Chapter 26

Activity of Hindu-Related Movements and Western Esoteric Groups in Latvia

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After the fall of the Communist regime, Latvia, like other Central and Eastern European countries, faced profound political, economic, and cultural changes. Following the restoration of independence in 1991, the revival of interest in religion rapidly increased, replacing the fifty-year-long secular ideology which had been opposed to religious practice. Today, Latvia is on a par with other Western European countries with regard to the spread of new religious movements (NRMs). Various religious groups whose historical roots are in Asia, the US, Russia, and Western Europe populate the country’s religious scene.

Due to various complications, it is difficult to estimate the number of NRMs. The last population census, which included a question about an individual’s religion, took place in 1989. The Ministry of Justice’s annual reports on the activities of religious organizations in Latvia only provide information about a very limited number of NRMs: Jehovah’s Witnesses, Baha’i, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Sukyo Mahikari, Neopagans (Dievturi), Christian Science, ISKCON, and the Church of the Last Testament. Most NRMs in Latvia have not been officially registered as religious organizations, but function as social organizations, cultural associations, training centers, and so on.

Mapping of religious groups by using information provided by the media has led to the conclusion that today there are approximately seventy NRMs in Latvia (Stasulane 2009: 108). Each of these has its own religious doctrine, and each works in its own direction: some of them crack down on Western secularism and materialism, but others take a stance against the institutional churches. It is, of course, impossible to document the activities of all the NRMs in contemporary Latvia; therefore this chapter is limited to Hindu-influenced movements and groups involved in Western esotericism.

Hindu-Related New Religious Groups

Until the beginning of the twentieth century, there were no non-Christian religious groups in Latvia, with the exception of Jewish communities and a few esoteric movements; Latvia was part of tsarist Russia where the principle of the freedom of religion was more or less observed only after the 1905 revolution.
The fact that ministers of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Latvia opposed the 1905 revolution facilitated public interest in the Eastern religions as it believed that Christianity was a narrow dogmatic teaching and a politically reactionary force.

**Yoga**

Although interest in yoga had already featured towards the end of the nineteenth century, more interest in it originated when the Latvian Society of Parapsychology was established in 1924, and another group formed when the Latvian Society of Spiritual Sciences broke away from the original Society in 1930. The Latvian Society of Parapsychology became the Center of Yoga Science in Latvia in 1934, and then the Latvian Yoga Society in 1939. Members of these groups organized Spiritualist seances and were carried away by the teachings of Abhedinanda, Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, and Ramacharaka (Krumina-Konkova 2012: 36–38). Harijs Dīkmanis (b. 1895–?), one of the most active practitioners of yoga, established contacts with yoga teachers in India; he became the official European representative of Jogendra's Yoga Institute,¹ as well as Sivananda's Divine Life Society.² By the beginning of 1940, the Latvian Yoga Society had 79 full-fledged members, but shortly after the occupation of Latvia and its incorporation into the USSR in 1940, all these societies were closed down.

After World War II, religious practice recommenced when Khruschev’s “Thaw” brought about political rehabilitation and a certain amount of cultural liberalization, but in parallel there was also a new campaign advocating scientific atheism, in an attempt to free the “New Soviet” person from “the opium of the people.” However, interest in Eastern religions did not decline in these conditions. Thanks to the friendly relations between the USSR and India, Latvians had the opportunity to become acquainted with Buddhist and Hindu texts, as well as with the philosophy and practice of yoga.

**The Teachings of Sai Baba**

Poetess Mirdza Ķempe (1907–74), who both praised the Soviet regime and was interested in Dīkmanis’s yoga teachings in the 1930s, became the conduit for new religious ideas in Latvia. In the mid-1960s, the Indian ambassador to Moscow gave literature about Sai Baba to Ķempe, and she was first to introduce Sai Baba’s teachings into Latvia (Krūmiņa-Koņkova and Gills 2005: 224–226).

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¹ Jogendra (1897–1989) established the Yoga Institute in India in 1918, and in New York in 1919.
² The Divine Life Society, founded by Sivananda (1887–1963) in 1936, still exists as a world-wide organization.