Hindu Influence in Communist Bulgaria
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President's Daughter Opens Eastern European Nation to Spiritual Interchange with India

Mathur, Rakesh Tiny Bulgaria lies in Eastern Europe nestled between the Black Sea and the Balkan States of Romania, Yugoslavia, Greece and Turkey. Here among the friendly citizens, HINDUISM TODAY correspondent Rakesh Mathur found a surprising degree of Hindu influence, which is soon to Increase with the publication of the Bhagavad Gita in Bulgarian.

Indian and Bulgarian people more or less share the same historical and spiritual characteristics. The Bulgarians, like their Hindu counterparts, have the sobriety, the reticence and the simplicity of a people who have suffered during their history. They are also a notably hard-working people. But these more austere virtues are tempered by the good humor of a race which has remained faithful to the ancient traditions of not differentiating between one and many. Like Hindus, Bulgarians also believe that material things will fade away like ashes and marigolds in the river of life.

There can surely be no other country in Europe which within a small area (less that 110,000 sq. km., pop. 9 million) offers the visitor such a variety of scenery and of easily accessible geographical and emotional attractions. The Bulgarian is obliging and always ready to help a stranger. The word Bulgaria literally means "land of roses."

In the course of its 1,300-year history, Bulgaria has passed through much trial and tribulation. Just a century ago, its people were still subject to a bondage under the Ottoman Empire in which they had been languishing for 500 years. Prior to foreign subjugation, Bulgaria (like India) flourished with a most impressive religious-social culture. And like India, Bulgaria had to wait until the 18th and 19th centuries to feel the first impulses of the national and religious re-awakening known as the Bulgarian renaissance.

In the 20th century, Marxist doctrines imposed on Bulgaria clearly assumed religion as the people's "opium." The churches and monasteries, which are all Eastern Orthodox Christianity, have been reduced to tourist attractions. But the average Bulgarian has found a fascination with the way of living, the "dharma" which Hinduism has practiced for centuries.

Krassimira Stoyanova of Sofia Press pointed out to me during my visit to her office that, "A number of Bulgarian scholars - historians, philologists, linguists and men of letters - have shown interest in various aspects of Indian thought and culture. The most prominent names are Vladimir Georgiev, member of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Vicho Ivanov, literary critic N. Miliev and Nikolai Rainov."

Later during my visit to the Ludmila Zhivkova Art Gallery, director Atanass Neikov explained, "In our museums there are a number of miniature paintings and wooden sculptures from all parts of India which vividly depict tales from the Ramayana, Mahabharata and Vedas. The visitors have always shown special interest in them and now, because of the popular demand, we are working on their captions to provide in-depth explanation 6f the intricacies of Hinduism. For example, one caption reads, "To the Indian devotee of God Vishnu, love means everything contained in man and outside him. It is the equivalent of the Hinduistic concept of the 'Absolute,' and is expressive not only of physical, psychological and intellectual experience. All manifestations of life, of the spirit, of movement and development are considered a sign of love."

Most of these ancient paintings and pieces of Hindu sculptures were purchased in the seventies by Ludmila Zhivkova, as the daughter of the Bulgarian President, Todor Zhivkov and Chairman of Committee of Culture, who took special interest in the spiritual heritage of India.

Ludmila - Student of Hindu Thought

Valentin Miter of the International Foundation of Ludmila Zhivkova in Sofia told me, "Inspired by the ancient Vedas and Upanishads (the character of Nachiketa, for instance), Ludmila Zhivkova possessed the searching spirit and the restless passion of a discoverer and the thoroughness of a talented scholar. She initiated valuable international undertakings and did much to link Bulgarian culture to progressive

world culture. She started the Department of Indology at the University of Sofia where today more than a hundred students learn Indian languages, including Sanskrit, in order to take a journey to the Vedic culture of India.

Ludmila Todorava Zhivkova was born on July 26, 1942, in Sofia to Bulgaria's president, Todar Zhivkov - who is still going strong in his fortieth year of ruling the country. Ludmila went on to become a brilliant representative of the younger generation of public figures and politicians who emerged under the conditions of people's power. An outstanding politician, distinguished figure in Bulgarian socialist culture, ardent patriot and internationalist, she dedicated all her ebullient young life to the bright future of mankind.

Ludmila graduated from the Sofia University in 1965. Later, she specialized in history of the arts at the Moscow State University Lomonossov, and history in Oxford, Great Britain. She engaged in original and valuable studies in the spheres of history, culture and the arts. She always gave credit to the study of Indian philosophy for her distinct approach towards humanity and arts.

Today the name of Ludmila Zhivkova is inseparably linked with a new era in the development of Bulgarian spiritual culture. It was under her guidance and with her active participation that the program of nationwide aesthetic education aimed at realizing the artistic gifts of children was successfully implemented.

The International Assembly and the movement "Banner of Poaco" are among the most exciting expressions of humanism and devotion to peace in modern Bulgaria. Both of them were initiated by Ludmila more or less on the model of the panchshila siddhantha of Indian Kautilya diplomacy.

Adding her solid knowledge to her tireless search for beauty, Ludmila not only affirmed herself as a notable, versatile and harmonious personality - she was also a unique embodiment of the exceptional qualities and virtues of a scholar, artist and public figure - she was a kind of political saint of Bulgaria. Mrs. Indira Gandhi respected her profound personality and they shared a deep friendship.

On July 21, 1981, in Sofia, after a short, unnamed illness, Ludmila left her physical body. Her brief life of exceptional spiritual wealth became a model whose continuation and development are the best and most durable ways to remember her.

Ludmila's spirit was evident in her father's statement earlier this year in New Delhi at the beginning of the "Days of Bulgarian Culture." He said, "Bulgarian songs will again resound at the foot of the Himalayas and by the banks of the Indus and Ganges, the steps of Bulgarian dancers will echo, the colors of an art imbued with love for humanity will bloom. The meetings with the envoys of spiritual communion will bring us ever closer, making us kin, just as it happened during the unforgettable festival of the millennium-old Indian culture in our country."

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