

# “INDIA” IN BALTIC CULTURAL SPACE: DIMENSIONS, PERCEPTIONS, IMAGINATIONS

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**Abstract:** This paper is based on the personal experience of author; it points out the basic references to both real and imagined India in the Baltic states, Latvia in particular. Apart from the global context of fusion of cultures, the ‘Indian’ – ‘Baltic’ connections lies in national romanticism related to the comparative linguistic, as well as an idea of particular cultural similarities between Indians and Latvians and Lithuanians.

**Keywords:** Cultural imagination, Baltic, India, acculturation, perception

This essay is written on the basis of my personal experience in Latvia and Lithuania as a area of my ethnographic fieldwork (aimed at the study of various facets of national culture in Baltic states) and performance activity (in Indian *kathak* dance style, predominantly) since middle 1990ies. Those were (and still are) two very different areas of my research, I was always trying never mix them up, apart form may be few fusion dances, with the “grammar” of *kathak* and content of Latvian folk songs, which were known to the audience. This kind of experiments is quite widespread today, anyway. Otherwise three of my roles,

as a researcher, as a dancer and as a teacher, were apparently different. In the summer 1998, after my solo concert in “Ave Sol” hall in Riga, two girls, Katrina and Anna, met me with the request to teach them some *kathak*; the place for our classes was arranged immediately. My wonderful pupils established in Riga dance studio called “Lila” soon. Since that time I have got involved into “Indian” life of the city, and came to know many people in all Baltic republics who developed a strong interest towards India – in all senses possible. They were academician, researchers, yoga practitioners, healers, musicians, painters and simply admirers. Few of them have an experience of visiting India and even staying there, but most of them – not, they enjoyed their imagined “India”, sometimes for a long time. But in any case I was extremely impressed by the level of interest expressed by many of my friends, acquaintances, students, colleagues in various “Indian matters”.

Here I am going to discuss the issue of various dimensions of this interest, as well as the models of perception of “India” and ways of so to say the “domestication”. I am going just to point out few ideas to the large talk on “cultural hybridity”, the very term of which was popularized due to the famous book of Peter Burke (Burke 2009) and defined as a process of cultural encounter, interrelations, contacts, interactions, diffusion, and exchange – in today’s Baltic republics. The aim of this paper is to figure out the facets of Indian discourse at it exists today here.

Exploration of foreign – and especially “Oriental” – cultures is predominantly elitists, or intelligencia’s types of cultural behavior, however city today is not merely the *topos* of a capital that prescribes the content of culture, of the spiritual and daily life. A distinction between “urban” and “rural” was quite crucial earlier, but is no longer always valid, particularly in relatively small and developed countries with the good roads and connected society. The experimental activity based on the fusion of various cultures – in a different ways, indeed – happens in Latvia and Lithuania, for instance, very much outside of the cities: Orvydų sodyba (see Landsbergis 2008), “Tautskola 99 Baltie Zirgi” school (2013), Likteņdārzs (Taivāne 2014: 174–188), their own traits and logic of circulation. The ways of perception of “alien” in a certain society always plays a role of a cultural mark, discovering hidden relations and correlations, unfolding possibilities and tensions. Riga in particular, for instance, reminds me a rose of winds: its shape is been created by many different winds blowing always and from all sides simultaneously. In the very center of this ‘rose’ one

can experience a certain “silence”, interpreted differently as a stagnancy or as a harmony. But it is only a part of the whole picture, a certain “eye storm”, balancing the rest of the movement.

I am going to argue here that despite quite settled and in a sense closed ethno-social picture with the strong conservative mechanisms, expressed in the cultural and social institutions and ways of predominant decision-making, the content of many areas of local life and culture is highly diverse (see the detail in Ryzhakova 2017). Both social and cultural borders are quite flexible and receptive, they allows many “foreign” elements to entry and to get appropriated. Religious life in a broad sense, including so called spiritual, healing and other practices widely used in Baltic society demonstrated particular fluidity and wide range of variations. For example, there are many instances of referring to Orient, or, rather “Orients” in today’s cultural space of the Baltic countries. How this usage impacts on the identity of people, is a question to explore.

The dichotomy of “East” and “West” in Baltic (as well as Balkan, by the way) cultural space is a well-known trope in historical narratives; it includes such characteristics as multiple belonging, marginality (as a category of a “Zwischenwelt”, for example), and transition as a permanent state. Both modernization and conservative trends here are equally strong and “work” together: development of brand new devices often clashes with the resistance. Cultural and political ethnonationalism here collide with the certain social fragmentation; small and quite isolated communities (or groups, or social circles) hardly merged into united entity unless the whole historical situation all around is benevolent. Here postmodern opposition between “universe” and “multiverse” is appeared to be very relevant.

The creative imagination, using and application of various magic practices, both inherited from ancestors and neighbors and derived from various cultures, become important tools of psychical and sometimes may be even physical survive.

“Magic” of India, broadly known, explored and used, in case of Lithuania and Latvia has additional references. Several issues were pointed out in a book “Balts and Aryans in Their Indo-European Background” by S. K. Chatterji, published by Indian Institute of Advanced Study in Shimla in 1968 (Chatterji, S. K. 1968). The main reason for a special interest towards India here was a linguistic study, a discovering of Indo-European origin of the local languages, “Letto-Lithuanian” languages, as they were named in middle 19 century, and

a clam of Lithuanian as a certain “Sanskrit” of Europe. Next to the academic studies a quasi-linguistic writing emerged (Leitis 1938; Paliepa 2011), with a considerable mystic and an occult element. One could observe here a certain freak-ness sometimes.

Both real and imagine India has multiple “faces” or manifestations in today’s Baltic culture. As everywhere in the world, it arrives in a form of Indian cinema (Bollywood, first and foremost, but not only) in middle of 20 century, but now arising interest only in quite small groups of fans. As in many countries with considerable Indian migrants communities India install herself through the net of Indian restaurants and boutiques, which serves as both business and meeting places of India-oriented persons. Especially popular and now also wide-spread are various practices of yoga. Actually, there are many variations of physical activity, fitness and groups aimed at personal development, whose titles uses the name of “yoga”, more or less correctly. They have different origins and different approaches; some of them, as Bikram Yoga, are transnational products of USA based corporations. Iyengar Yoga is another widely known and established technique, as well as a net of institutions. Dozens of small yoga groups are part of the cultural landscape of today’s Riga, Vilnius, as well as other towns. In June a global festival called “Days of Yoga” happens in Riga (just like in many other cities of the world) with the participation of variously related persons and groups. It has some commercial flavor, but many events are happened free of cost, including musical and dance programs and workshops. It is also a place of informal meeting for all interested in the subject.

Yet it is interesting to know, that the popularization of yoga in a global scale has a special connection to Riga. A first lady teaching yoga in America was born in Riga; she was Yevgenia Vasilevna Peterson (1899–2002), a Russian noblewoman of Swedish descent, and became famous by the pen-name Indra Devi. A famous Russian poet and singer Alexander Vertinsky dedicated a poem “A Girl Is Not Somehow, And Not Like Everything” to her. Yoga was a part of Roerich Society established in Riga in 1924; people of various origin, walks of life and even religions (as Ivan Matveyevich Roshonok, a medical doctor and the elder of an Old Believers, Grebenschikov’s, community) uses to be a part of this Society and yoga practitioners on their own.

Today it is also traditional Indian medicine, *ayurveda*, as a certain product on market, or as an alternative medical treatment, became also popular. Another “incarnations” of India are various styles and schools of Indian dance and music,

developing in Latvia and Lithuania due to the activity of certain musicians and dancers. Miss Vija Vētra, a girl in a family of Latvian immigrants, a professional dancer with the strong interest towards Indian dance, is maybe the most known person here. In 2018 she has been turning 95, and she still dance on stage, fusing together many different styles and dance traditions, including flamenco, modern ballet and many more. South Indian *bharata-natyam* is an important part of her dance repertoire. But it is her own imagination expressed in her choreographies constitutes the uniqueness of her dance approach. Romantic stories of Latvia's legendary past, poetry and mythology are intertwined with the technique of particular traditions. Vija Vētra used to dance in churches, using her experience in a variety of dance styles; she is also device a certain mission vision, related dance to a mystical devotion to a Supreme God. Since middle 1990s she is coming to Latvia from New York (where she lives) every summer to enjoy the local hospitality, to perform and to be in touch with a number of disciples and friends.

Many spiritual groups, religious communities, practicing various traditions of Indian origin are known in Riga and other cities. Apart from most known ISCON (Hare Krishna), they are Sahaj Marga, Sri Chinmoy, groups of transcendental meditation (Maharishi Mahesh Yogi), adepts of Satya Sai Baba, as well as loosely organized groups around Shakti centre, Shiva centre, etc. Some of those groups are part of the global net, and have good international contacts.

But what is more specific for Baltic cultural space is the local “Indian approach” in religious, or rather spiritual spectrum. One of the early explorer of Indian heritage, however, in a peculiar way, was Ernests Brastiņš, a leader of *dievturība*, a Latvian “neo-paganism” (which is not the proper denotation of the movement, it is rather a certain “protestantism of protestants”, as it was sharply described by some of my Latvian colleagues). But certain “Indian heritage” was a part of *dievturība* since the very beginning; see detail in (Ryzhakova 2017: 283). Even before the registration of the organization in 1925, a kind of manifesto was composed by E. Brastiņš – “Restoration of the Latvian Dievturība”, and published by him with a subtitle “A Brief History, Wisdom and Praise” (Brastiņš 1925).

Later the author himself admitted that this book was not good enough, not well-written. It is an example of a search for a certain Latvian-Indian historical and cultural parallels and unity. The author of the manifesto (possibly E. Brastiņš himself) finds Hindu parallels to all Latvian folklore characters and deities.

Dievs – this is the same as Vishnu for him – “all-knowing” (“Višņa – viszinis” in the text), or Ishwara – the “almighty” (“Isvara – visvaris”), or Shiva – “living” (“Žīva – dzīvais”). Laima is certainly the goddess of happiness Lakshmi. Latvian Dēkla is Kali, “the protector of people and cities, a part of Lakshmi”. Kārta turns out to be nothing more than “Karma, the doctrine of the consequences of deeds”. Ūsiņš is representing the twins Ashvins, “horses of Sun”, etc. Little later, in the text “Some proposals for the restoration of the Latvian Dievturība” (late 1920s), E. Braстиņš writes:

*The deep foundation of the Latvian dievturība constitute Indian Aryan religious and philosophical teachings, mainly the philosophy of Vedanta. As an irrefutable truth (natural law) one should accept the doctrine of the regularity of cause and effect (Karma, Kārta) and the rebirth of the soul, or the doctrine of multiple incarnations. We must accept the doctrine of the Avatar - the Divine Incarnation (Logos, Ishvara, Vishnu) in the great personalities, which were Rama, Krishna, Buddha, Christ. On this basis, some compromise with Christianity is possible. It is necessary to publish the “New Testament” in a new translation, with a comparison with the Greek text. This new edition should be accompanied by extensive commentary from the standpoint of Vedanta philosophy on the personality and teachings of Christ. It should be issued to the people of ancient Aryan holy books, primarily the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita, etc. We must get acquainted with the teachings of the Indian yogis, and the ways of its realization. In this connection, it would be useful for some prominent devotees to undertake a pilgrimage to India, and spend a few years there. Since Rabindranath Tagore will visit Russia this summer, it would be worthwhile to invite him to come to Latvia, and before that, to acquaint him with the Indian-Latvian relations (Braстиņš 1925: 32).*

Here the “Indian heritage” was a part of the highly synergetic and wide-spread in 1920-1930s national-romantic outlook and a project, formed then in the fantasies of Western Orientalism, including Nazi Germany, under the auspices of the Ahnenerbe Institute.

Later devotees of dievturība did not develop this “Indian” topic properly, although some slight reflection of the “spirit of India” remained on their teachings, but the pantheon and the doctrine of dievturība, polished over time, became more homogeneous and “Latvian”.

Within the framework of the “Romuva” movement in Lithuania, which began in the late 1960s, in the late 1990s, and later, late Jonas Trinkūnas and Inija Trinkūnenė became more and more interested in India. They establish contacts with Indians, including some priests who participated in collective ceremonies in Lithuania, including fire rituals (Personal information, talk and discussions, as well as authors participation, supported by photo and video documentation).

In last two decades some Latvians and Lithuanians actively embraced to the exploration and practicing of ritualistic practices of Indian origin. It is interesting to note, that the ideas behind this practices are the least point taken into consideration. The reference to the spiritual practices of Indian origin as not to “Hindu”, but to “Vedic” is quite remarkable: “Vedic” here means not at all the real historical background, but peculiar synergetic set of ideas, established by the local practitioners for their own needs. Localization of certain Indian cults and practices is done by many small and tiny groups, such as “Baltais aplis” and many more groups, families and individuals. Mostly they are not intended to popularize themselves broadly. Astrology, magic, healing, organization of festivals, various kinds of rituals may be the source of income, but that is not – or not only – the question of business. The main issues here are social connections, exchange of information, friendship, and alternative ways of doing routine jobs. The stress in “Vedic knowledge” lies not in non-orthodoxy, but rather on “orthopraxy”: variety of interpretations is acceptable. The very word “*viedais*” in Latvian language means “wise”; linguistic connectivity makes considerable part of Indian cultural heritage – otherwise alien – recognizable (in some cases, however, confusingly).

Certain “domestication” of “India” in Latvia and Lithuania has several dimensions: romantic national segment is related to comparative linguistic, which led to both academic and non-academic approaches in exploring of the past (national past in particular), and global scene of diffusing ideas and practices, relevant to the daily life, aesthetic feeling and needs of a modern man. Our digital epoch prescribes the fragmentation of the actual reality (Indian, for instance), and using of the elements for the making and remaking of the spiritual life of the actors. Experiments and constant creation constitutes a significant part of the daily life.

One of the peculiar new rituals, recently established and practiced by various groups in Latvia, predominantly not in the cities, but in rural places,

in open air, all over the Latvia, mostly by educated urban citizens is so called “fire ritual” (personally observed by an author and discussed with the other participants). The origin of it probably could be discovered in 1990s – early 2000s activity of various artistic groups, including some ethnographic ensembles and among the folkloristic circles. Artists of Riga, painters, musicians, poets, mystically oriented persons created the interest towards this ritual. Rasma Rozīte and her group, Lilita Postaža, “Baltais aplis” group were among the first practitioners. Some of my Latvian and Russian friends from Latvia (ethnicity never play a dividing role here) traveled to India in late 1990–early 2000 to learn the “fire ritual” from *babas*, *gurus* and priests, as they claimed. What is important, the deep interest towards Indian spirituality always is combined with the involvement into the creation of pan-Baltic, Latvian, Lithuanian or more specific local practices, which could turn with the time to traditions. Brought to Latvia, Indian experience has not got a special and one name and structure, but it is been identified and explained differently by the practitioners. The usage of fire as such could have been rooted in both local ethnographic traditions, highlighted by folkloristic groups, especially since 1980ies, and in ritual derived from Indian practice – out of books, or from the living practice. Now, as I see, it became more widespread and adopted differently by various small groups. It definitely has various reasons including aesthetic, magic, and recreational and many more, and has a multiple cultural references.

So to say little “home magic practice” in form of candle burning at home for different purposes was a part of Baltic daily life even in Soviet time. Burning of bonfire, in particular during the celebration of Latvian *Līgo* (Jāņu nakts between June 23 and 24, Midsommer Day, St. John’s Day), or Lithuanian *Joninės*, is widespread. Using the real bonfires as a part of in All-Latvian Song and Dance festival, in the large arena, design by Valdis Celms, has brought the tradition to the official and representational level.

Creation of new groups with hybrid, syncretic identities, free from either local, or national discourse, whether they are Latvian, Lithuanian, Russian or else, is an interesting brand of today’s world. This groups, or rather circles with quite open agenda, are at the same time global (or easily can turn global) and limited (could be private, and sometimes even not known to the very neighbors). In Baltic republics they mostly constitute small or even tiny communities. But the ideas, circulated in this groups, and practices established and devised by them have a broad usage and context.

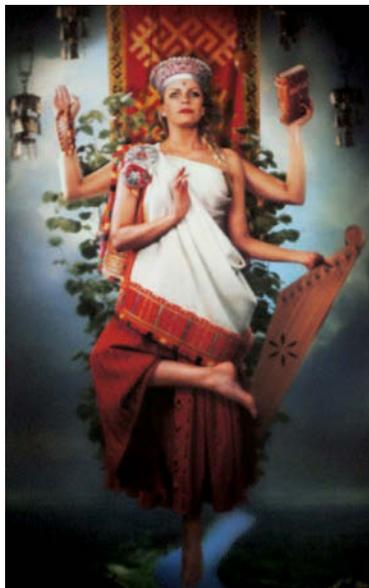


Figure 1. Artūrs Bērziņš. Collage in so called “Tautiskais postromantisms” (Folk Post-Romantism) style. Exhibition in Gallery “Bastejs”, Riga, 2014.



Figure 2. Ritual with fire. 21.06.2017, Ikšķile, Latvia. Photo by Svetlana Ryzhakova.



Figure 3. Morning yoga practice. Still from short film “Tomorrow’ Regimen” by Kartina Neiburga, 2018.



Figure 4. Indian miniature in the decoration of “Tibetan kitchen” restaurant in Riga. Photo by Svetlana Ryzhakova, 2016.



Figure 5. Holy “OM” sing in Riga’s graffiti. Photo by Svetlana Ryzhakova, 2008.



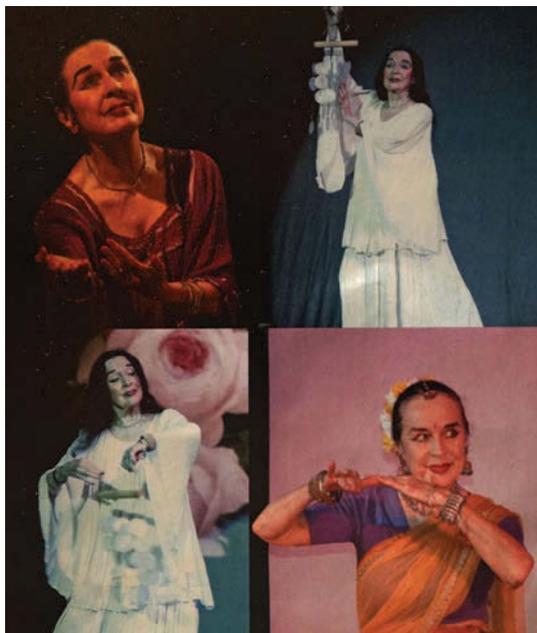
Figure 6. Tourist agencies in the small shops; celebration of Divali in Riga.  
Photo by Svetlana Ryzhakova, 2014.



Figure 7. Tourist agencies in the small shops; celebration of Divali in Riga.  
Photo by Svetlana Ryzhakova, 2014.

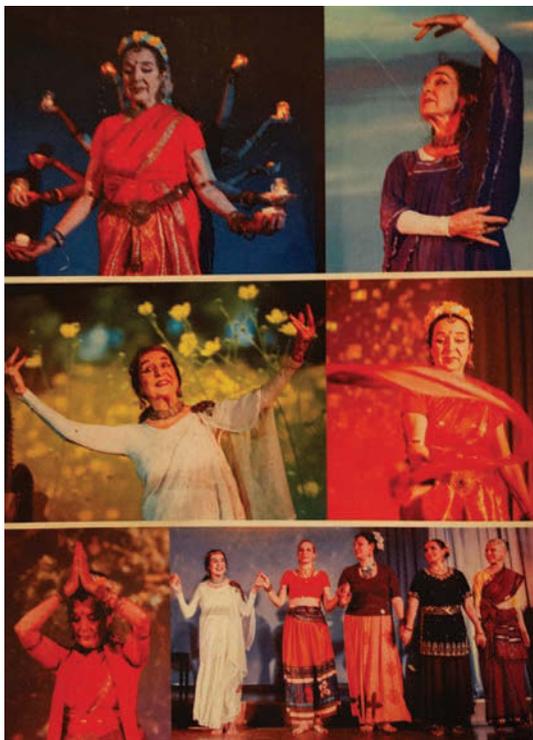


**Figure 8.** ISCON food selling; celebration of Divali in Riga. Photo by Svetlana Ryzhakova, 2014.



**Figure 9.** Vija Vetra: a booklet for the dance program “Two worlds” (Divas pasaules) in Riga, 2015.

**Figure 10.** Vija Vētra:  
a booklet for the dance  
program “Roots and wings”  
(Saknes and spārni)  
in Riga, 2017.



**Figure 11.** Celebration of Mahasivaratri in Riga. Shakti centre.  
Photo by Svetlana Ryzhakova, February 2016.



**Figure 12.** Celebration of Mahasivaratri in Riga. Shakti centre. Photo by Svetlana Ryzhakova, February 2016.



**Figure 13.** Larisa Poskochaya, Svetlana Ryzhakova, Katrina Rute, Anna Melngalve. Dancers of “Bharata” and “Lila” dance studios in Riga. Private collection, February 2016.



Figure 14. Healing by gongs in Riga. Photo by Svetlana Ryzhakova, April, 2018.



Figure 15. An evening in Riga with Indian music. Anatoly Popov and Svetlana Ryzhakova. Private collection, 2017.



Figures 16–17. Vija Vētra with her flower “mandalas” after the dance program in Riga. Photos by Svetlana Ryzhakova, 2014.



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