from specific ethnic group is stifled by offering their leader, high position in coercive state apparatus, and thus, for the time being the challenge is circumvented. This has been adequately true in the context of Buryatia, which in 1992 attempted secession under the influence of Pan-Mongolian identity. 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. Accordingly, the federal laws have been re-adjusted, powers of the regional heads have been curtailed and changes in the composition of the upper house of the Russian parliament have been made. Theoretically, the Constitution of Russia leaves adequate space for accommodating interest of the diverse ethnic nationalities, however, the actual realisation of constitutional guarantees relating to cultural groups rest with the President of Russia.

However, the point remains same that concerns the survival of Buryats despite facing various challenges during both the phases of Russia's history. One unique aspect regarding Buryat's religion is that, Buryat's Buddhism do not relates to the Buddhism followed and practiced elsewhere in the world. This in some way has limited the outside influence in the republic that might have fuelled separatist tendencies among its members. Any separatist tendencies might have irked the Federal Government that could have used force to curb such anti-State tendencies. So the Russian state is not facing any as such threats from the Buryats that can harm its national interest. Therefore, Republic of Buryatia enjoys all the constitutional privileges granted to

republics by the Russia's Constitution. Constitutionally, there is no imposition of Russian language that could have created discontent among the members of the Buryat's group. They can have their own language despite Russian being the state language. Also, the president of the republic remains in the office only till he enjoys the patronage of the President of the Russian Federation. So the president of the republic also works in conformity with the federal government and avoids any conflicting situation. Moreover, during the Soviet rule there were strict rules regarding the language policy, it was required that Russian language should be taught in schools on mandatory basis. Censorship was imposed on Buryat Writers who tried to write freely. So in subsequent period, especially the new generation of Buryatia became well versed in Russian language and they easily became assimilated within the Russia's mainstream culture. Probably this has been the reason for Russian state experiencing least resistance from the Buryats unlike other republics in which few of them declared outright independence from the Russian Federation after Soviet collapse.

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