Vedanta in Latvia?
Category : July 1999
Published by Anonymous on Jul. 01, 1999

ROOTS

Vedanta in Latvia?

How India led me to My European roots

More than 30 years ago, Latvian-born Rudite Emir, 59, received a mystical poem by Rabindrinath Tagore translated into her native language. The unexpected gift opened for her the door to India's wisdom, and culminated in her finding her guru, Swami Chinmayananda. She remained his close student for 27 years, until Swami's Mahasamadhi in 1993. In 1994, she went from America to her native country in northern Europe to teach Vedanta, but soon became the student of her land's pre-Christian spiritual tradition and its strong links with India's Vedic wisdom.

By Rudite Emir, Los Altos, California

It was a brisk, misty October day in 1995 when some ten carloads of people spilled out onto a rain-soaked field near a forest in central Latvia to witness the discovery of an ancient sacred site. In the group were Latvian folklorists, amateur archeologists, spiritual seekers, television crews with video cameras propped on their shoulders and a few visitors from the United States, among them myself.

We were in a forest called "Pokriane," some 70 km southwest of the capital city of Latvia, Riga. The forest had recently been discovered to hold a rich array of mysterious stone mounds, all man-made and comprised of rocks not native to the region. A number of theories were propounded, among them that this marked an ancient sacred site and that the stones were brought by pilgrims from afar. Many Latvians now pilgrimage here to leave flower offerings on prominent boulders or mounds, or stand in quiet contemplation of the region's energy.

This was not the Latvia many of us knew, a country recently freed from the constraints of 50 years of atheistic communist rule, a people who were eagerly reclaiming their former allegiance to the Lutheran, Catholic or Russian Orthodox church or the Hebrew faith. The Latvia we witnessed in the Pokriane forest took us back to the era of Druid traditions of pre-Christian Europe. Since my childhood, I had heard that our forefathers had worshiped in oak groves and had held the land sacred, but until this moment my personal experience had not included that dimension at all.

I discovered, too, at that moment that even though Latvia and India are separated by a great physical and cultural distance, the signs are many that they share a close kinship. It is evident in the psyches of the Latvian people, who today are beginning to repossess the spiritual culture they once had before Christianity was imposed by Germany's "Livonian Brothers of the Sword" in the 13th century. It exists through close parallels between Latvian and Sanskrit languages. Latvian, along with Lithuanian, is among the oldest of all Indo-European languages and has many parallels with Sanskrit.

For years I had had on my shelves twenty volumes of the greatest cultural wealth of Latvia: a collection of simple, four-line verses called dainas that describe the full spectrum of life on earth, from birth to marriage to death, including many references to the spiritual dimension. By the time my second lecture series began in Riga, I had already incorporated a few dainas into my lectures to show how they reveal the teachings about karma yoga, the beauty of a pure mind and the pervasive presence of God in all of our activities. The dainas also speak elaborately about God's pantheon of deities, such as Laima, the bearer of good fortune--very likely the counterpart of Goddess Lakshmi.

The pre-Christian spiritual tradition of Latvia was closely related to the Druid religions of northern Europe. Among the old traditions are fire rituals, known to all Latvians, both native and immigrant, through their avid celebration of the longest day of the year, Ligo Svetki, the Summer Solstice. Last year, I first witnessed it on a rainy hilltop in Latvia's countryside. Standing in front of a huge bonfire, I watched our host offer honey, water and flowers into the fire, saying and singing verses that addressed Fire as a living entity--just as I had seen countless times at homas, fire ceremonies, in India.

A good many people attending my lectures in Riga began to see that the study of Vedanta could unlock the wealth of Latvia's own ancient spiritual tradition. As for me, I've come full circle. I began as a northern European, became an American and then became so deeply influenced by Indian thought that when I first set foot on India's soil, I felt I had returned home. Now I have wended my way back to my birth home year after year only to find out that the more deeply I

look at what seems to be different, the more clearly I see that all is One.

Rudite (Rudite@aol.com) now conducts business workshops incorporating Vedanta into management development techniques. She is known in Latvia as Rudite Raudup.