



Bridging baltics and India: Tracing the historical connection and Buddhism

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Abstract

The Baltic States, comprising Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, have a rich and extensive history of relations with India. These connections encompass various aspects, ranging from cultural to political engagements. India shares a profound linguistic bond between India and Lithuania, rooted in the similarities between the Sanskrit language and Lithuanian language. This linguistic connection serves as a testament to the historical and cultural ties that have shaped the relationship between these regions. Additionally, the ancient trade route known as "the amber way" has provided a historical link between India and Latvia, enabling access to the Baltic Sea via Mediterranean and North Sea trade routes. These historical trade connections played a significant role in fostering cultural exchange and facilitating interactions between India and the Baltic States. Additionally, Estonian Buddhists have played a significant role in disseminating Buddhism throughout the Baltic States and Europe at large. This research paper aims to explore the historical connection between India and the Baltic States, the paper also focus on the role of Buddhism in bridging the gap between these regions. The objectives of this research are to provide a comprehensive understanding of the background and historical context of the connection between these regions and to analyse the role of Buddhism in facilitating cultural exchange and understanding.

Keywords: India, baltic states, historical connection, buddhism, cultural exchange

Introduction

The three countries Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania are situated at the north eastern region of Europe, on the eastern shores of the Baltic Sea. These three countries are bounded on the west and north by the Baltic Sea, which gives the region its name "the Baltic States". India granted recognition to independent Baltic States on 7 September 1991 after formal acceptance of their independence by the erstwhile Soviet Union. The Baltic States, a geographically distinct region situated along the north-eastern coast of Europe and India, geographically vast and culturally diverse in South Asia, they are in fact connected by a rich and complex history. This connection is evident in the shared cultural and linguistic heritage of the two regions, as well as in the long history of trade and cultural exchange between them. This research paper aims to explore the historical interactions and cultural exchanges that have linked the Baltics and India, this paper also focus the role of Buddhism in facilitating these connections.

By 1992 India established diplomatic relations with the all three Baltic States. Moreover, India's relations with Baltic States are rooted in history. India's ancient connection with the Baltic States derives predominantly from missionary activities. For instance, A. Nerling and J. hesse were the first Estonian missionaries to come to India in the mid- 19th century. E. Eckhold was reported to be the first person of Estonian origin to visit India at the end of the 17th century, (K. B. Usha, 2012) [15]. The Baltic states have established a profound connection with Buddhism, embracing its teachings and practices. Buddhism, an ancient religion originating in India, has spread its teachings far beyond its birthplace. Its journey across Asia not only left an enduring mark on the religious and philosophical landscape of different countries but also paved the way for cultural

exchange and mutual enrichment. Understanding the role of Buddhism in bridging the Baltics and India provides a unique lens through which to examine historical connections and the enduring legacies of shared cultural heritage.

Historical connections between the baltics and India: cultural exchange and influences

India and Baltic States share a remarkable historical connection that can be traced back to ancient times, particularly through the lens of missionary activities and University of Tartu in Estonia, established in 1632 AD, has a extensive publications in India ancient Sanskrit language and literature. Sanskrit, known as the language of the gods, holds immense significance in the Indian cultural and intellectual tradition. The presence of publication in Sanskrit at the University of Tartu signifies a scholarly dedication to the study and dissemination of ancient Indian knowledge. Cultural exchange has been a key factor in the growing relationship between India and the Three Baltic States. In recent years, there has been a rising interest in the Baltic States for Indian dance, music, yoga, Ayurveda, and the works of Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore. Indian religion is also becoming increasingly popular in the Baltics. This growing interest in Indian culture is a testament to the strong ties that exist between the two regions. It is also a sign of the growing importance of cultural diplomacy in the 21st century. Cultural exchange can help to build bridges between people from different cultures, and it can also help to promote understanding and cooperation.

India and the Baltic States share many similarities in their culture and language. Professor K.B. Usha emphasizes the importance of culture in fostering mutual understanding between nations in international relations. The Baltic States have had a strong influence on Indian culture, leaving a

lasting impact on various aspects of Indian society. Similarly, the people of the Baltic States feel a deep sense of nostalgia and emotional connection towards Indian culture, language, religion, and spirituality. The cultural exchange between India and The Three Baltic States has significantly contributed to the enhancement of their bilateral relations. The Baltic States have shown a growing fascination for various aspects of Indian culture, including dance, music, Yoga, Ayurveda, as well as the profound works of renowned figures such as Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore. Furthermore, Indian spirituality and religious practices have gained significant popularity among the people of the Baltic region. This mutual admiration and engagement with Indian culture have fostered a deepening bond between these nations.

Estonia and India have a long and strong cultural connection. The cultural relations between Estonia and India have consistently exhibited a remarkable strength and diversity throughout history. The first Estonian to visit India was E. Eckhold, who arrived in the 17th century. In 1797, the renowned seafarer A. J. von Krusenstern visited Madras and Calcutta. The first Estonian work to mention India was "Puhhapaiwa Wahhe-Luggemissed" ("Sunday Intermediary Readings") by Otto W. Masing, published in 1818. In 1837, the University of Tartu began teaching Sanskrit, and several publications on Sanskrit language and literature were published there (Estonian Embassy, 2014). Tartu University, founded in 1632, began offering Sanskrit courses in 1837. However, Sanskrit is no longer taught at the university, though the Department of Oriental Studies continues to exist (Embassy of India, Tallin, 2023) [3].

The Indian Cultural Association of Estonia (ICAE), founded in 2003 and operating since 2004, has been instrumental in promoting Indian culture and providing opportunities for numerous musicians to showcase their talent in Estonia. Similarly, the cultural exchange between India and Latvia, one of the three Baltic states, has been flourishing, leading to closer and friendlier relations between the two countries. Latvia has developed a strong interest in various aspects of Indian culture, including its rich traditions, education system, music, yoga, dance, and films. The growing fascination and appreciation for Indian culture in Latvia highlight the shared cultural ties and the mutual benefits gained from this intercultural exchange.

In 2006, an impactful cultural exchange program was established between India and Latvia, which originated during the visit of Latvian cultural minister Helena Demakova to India. Over the past few years, Latvia has had the privilege of hosting numerous Indian cultural troupes, generously sponsored by the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR). These mesmerizing performances have not only attract audiences but have also fostered a stronger cultural connection between the two nations. The Museum of Foreign Arts in Riga proudly features a dedicated section that showcases fascinating insights into Indian art, highlighting its significant contribution to the global cultural landscape. The "Centre on Indian Studies and Culture" at the University of Latvia was formally inaugurated on September 9th, 2013, showcasing the institution's commitment to fostering a deeper understanding of India. The centre actively promotes Indian culture through various activities, including Yoga classes, Hindi classes, and other engaging initiatives. This concerted effort holds tremendous potential for the advancement of Ayurveda and Yoga in

Latvia, both of which are widely embraced as means to enhance holistic healthcare. The University of Latvia has played a pivotal role in supporting these endeavours. In collaboration with the prestigious Arya Vaidya Pharmacy in Coimbatore (AVP), which has been granted the status of Centre of Excellence by the AYUSH Ministry, the University has been conducting a highly regarded three month Diploma course in Introduction to Ayurveda since February 2015. This program represents a significant milestone in the promotion and dissemination of Ayurvedic knowledge in Latvia (Indian Embassy, Sweden, 2016).

Lithuanians display a remarkable fascination with Indian cultural traditions, notably embracing the practice of Yoga. A significant proportion, approximately 70%, of Lithuanians who travel to India do so with a genuine desire to explore spiritual and yogic pursuits. Moreover, the popularity of Yoga and Sanskrit has extended to various cities across Lithuania, where individuals can engage in classes and instruction. The International Day of Yoga is ecstatic commemorated every year in Vilnius, along with several other Lithuanian cities, demonstrating the deep rooted interest and appreciation for this ancient practice (Embassy of India, Poland, November 2022) [7].

Lithuania holds India in high regard, recognizing a sense of shared cultural heritage between Indian and Lithuanian people. There are remarkable similarities in the language, customs, and cultural practices of the Baltic states and India, which further strengthen their connection. Particularly, it is interesting to see that the Old Lithuanian language shares striking similarities with Sanskrit, an ancient language of India. Lithuania boasts a rich tradition of Oriental studies, with a longstanding engagement of its people in the exploration of Indian philosophy, culture, and spirituality dating back to the 19th century. Indology, a significant subject within Oriental studies, has played a pivotal role in deepening the understanding and appreciation of India within Lithuanian academia and intellectual circles. (K. B. Usha, 2017) [14]. There is a history of people who have personal links to India. Hermann Kallenbach, Antanas Poska, and Wilhelm Storostas-Vydunas share a significant personal bond with India and its people. Within this trio, Hermann Kallenbach holds particular prominence due to his enduring influence in the life of Mahatma Gandhi. Operating as a pivotal European figure, Kallenbach provided invaluable assistance to Gandhi during his endeavours and challenges in South Africa, leaving an indelible mark on their collective journey (Anil Nauriya, 2017, pp. 11- 36).

During the Soviet occupation, the people of the Baltic States actively engaged in both violent and non-violent struggles in their quest for freedom. The desire for liberation was expressed through the promotion of national cultures and the resurfacing of patriotic folk songs, which had previously been banned. This movement, famously known as the "Singing Revolution," employed non-violent methods akin to Mahatma Gandhi's principles of Satyagraha. Understanding Gandhi's influence on Lithuania's ideas and strategies of non-violent resistance can be enhanced by considering two factors: the shared cultural and linguistic background between India and the Baltic States, and the intellectual discussions on non-violence that took place during the Singing Revolution. Since the late 19th century, Indian culture and philosophy have gained popularity among the cultural elite in Lithuania (Goverdhan, 2015, pp. 146- 156).

Buddhism: Historical and philosophical overview

Buddhism has its roots in ancient India, originating around the 6th century BCE. Its founder, Siddhartha Gautama, later known as the Buddha, was referred to as the "awakened one" or "enlightened one." During the Buddha's lifetime and the subsequent centuries, Buddhism gained a substantial following and expanded across the ancient Indian region. Its initial flourishing occurred primarily in the eastern parts of India, encompassing regions like Magadha and Kosala. Numerous kingdoms and empires of ancient India, such as the Maurya and Gupta Empires, actively supported and patronized Buddhism, which contributed to its continued growth and significant influence.

Despite not actively engaging in missionary endeavours, the teachings of the Buddha managed to traverse great distances over the course of centuries. Initially, they extended to Southeast Asia, followed by their passage through Central Asia into East Asia, and eventually reaching Tibet and the remote corners of Central Asia. In many cases, this expansion occurred organically, driven by the curiosity and interest of foreign merchants in Buddhism. On certain occasions, rulers embraced Buddhism as a means to instill ethical values in their societies, but conversions were never forced upon anyone. The spread of the Buddha's teachings took place peacefully throughout the Indian subcontinent and beyond, across diverse regions of Asia. As it encountered new cultures, Buddhism readily adapted its methods and practices to align with the local mindset, while preserving the fundamental principles of wisdom and compassion. Notably, Buddhism never established a centralized hierarchy of religious authority with a supreme leader. Instead, each region that embraced the faith developed its unique variations, religious structures, and spiritual leaders. Presently, one of the most renowned and internationally revered figures among these authorities is His Holiness the Dalai Lama of Tibet (Dr. Alexander Berzin).

Until modern times, Buddhism remained relatively obscure in the Western world. However, awareness and understanding of Buddhism in the West have primarily evolved through three primary channels. Firstly, Western scholars have played a crucial role in unravelling the teachings and history of Buddhism through their research and academic contributions. Secondly, the work of philosophers, writers, and artists has also contributed to disseminating knowledge about Buddhism to a wider audience. Lastly, the arrival of Asian immigrants in Europe, North America, and Australia has brought various forms of Buddhism with them, contributing to the spread and establishment of Buddhist communities in these regions. Over the past five decades, Europe has witnessed the establishment and flourishing of a diverse range of Buddhist traditions and schools. Sanghas representing Theravāda, Mahāyāna, Tibetan Buddhism, as well as newly-formed Western Buddhist communities, have found firm footing in the continent. Many of these Buddhist groups have established significant monasteries and centers. While Buddhist places of worship and practice were largely unknown and concealed from the broader public for a considerable period, the past three decades have witnessed the construction of remarkable Thai temples, Vietnamese pagodas, Tibetan monasteries, numerous Buddhist stupas, and other prominent Buddhist stupas (Martin Baumann, 2019) ^[1].

Buddhism's influence in the Baltics

Prior to the German occupation, Buddhism made its way to the Baltic region, and it is important to acknowledge that the initial individuals deeply interested in Oriental religions and philosophy were the local Balts and Germans. The University of Tartu had been offering Sanskrit language courses since at least 1837, as indicated in the 1837 catalogue. Even during Estonia's first period of independence, Oriental languages were predominantly taught at the same university by German scholars. An early exploration of Buddhism in the Estonian language can be found in the book titled "Buddha, Muhamed ja Kristus" ('Buddha, Muhammad, and Christ'), authored by the German theologian Robert Falke in 1903 (Mait Talts, 2008) ^[13].

Karlis August M. Tennisons (1873-1962), who held several esteemed titles such as the Sangharaja of Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia, the Buddhist Archbishop, and the Baltic Mahatma, played a significant role in introducing Buddhism to Estonia. His efforts were instrumental in the dissemination and expansion of Buddhism throughout the Baltic States. Thanks to his dedicated activities, the teachings of Buddhism found their way into the hearts and minds of people in Estonia, as well as in Lithuania and Latvia, leaving a lasting impact on the region (K. B. Usha, 2012) ^[15]. Tennisons' life holds many intriguing and mysterious aspects. Friedrich V. Lustig (1912-1991), an Estonian Buddhist and Tennisons' disciple and lifelong companion, served as his biographer. Lustig himself was born in Narva, Estonia, but was of German origin. Tennisons dedicated several years to spreading Buddhist teachings in the Baltic States, with Estonia being a significant focus.

Another phase of Buddhism's dissemination in Estonia began in the late 1960s at the University of Tartu, with the arrival of Linnart Mall, an Estonian linguist, Indologist, and philosopher who studied under Buryat Buddhist scholar and lama Bidiya Dandaronovich Dandaron (1914-1974). In the 1970s, a group of students gathered around Mall, forming an academic student circle that delved into the study of Buddhism, Sanskrit, and the Tibetan language. Starting from the early 1980s, public lectures on various aspects of the Buddhist religion were regularly held in Tartu. A significant milestone occurred with the visit of the 14th Dalai Lama in early October 1991. His pilgrimage across Estonia drew large crowds wherever he went, receiving a warm reception from the people. In Lithuania and Latvia, he was received by high-ranking state representatives. In Tallinn, he met with members of the Estonian Congress, representing those striving for Estonian independence, as well as some members of the Supreme Soviet, the Soviet parliament still functioning in Estonia at the time. The Dalai Lama delivered public lectures in Tartu and Tallin (Luboš Bělka, 1999).

The Diamond Way Karma Kagyu Buddhist organization originates from Tibet and is primarily Tibetan in nature. Following the Chinese Communist occupation of Tibet in 1959 and subsequent succession disputes in the 1990s, the leadership of the Karma Kagyu lineage became divided between Dharamsala in the Indian state of Himachal Pradesh, where the Tibetan government-in-exile is based, and New Delhi, the capital of India. The presence of Diamond Way Buddhism in Lithuania and other European countries can be attributed to the efforts of Ole Nydahl. The

establishment of the first Diamond Way meditation centre in Siauliai in 1997 marked the beginning of its presence in Lithuania. This was followed by the opening of centres in Vilnius in 1998, Kaunas in 2002, and Klaipėda in 2007. The Diamond Way tradition has achieved notable success in Eastern Europe, with two meditation centres in Latvia, two in Belarus, over 50 in Poland, and over 60 in Russia, just to mention a few neighbouring countries. According to the 2001 Lithuanian census, the estimated number of Buddhists in Lithuania was 408. However, the census did not differentiate between different Buddhist sects, making it difficult to determine the number of Karma Kagyu Buddhists specifically. Unfortunately, the 2011 census did not provide any data regarding Buddhist communities in Lithuania (Michael Strmiska, 2013) [12].

During the Soviet era in Lithuania, the initial Buddhist ideas started to emerge through the influence of Buryat Buddhist teacher Bydia Dandaron. However, due to the prevailing official atheistic policies of the Soviet Union, Buddhism remained largely inaccessible to the wider population, resulting in limited interest. Only a small underground religious group practiced Buddhism at that time. The restoration of Lithuanian independence in 1991 brought about significant changes, allowing not only the freedom to practice religion openly but also the establishment of officially recognized religious organizations in accordance with the country's legal system. This new environment paved the way for the formation of the first legally operating Buddhist groups in the early 1990s, some of which continue to be active today. Presently, Lithuania is home to several active Buddhist groups, representing diverse Buddhist teachings and traditions. These include Zen Buddhists and Tibetan Buddhists, among others (Marika Laudere, 2013) [4]. Following the regaining of independence, the formation and growth of Buddhist groups in Latvia have progressed rapidly. Similar to the Western context, where Buddhism is characterized by its diversity and pluralism, Latvia has become a home to various Buddhist traditions for over three decades. The first news about Buddhism reached Latvia towards the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, while in the 1920s, Karlis Tennisons (1883-1962), the first Buddhist monk in the Baltic States, played a key role in popularizing Buddhism in the region. Currently, Latvia is home to more than ten active Buddhist groups, each representing different Buddhist teachings. The introduction of Tibetan Buddhism in the late 1980s played a significant role in shaping the religious landscape of Latvia, captivating the imagination of spiritual seekers during that time. Every Buddhist tradition that has been introduced in Latvia carries its own unique history. Throughout the gradual integration of Buddhism into Latvian society, women have played crucial roles in the establishment and development of many Buddhist communities. They have taken on various roles, assuming leadership positions in some instances while offering support in others. The visible presence of women in leadership positions within Latvian Buddhist communities is evident at the institutional level as well (Marika Laudere, 2018).

Conclusion

The historical connections between the Baltic States (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) and India are rooted in a rich tapestry of cultural exchange and influences. The Baltic States have shown a growing fascination and appreciation

for various aspects of Indian culture, including dance, music, yoga, Ayurveda, and the works of renowned figures like Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore. This mutual admiration and engagement with Indian culture have fostered a deepening bond between these nations. Estonia, in particular, has a long and strong cultural connection with India, with the University of Tartu playing a significant role in the study and dissemination of ancient Indian knowledge. Latvia, on the other hand, has established cultural exchange programs and actively promotes Indian culture through various initiatives, such as hosting Indian cultural troupes and featuring a dedicated section on Indian art in its Museum of Foreign Arts. Lithuania, too, displays a remarkable fascination with Indian cultural traditions, especially yoga, and recognizes a shared cultural heritage between the two countries. The spread of Buddhism, an ancient religion originating in India, has also played a role in bridging the Baltics and India. Despite not actively engaging in missionary endeavours, Buddhism's teachings have traversed great distances over centuries, reaching different parts of Asia and beyond. Figures like Karlis August M. Tennisons played a significant role in introducing Buddhism to the Baltic States and expanding its influence. Overall, the historical connections between the Baltics and India, combined with the influence of Buddhism, have contributed to a vibrant cultural exchange and a shared appreciation for each other's heritage.

In recent times, the Baltic States have witnessed a significant increase in the presence of Indian dance and music performances. The rise of yoga studios throughout the region and the growing adoption of Ayurveda, an ancient Indian system of medicine, reflect the growing popularity of these practices among Baltic residents. These deep rooted cultural ties between Estonia and India serve as a testament to the profound friendship that exists between the two nations. As Estonia and India continue their collaborative efforts, these cultural connections are poised to flourish, promising a brighter future for both countries.

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