

Gauja River

Gauja, as a River embraces the most significant position in the mindset of the Latvians, not only because it is among the largest rivers of Latvia, but also because of its sacred imprints on the Latvian history and heritage. From a geographical point of view, it is the only large river of Latvia, which has its upper and lower stretches both located in the Latvian terrains. From its upper reaches in the Vidzeme Upland; it runs uninterrupted for about 452 kilometers before falling into the Gulf of Riga, thus making it the longest river of Latvia. However, it is not its length that offers Gauja, a distinct position in the Latvian chronicles rather it is the sacred and mystical value of Gauja that provides it an unparalleled position, which can only be compared to the River Ganges of India or other such sacred rivers of that historical nation.

Several hundred years ago, ancient societies of Finno-Ugric origins called *Livs* lived in the Basin of Gauja River and had their settlements alongside the river. Fascinatingly, the language of the *Livs* was called *Koivo*, which means 'Birch-Tree River' or 'Sacred River' or 'Great River'; strongly indicating to the fact that from the time immemorial, Gauja was revered as sanctified and highly important among the civilization. Many scholars believe that for them, Gauja was like a Goddess as before approaching sea for fishing and trade purposes, they prayed to the Gauja to ensure that her divine protection would make their travel and return safe. The *Livs* also believed that everything in the nature is a living being with a soul, which continues to live even after peoples' death. This belief was equally shared by the ancient Indians, who also approached the sacred rivers for ensuring harmony within the elements of the nature.

Gauja river valley hosts one of the most beautiful formations of the Latvia in a spectacular little town, called Sigulda. This is the place, where

the river is 1-2.5 kilometers wide and has a staggering depth of up to 85 meters at some places. This has made Sigulda the most visited touristic attractions of Latvia. Adding to the glory of the region, the First National Park of Latvia – The Gauja National Park was also established in this valley on September 14, 1973 to protect slightly disturbed natural habitat and to promote eco-tourism as well as to ensure the sustainable development of the region. A great biological diversity, rocky outcrops, varied terrains; springs, picturesque landscapes and many historical and cultural monuments signifying the aura of different centuries characterize this national park.

Every year, thousands of visitors flock to the unique landscape of Gauja Valley, particularly to appreciate the largest Devonian rock ridges of Latvia. Sandstone precipices, rocks and caves, which are situated on the banks of Gauja River, creates an astonishing view in all the seasons. It has been suggested that some of the caves which are situated near the Gauja River, were used as worshipping places and may have been used for occult purposes in the ancient times. This hypothesis has been supported by the discovery of many petroglyphs on the walls of the caves.

Previously, it was believed that the Gauja River Valley was created by the glacial melted waters but it turned out that there is another, much more ancient, valley lying deep within the Devonian sedimentary rocks. It is now universally accepted that the Gauja Valley started to form approximately 370-300 million years ago (the same as the sandstone outcrops) but obtained its current outline nearly 12,000-13,000 years ago, when it was transformed by glacial meltwaters.

Gauja cannot be categorized as an ordinary river because its nature is very diverse and it tends to change its course every year. It not only changes the strength of its stream but in some

places it also creates double bottom and whirlpools. Although the average depth of the Gauja River is only more than a meter, yet, it is still prohibited by law, to swim in the river because of these unique properties of the Gauja. It is important to mention that there are several legends, myths, poems and folklores written about

Gauja that still continue to inspire people like me, who are humble residents of Sigulda. I wrote this article with the hope that the sacredness of this river of Latvia would spread and gather around similar stories from all over the globe.

Rita Arāja, Latvia
