India's Cultural Connect with SCO

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India completed its chairmanship of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) for 2022–23 after hosting the meeting of the Council of Heads of State of the SCO in virtual format on July 4, 2023. Most of the analysis on India's chairmanship of the SCO Summit focused on geopolitical and economic issues, which include terrorism. However, the Indian chairmanship of the SCO had strong cultural themes and agendas. Many cultural events on the SCO platform were held in both physical and virtual formats.Cultural connections between India and SCO countries were mentioned in the speeches of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi during SCO Summits in 2018 in Qingdao (China), 2019 in Bishkek (Kyrgyz Republic), 2020 in Russia, 2021 in Tajikistan, and 2023 Virtual Summit in New Delhi (India). Overall, cultural ties between India and SCO countries were highlighted in PM Modi's speeches for five times during 2017–2023.In this backdrop, India's chairmanship of SCO held many cultural events on the SCO platform during 2022–23. The list of cultural events includes the Ramnagar Ramlila festival, which highlights Lord Rama's story through music and songs; the Dev Deepavali festival of lights, celebrated through lighting diyas in the River Ganges; the International Handicraft Conclave in Uttar Pradesh, All India Boat Race, Varanasi Hot Air Ballon Festival, SCO Film Festival—Cinescope; the SCO cultural showcase at Suraj Kund Mela, Travel Writer's conclave, SCO Tourism Mart, Kashi Photography and Painting festival, Mahashivratri, International festivals for Fusion Music and Literature.Most of these cultural events were held were in the city of Kashi/ Varanasi, which was declared as the first Tourist and Cultural Capital of SCO (2022–23). The Indian chairmanship of SCO also included the International Conference on Shared Buddhist Heritage with a focus on India's civilisational connection with SCO countries, held on March 14, 2023, in New Delhi.Traditional medicine and shared Buddhist heritage are two of the five new pillars and focus areas of cooperation in the SCO, created by India during its chairmanship. Additionally, the Experts Working Group on Traditional Medicine at SCO was created at India's initiative. There was also a SCO millet food festival held in India.India hosted the SCO Tourism Ministers' Meeting in Varanasi on March 17–18, 2023, where the Tourism Joint Action Plan on the Development of Cooperation in the Tourism Sector among SCO countries was adopted. The Joint Action Plan includes actions to promote the SCO tourism brand, the cultural heritage of SCO member states in tourism, the exchange of information and digital technology in tourism, and cooperation in medical and health tourism.SCO countries will also participate in the upcoming event, The Festival of Libraries, scheduled to be held at Pragati Maidan, New Delhi, in August, 2023, organised by the Ministry of Culture, Government of India. India's emphasis on cultural ties with SCO countries focused on people-to-people relationships should foster its strategic and economic interests in the Central Asia/ Eurasian region in the long term. India's foreign policy has placed a cultural dimension while hosting a multilateral summit of the SCO. Indian foreign policy should continue its cultural dimension as part of its multilateralism towards various global institutions like the SCO.

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