

## Brushstrokes of Unity: Roerich's Canvas in Russia-India Relations

- *Amitabh Kant\**

In the tapestry of diplomatic relations between nations, few threads are as rich and enduring as the cultural connections that bind them. The story of Nicholas Roerich, the eminent Russian artist, philosopher, and explorer, weaves a captivating narrative of deep-rooted ties between Russia and India. Roerich's life and work transcend geographical boundaries, embodying a shared commitment to cultural preservation, unity, and peace. As we delve into the legacy of Nicholas Roerich, we unravel the intricate threads that have bound Russia and India together through art, philosophy, and diplomacy.

In fact, it is a particularly special moment in history to be able to share in the bonds of art and culture that connect our two great nations across time and space. Just two days ago, India's G20 Presidency was able to achieve unanimous consensus at the G20 India Leaders' Summit, leading to the adoption of an incredibly ambitious, inclusive, and action-oriented New Delhi Leaders' Declaration by all countries. This testament to global cooperation, at a markedly fraught time for geopolitical relations, tells us that differences can be overcome when we unite in our shared commitment to people, planet, peace, and prosperity.

Roerich's vision of unity and harmony through art resonates deeply with this achievement, underscoring the belief that art and culture can bridge divides and foster understanding among nations and their people.

Nicholas Roerich's profound connection with India spans over a century, tracing back to his early explorations into the spiritual and philosophical realms of eastern religions. Together with his wife, the philosopher Helena Roerich, he discovered a profound resonance with the Vedanta essays of luminaries such as Ramakrishna and Vivekananda, the poetic verses of Rabindranath Tagore, and the timeless wisdom encapsulated in the Bhagavad Gita. These deep influences can be readily seen in Roerich's body of work, especially in his masterpiece "Buddha the Winner," that beautifully captures the essence of Eastern spirituality and peace.



His artistic odyssey led him from the spiritual to the physical, when he landed in India in 1923, eventually settling in the mystical landscapes of Naggar in the Kullu Valley. It was here, in his early 50s, that Roerich found inspiration in the majestic Himalayas, making them his immediate muse. Over the course of more than two decades, he poured his creative genius

into capturing the Himalayan grandeur, and was eventually cremated in Kullu according to Hindu rites in 1947.

It was in this home, now the International Roerich Memorial Trust, which was visited by two future Prime Ministers of Independent India (Jawaharlal Nehru and his daughter Indira Gandhi in 1942), that the Roerich Pact for the protection of cultural properties was drafted. It was signed in 1935 at the Oval Office – the first international treaty to be signed there – and India became one of the first nations to support Roerich's appeal for the necessity of protection and preservation of culture.

And so, it was in Kullu, amidst the embrace of the majestic Himalayas, that the life and legacy of Nicholas Roerich came to symbolize the collective dedication of India and Russia to safeguarding the richness of our shared human heritage.

In the decades that have followed, the torch of cultural preservation has continued to burn in the hearts of both our nations. India and Russia have nurtured a time-tested friendship that has seen remarkable milestones – whether in the form of strategic alliances in the fields of defence and technology to collaborations in space exploration.

In the realm of cultural exchanges, our nations have seen the brilliance of Indian cinema light up the silver screens in Russia during the 5th Indian Film Festival last year, while Russian ballet troupes have graced our stages with their graceful performances. Renowned authors from both countries have shared literary insights, and the melodies of Indian classical music and dance have resonated in Russian cities. Further, our educational institutions have collaborated to nurture academic ties, and the ancient wisdom of yoga has been embraced by countless Russians. The International North-South Transport Corridor connects St. Petersburg with Mumbai in 25 days, bridging the distance between our lands.

In the face of complex geopolitical challenges and an ever-changing global landscape, our two great nations have grown from strength to strength. Our shared vision for the future includes not only the preservation of our cultural heritage but also a dedication to building a better world for all. As we gather here today, to celebrate the genius and wisdom of Nicholas Roerich, let us draw inspiration from his lifelong commitment to unity, harmony, and peace – values that have and will continue to guide India-Russia relations for generations to come.

Nicholas Roerich's legacy extends far beyond the canvas; it is a testament to the enduring cultural bridge that unites Russia and India. His life, marked by a profound spiritual journey and artistic exploration, exemplifies the shared commitment to preserving cultural heritage and building a better world. As we reflect on Roerich's contributions, let us celebrate the deep-rooted ties that continue to strengthen the bond between Russia and India in the realms of art, philosophy, and diplomacy.

*\* The author is India's G20 Sherpa and former CEO, NITI Aayog. Views expressed are personal.*