

Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts

Brihattar Bharat and Area Studies

International Conference on

Bharat's Cultural Connections across Asia and Beyond

October 2026

CONCEPT NOTE

"बहुजनहिताय बहुजनसुखाय लोकानुकम्पाय"

Bahujanahitāya Bahujanasukhāya Lokānukampāya

“For the welfare of many, for the happiness of many, and out of compassion for the world”

The idea of **Brihattar Bharat** refers to the wider civilizational sphere shaped by the transmission, adaptation, and interaction of Indian cultural, philosophical, artistic, linguistic, and religious traditions across Asia and beyond. Rather than a political or imperial construct, it signifies a long historical process of intercultural exchange through which ideas originating in the Indian subcontinent travelled across regions through maritime trade, pilgrimage, monastic scholarship, diplomacy, migration, mercantile networks, intellectual contact and vice versa. Extending from the Buddhist monastic corridors of Central Asia and the Trade Routes of Eurasia to the temple civilizations of Southeast Asia, from the spiritual and commercial exchanges of West Asia to the Buddhist worlds of China, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam in East Asia, and further into the global Indian diaspora across Africa, the Caribbean, Europe, North America, and the Pacific, Brihattar Bharat represents one of history’s most extensive and enduring networks of civilizational interaction.

The evidence of this interconnected cultural world survives in material, textual, architectural, linguistic, and performative traditions across a vast geographical landscape: Sanskrit and Pali inscriptions discovered in Cambodia, Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia, and the Malay Peninsula; monumental sacred complexes such as Angkor Wat, Borobudur, Prambanan, and Bagan; Buddhist manuscripts and monastic traditions that linked India with Central Asia, China, Korea, and Japan; literary and theatrical traditions in Khmer, Thai, Javanese, Lao, Burmese, Tibetan, and other Asian cultures inspired by the Ramayana and the Mahabharata; shared artistic vocabularies, cosmological ideas, musical forms, and craft traditions across Asia and the Indian Ocean world; and the enduring cultural landscapes created by Indian diaspora communities through language, religion, cuisine, festivals, and intellectual traditions across multiple continents. Spanning nearly two millennia — from approximately the third century BCE to the fifteenth century CE and continuing in transformed forms into the modern era — this civilizational process unfolded largely through peaceful, reciprocal, and adaptive channels of cultural transmission, creating enduring bridges between India and the wider world.

In 1926, a generation of Indian scholars — Radhakumud Mookerji, Prabodh Chandra Bagchi, Jadunath Sarkar, Suniti Kumar Chatterji, Ramesh Chandra Majumdar, Phanindranath Bose, Kalidas Nag, Bijan Raj Chatterji, their contemporaries — established the **Greater India Society (Brihattar Bharat Parishad)** in Calcutta on **14th October 1926** to give systematic scholarly attention to this history, with Rabindranath Tagore as its spiritual guide. Over the following three decades they produced bulletins, monographs, and eighteen volumes of the Journal of the Greater India Society (1934–1959). This scholarship, however, declined through the mid-twentieth century due to reservations around certain of its frameworks, and the field receded from mainstream academic attention.

In the second half of the 20th century, Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore emphasized the civilizational extent of ‘Bharatvarsha’ in the following lines:

*“Bharatvarsha was never merely a geographic territory
never just a stretch of land marked by political boundaries;
Instead, it was and is a civilizational idea, a spiritual and cultural expanse.”*

Similarly in the modern times, the Hon’ble Prime Minister Narendra Modi reiterated the Idea many times through the quotes:

*“In the spirit of ‘Democracy first, Humanity First’,
India is doing its duty as a ‘Vishwa Bandhu’.”*
- Prime Minister of Bharat Shri Narendra Modi at the
Parliament of Guyana, South America on November 21, 2024

“Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam - One Earth, One Family, One Future”
- the motto of the G20 Summit held in Sept. 2023 in India

“It is high time to start taking pride in our legacy.”
- Prime Minister of Bharat Shri Narendra Modi at Red Fort on 15th August 2022.

The renewed national resolve around decolonization of the mind — articulated as one of **the Panch Praan of Amrit Kaal and reiterated at the Ramnath Goenka Lecture in November 2025** — calls for the recovery and continuation of precisely this scholarship. The work of documenting India's civilizational presence beyond its borders, begun by an earlier generation of scholars and left incomplete, is a task that the present moment demands be taken up with fresh rigour and new perspectives.

BRIHATTAR BHARAT SCHEME (2026-2031)

The Brihattar Bharat Scheme under the Global Engagement Scheme of Ministry of Culture is being administered under the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts. It is envisioned as a long-term national and international academic initiative dedicated to the research, documentation, publication, preservation, promotion and digitization of the shared cultural and civilizational linkages between India and the wider world. Rooted in the recognition that Indian cultural traditions travelled across Asia, Africa, and beyond through networks of trade, pilgrimage, scholarship, maritime exchange, migration, and intellectual dialogue. The project seeks to undertake collaborative research on transnational intangible heritage, epigraphic traditions, manuscripts, artistic exchanges, cultural practices, and shared knowledge systems. The conceptual framework of the project draws inspiration from the historic intellectual legacy of the “Greater India Society” (Brihattar Bharat Parishad), established in 1926, which emphasized the study of India’s wider civilizational interactions across regions and cultures.

The Brihattar Bharat Scheme received in-principle approval in September 2022, marking an important institutional step towards reviving and advancing studies on India’s transregional cultural networks and shared heritage traditions. Following extensive conceptual development, consultations, and preparation of the project framework, the Scheme is now poised to commence its implementation phase under the stewardship of Ministry of Culture. The project proposes to initially focus on selected countries across East Asia, Southeast Asia, Central and West Asia, South Asia, the Giritiya world, and parts of Europe and

Eurasia through research collaborations, documentation, publications, digital archiving, exhibitions, outreach programmes, and international academic partnerships.

ABOUT THE CONFERENCE

Brihattar Bharat: International Conference on ***Bharat's Cultural Connections across Asia and Beyond*** is proposed as an international academic gathering convened by the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts in 2026. The conference endeavours to encourage scholarly work and research on the subject that will pave the way for the documentation, study, and critical re-engagement of India's civilizational presence across Asia — across disciplines, across regions, and across methodological traditions and vice-versa. It also marks the centenary of the Greater India Society (Brihattar Bharat Parishad), commemorating the scholars who first laid the foundation of this field and to make their research publications accessible to new generations. The conference invites new studies, experimental approaches, and fresh critical perspectives alongside this work of recovery, bringing Brihattar Bharat studies into mainstream academic and public discourse.

OBJECTIVES OF THE CONFERENCE

- Explore civilizational and cultural linkages between India and regions across Asia and Europe, and identify the centres, sites, and traditions through which this connection is materially and textually manifested.
- Recognize and research the monks, traders, travellers, and scholars — from Xuanzang and Faxian to Chola merchants and Sufi wanderers — who carried and disseminated Indian culture across the world.
- Identify and document India's art traditions — architectural, sculptural, and performative — beyond the subcontinent, tracing their transmission, transformation, and living continuity.
- Identify modern resource centres, archives, and untapped repositories in these regions that hold material relevant to the study of India's civilizational presence and make them accessible to researchers.
- Invite international scholars across disciplines to bring forward new approaches, experimental methodologies, and fresh critical perspectives on the subject.
- Identify the work of explorers and archaeologists — Mark Aurel Stein's expeditions, the archaeological surveys of Taxila and Nalanda, and comparable endeavours — and place their findings on an accessible scholarly portal.
- Honour the scholars of the Greater India Society (Brihattar Bharat Parishad) and their intellectual legacy and make their publications accessible to a new generation of researchers.
- Creating scholarship on the subject and including it as part of the curriculum.

CIVILIZATIONAL CORRIDORS OF BRIHATTAR BHARAT

India's engagement with the wider world was never unidirectional. The civilizational corridors that carried Sanskrit culture, Buddhist philosophy, Hindu iconography, and mercantile traditions outward were simultaneously channels through which India absorbed, adapted, and was enriched by the cultures it encountered. This reciprocity — this quality of dialogue rather than dictation — is the defining characteristic of India's historical engagement with the world, and it is what distinguishes *Brihattar Bharat* from any concept of cultural dominance.

These interactions unfolded along five great civilizational corridors, each with its own distinct character, geography, and legacy:

◆ **India and Southeast Asia** — united through Sanskrit epigraphy, temple cosmologies, Ramayana traditions, shared kingship models, and the ancient maritime networks of the Indian Ocean that made the Bay of Bengal a cradle of civilizational contact;

◆ **India and East Asia** — linked through the extraordinary transmission of Buddhism: its texts, its iconography, its monastic discipline, and its metaphysics, which travelled through Central Asia along the trade routes and by sea to China, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam;

◆ **India and Central Asia** — connected through the trade route networks, Kushana imperial culture, nomadic exchanges, manuscript traditions, and the Buddhist monasteries that served as cultural relay stations across thousands of miles;

◆ **India and Europe** — connected through ancient and early modern maritime trade, Indo-Roman trade, Indo-European linguistic and intellectual affinities, the exchange of science, mathematics, philosophy, textiles, and spices, as well as later encounters through Orientalist scholarship, art, literature, and anti-colonial political thought, creating a long and complex history of mutual influence and cultural dialogue.

◆ **India and West Asia** — interwoven through Sufi spiritual traditions, shared musical and craft vocabularies, mercantile diaspora communities, linguistic borrowings, and the complex, reciprocal cultures of the Indian Ocean's littoral societies;

◆ **India and the Global Diaspora** — sustained through centuries of migration, pilgrimage, trade, indentured labourers, intellectual exchange, and modern transnational mobility, creating enduring cultural worlds across Africa, the Caribbean, Europe, North America, and the Pacific, where Indian languages, faiths, cuisines, artistic traditions, and political ideas were continually reinterpreted in dialogue with local societies.

Together, these interconnected spheres reveal *Brihattar Bharat* not as a project of conquest, but as a civilizational ecumene shaped by circulation, encounter, adaptation, and mutual transformation across regions and centuries.

THEMES OF THE CONFERENCE

• **Early Linkages and Civilizational Interface**

- Early contacts between Bharat and other civilizations through land routes
- Archaeological, epigraphic, literary, and material evidence of early cultural encounters
- Early movement of monks, merchants, travellers, scholars, and cultural mediators
- Formative encounters and processes of cultural exchange, adaptation, and mutual influence

• **Religious Traditions, Knowledge Systems and Philosophy**

- The transmission of Buddhism, Hinduism and other Indic religions
- Indian cosmological and ritual frameworks: kingship, temple culture, and religious practice
- Sufi orders, syncretic spiritual movements, and the role of wandering mystics and saints
- Indian tradition of knowledge — Ayurveda, astronomy, mathematics, and philosophy — and their reception and adaptation in other civilizations

• **Languages across civilizations: Transmission, Translation and Literary Bridges**

- The spread of Sanskrit, Pali, Prakrit and Tamil etc. as vehicles of civilizational knowledge
- Translation movements: rendering Indian epics, philosophical texts, and scientific treatises into Chinese, Tibetan, Arabic, Khmer, Javanese, and other languages
- Sanskrit epigraphy beyond the subcontinent: inscriptions

- Indian narrative and epic traditions and their literary retellings
- Manuscript cultures and the preservation of Indian texts across regions
- **Ideas visualized in Art**
 - Sacred ideas, cosmologies, philosophies, and narratives expressed through architecture, sculpture, painting, and visual traditions
 - Temple plans, sacred spaces, iconography, and artistic forms reflecting shared cosmological and philosophical concepts
 - Transformation and localisation of Indic artistic vocabularies across different cultural and regional contexts
 - Shared motifs, symbols, visual conventions, craft techniques, and aesthetic traditions across civilizations
- **Textile and Attire Traditions**
 - Cotton, silk, weaving, dyeing, embroidery, and other textile traditions across regions
 - Movement of textiles, techniques, motifs, patterns, and technologies through cultural networks
 - Adaptation of Indian textile traditions within local cultures and the emergence of distinctive regional forms
 - Contemporary continuities in traditional weaving, attire, craft practices, and textile heritage
- **Cuisine and Culinary Exchanges**
 - Movement of crops, spices, ingredients, food technologies, and culinary practices across regions
 - Indian Ocean and overland networks as channels for the circulation of food cultures
 - Adaptation of Indian ingredients, recipes, cooking techniques, and dietary practices within local contexts
 - Food traditions as expressions of cultural contact, memory, identity, and everyday interaction
 - Shared culinary traditions and contemporary food cultures emerging from long-term civilizational exchange
- **Cultural Expressions and Fusion**
 - Shared symbols, customs, rituals, festivals, and forms of everyday cultural expression
 - Social practices, lifestyles, material culture, and traditions emerging through sustained cultural interaction
 - Processes of cultural adaptation, assimilation, reinterpretation, and syncretism
 - Shared cultural vocabularies expressed through objects, symbols, ceremonies, social institutions, and community practices
 - Indian cultural forms and Lifestyle: interpreted, and transformed
- **Performing Arts and Living Traditions**
 - Dance, music, theatre, puppetry, storytelling, and other performing traditions across civilizations
 - Shared narratives, characters, themes, gestures, instruments, and performance vocabularies
 - Adaptation of Indic epics, mythology, and artistic traditions within local performance cultures
 - Ritual performances and community traditions as carriers of collective memory and cultural identity

- Living continuities and contemporary practitioners sustaining, adapting, and reinterpreting traditional forms
- **Trade and Commerce as Carriers of Goods and Ideas**
 - Maritime and overland trade networks as channels of cultural and intellectual exchange
 - Merchants, ports, trading communities, and commercial settlements as spaces of intercultural interaction
 - Circulation of goods alongside languages, beliefs, knowledge, technologies, artistic forms, and social practices
 - Merchant communities and diasporas as long-term carriers of cultural traditions across regions
 - Commercial networks as pathways for reciprocal cultural influence and the formation of connected worlds
- **Diaspora Communities, Cultural Preservation and Civilizational Continuities**
 - Indian indentured labour and its aftermath: cultural endurance and identity formation in the Caribbean, Fiji, Mauritius, and South Africa
 - Merchant communities abroad — Chettiars, Bohras, Gujarati traders
 - Language, religion, festivals, and cuisine as vehicles of cultural preservation in diaspora communities
 - Contemporary Indian diaspora intellectual and cultural contributions: literature, cinema, philosophy, and political thought in global conversations
 - Digital and transnational networks: navigate cultural identity, belonging, and connection to Bharat in the twenty-first century.

PROPOSED DATES OF THE CONFERENCE

The Conference is proposed to be organized on **14–16 October 2026** over three days of academic deliberations, plenary lectures, thematic sessions, cultural presentations and international scholarly dialogue. The proposed dates are intended to facilitate broad participation from national and international scholars, institutions, cultural practitioners, and diplomatic representatives engaged in the study of civilizational networks, heritage traditions, and transregional cultural interactions.