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## ON THE ROAD TO GREAT INDIA – A PROGRAM OF NATIONAL REVIVAL

### THE SARASWATI TEMPLE IN PILANI AS AN EXPRESSION OF THE WORLDVIEW OF G.D. BIRLA<sup>1</sup>

**ABSTRACT** The paper aims at tracing the idea of the revival of Indian society and nation in the undertaking of G.D. Birla (1894-1983) – the most influential representative of the Birla family which members, known as industrial magnates and corporate leaders, contribute since the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to medicine, education and technological development of India. G.D. Birla's overall goal, seems to have been the revitalisation and strengthening of Hinduism as "Arya dharma" and interpret it in such a way as to make this the religion as inclusive and universal as possible. One of the Birlas' activities fully demonstrating these religious ideas is

<sup>1</sup> The research is carried out within the framework of the "Opus 5" program of the National Science Centre [UMO-2013/09/B/HS1/02005]. The research is still ongoing, so this article presents only a current and by necessity fragmentary state of knowledge and therefore all necessary literature on the subject is still not complete. The project results will be published as a comprehensive monograph, thus publications of articles that focus on particular temples or aspects of the Birlas' foundation activity are in fact an invitation for discussion and comments. Any suggestions will be appreciated as indispensable to make the final outcome as complete as possible.

the temple foundation. Thus considering the wide range of areas in which G.D. Birla was involved, the authors have focused on one such project – the Saraswati temple in Pilani and its ideological background. The temple is located in the Birla Institute of Technology & Science campus and dedicated to the Hindu goddess of wisdom and learning. The authors hope that this analysis will succeed in showing how the individual worldview of the founder left its mark on the idea of the whole family's endeavours, and at the same time give voice to the range of ideas which, although already expressed at the turn of the nineteenth century, are still alive and influential in India today.

**Keywords:** Pilani, Birla, Saraswati, Sharda, philanthropy, *Bhagavadgita*, inclusivism, temple

In modern times the largest movement of the so-called “Indian revival” was generally not only a revivalist conception but it actually involved building the Indian nation from scratch, referring to both the enlightened practices developed in the tradition of the West, as well as to a renewed spirituality and Indian religiosity. Concepts developed by a number of representatives for several years, and sometimes even entire generations, had a great influence on what social, political and cultural form India would eventually adopt in the twentieth century. The Birla family venture can be regarded as a kind of project referring to some ideas of an Indian awakening in the times of the so-called “Indian Renaissance.” The next generations of Birlas – as the whole project has already lasted a few decades – have also been guided by the idea of a “national revival” in India, and they refer both to patterns developed in Western civilisation and to the oldest remnants of local traditions.

This article is not, however, an analysis of the similarities and differences between these two strands of thought on India. However, we intend to look at some ideas that may be generally understood as the revival of the Indian nation through a return to ancient Indian spirituality, without entirely relying on Western-style modernisation, and which are still alive in modern India. The authors will present these issues through the example of an undertaking of perhaps the most influential representative of this family – G.D. Birla (1894-1983) – who continued the family's philanthropic tradition dating back to the nineteenth century, but in a special way – because he embarked on a comprehensive and wide-ranging program to systematically construct Indian society. The overreaching idea underlying the endeavours of G.D. Birla, his overall goal, seems to have been the revitalisation and strengthening of Hinduism as *Arya dharma* and interpreting it in such a way as to make the religion as inclusive and universal as possible. Considering the extremely wide range of areas in which G.D. Birla was involved, the authors have focused on one project only – the Saraswati temple in Pilani (the Birla family cradle) and its ideological background. The authors hope that this will succeed in showing how the individual worldview of the founder left its mark on the idea of the

whole family's endeavours, and at the same time give voice to the range of ideas which, although already expressed at the turn of the nineteenth century, are still alive and influential in India today.



**Photo 1.** Birla Mandir in Pilani, overall view (A. Staszczuk)

The Birla family, the founders of the temples, commonly known as Birla Mandir, is one of the most influential families in India. Its members have been and continue to be active participants as well as co-creators of the economic, political, social, cultural and religious life of India. The Birlas have belonged, at least since the eighteenth century, to the very influential community of the *Mārvārī* (Marwari) – merchants and bankers.<sup>2</sup> Seth Shivnarain Birla (1838-1910) was the first of the family to start his own business and was the first to leave the cradle of the Birlas – Pilani (Rajasthan) – set-

<sup>2</sup> The term “Marwari” is connected with the generic name Marwar, which defined the former state of Jodhpur (the South-Western part of Rajasthan). Over time, the word Marwari came to be used not only for people from the area and involved in commercial activities, but it also included buyers from the neighbouring areas of Jaipur and Bikaner. Today, as argued by members of the community, the Marwari community includes people from other professions – *Yet while anyone from Marwar may call himself a Marwari, in colloquial use it invariably refers to traders and the word “Marwari” has come to evoke the imagery of a wealthy merchant well ensconced in his immigrant setting while clinging to the customs, practices and manners of his kin* – M. Kudaisya, *The Life and Times of G.D. Birla*, New Delhi 2013, p. 4. On the history and culture of Marwaris in detail see: D. Tripathi, ‘From Community to Class: The Marwaris in a Historical Perspective’ in B.L. Bhandani, D. Tripathi (eds.), *Facets of a Marwar Historian. Aspects of India’s Social and Economic History. A Volume in Honour of Shri Govind Ag[a]rwal*, Jaipur 1996, pp. 189-196.

ting off to Mumbai to seek his fortune in business. His only son, Raja Baldeodas Birla (1864-1957) was already twelve years old when he started helping his father and three years later became the co-founder (along with his father) of *Gaddi* – a typical business venture for the Marwari community involving banking and speculation.<sup>3</sup> This spectacularly successful venture went on to become the foundation of the Birla family fortune. Baldeodas' legacy was handed down to his four sons – Jugalkishore (1883-1967), Rameshwardas (1892-1973), Ghanshyamdas (1894-1983) and Braj Mohan (1904-1981). It is not only their activity in businesses within various industries, but also their political endeavours (during the key period of gaining independence), that assured the Birlas their place in Indian history. Their descendants still follow the lead of previous generations – they continue to develop the business and actively participate in the social life of India.

Business and politics were not the only realms of the Birlas. Of equal importance were, and still are, their social campaigns, which coincided more or less with their first successes in business. From the very beginning, this activity aimed to improve (or even create) conditions in which a person might be able to realise his or her full potential, which would in turn – as Ghanshyamdas Birla added later on – strengthen the society as a whole.

This community work – caring for the common man – was from the outset an integral part of the Birlas' business. This type of activity can be observed as an extremely popular tradition in India starting from ancient times and lasting until the present day, that is *dāna* (dana)<sup>4</sup> – donations and almsgiving. Traditional Indian dana in a wide sense of meaning in a Hindu, Buddhist or Jain tradition, is more than just a charitable attitude; it is a religious approach, an accumulation of merit by people active in the community, who through their activity are not able to accumulate purely religious merit, so the material fruits of their activities they share with others. In this way, they not only help the holy ones, but also those in need of assistance. Such an attitude and way of thinking about one's actions in the world is still close to many modern Hindus, but the Birlas belong in this regard not only to the richest, but also to the most generous. The Birlas themselves have left their mark through their philanthropy and successive generations have mythologised their ancestors who have become almost archetypal characters in the full realisation of such an important and fundamental ideal in India as karma yogin as outlined in the *Bhagavadgītā* (*Bhagavadgita*), a text to which the Birla family, or at least its most famous members, are attached in a special way. However, it should be noted that the understanding of *karmayoga* (as a specific course of action as well as a vision of the world) adopted by the family is firmly rooted in the ideas of the Indian Renaissance, particularly in the thoughts of Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902), who made a significant interpretation of this path described in the *Bhagavadgita*. In the

<sup>3</sup> On the structure and functioning of *Gaddi* see: M. Kudaisya, *The Life and Times...*, p. 11.

<sup>4</sup> Sanskrit and Hindi terms used for the first time in the text are written in transcription in italics, with additional English transliteration in brackets, if different. Names of places, people, etc. and titles are written in English transliteration only. This rule does not apply to quotations, where the original transcription is left.

thoughts of Swami, karmayoga ceased to rely on the fulfilment of the *Varna Dharma* (varna dharma) – an obligation arising from membership of the varna – but became instead a *wise and reasonable activity, the effects of which are devoted to God*.<sup>5</sup> This activity, which is particularly important in the context of our considerations here, as Vivekananda saw it, was aimed at the transformation and the continuous improvement of the world, especially in its social dimension.

The autobiographies or memoirs penned by family members, as well as biographies and commemorative volumes written by independent authors (which are, incidentally, of a hagiographic nature in many cases) are filled with examples of charitable, community-oriented and multi-faceted campaigns made by individual representatives of the family, ranging from minor, though undoubtedly important, local activities (for example, Baldeodas' and his son's food distribution during the famine that struck Rajasthan in 1899) to large, wide-ranging and comprehensive projects (for instance, the foundation of hospitals, schools and research institutes undertaken by various members of the family). The description of these activities is far from being a mere chronicle, but often has as a meaningful symbolic element. One example is the description of the organisation and, of course, financing of a water reservoir located in the Rajasthani desert in their family town of Pilani – *Shivnarayan arranged for a tank to be constructed at Pilani which has never run dry even during the severest drought. Even now, people say that the tank never dried up owing to the good deeds performed by the ancestors of the Birlas, meaning Shivnarayan and Baldeodas*.<sup>6</sup>

The family's philanthropic activity essentially involves three main areas: education and science with a special emphasis on the latest technology (the foundation of schools, universities, scientific research institutes, etc.), religion/spirituality (the foundation of temples and similar institutions), and community work (the foundation of hospitals, etc.). The ultimate aim was to create a comprehensive revival of Indian society. Such a vision of charitable work is aptly described by Krishna Kumar Birla (1918-2008) while writing about the attitude of his father – Ghanshyamdas:

*Education is the most important single factor in achieving rapid economic development and technological progress and in creating a social order founded on the values of freedom, social justice and equal opportunity [...]. The aim of education is not merely to impart knowledge but also to instil appropriate habits of thought and action, inculcating in students at the same time a sense of social responsibility [...]. Our effort at BITS, Pilani,<sup>7</sup> is to ensure harmoniously blended development of the students' physical, intellectual, aesthetic, social and spiritual powers and not merely to impart theoretical knowledge and skills.*<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> J. Justyński, *Mysł społeczna i polityczna renesansu indyjskiego. Od Rama Mohana Roya do Rabindranatha Tagora*, Warszawa 1985, p. 136.

<sup>6</sup> K.K. Birla, *Brushes with History. An Autobiography*, New Delhi 2007, p. 6.

<sup>7</sup> This refers to the Birla Institute of Technology and Science (BITS), which is widely mentioned in further sections of the article.

<sup>8</sup> K.K. Birla, *Brushes with History*..., p. 283.



Although the Birla family tree goes back many generations, and the list of philanthropic ventures carried out by its individual members – were one to write such a list – would be extremely long, the person who was the real initiator of all kinds of activities, both economic and social, is Ghanshyamdas Birla (known as G.D. Birla or just G.D.), and he remains to this day the most famous and recognised member of the family. His astrological birth chart – still an extremely important document, even for contemporary and forward-thinking Hindus – foretold of a future fit for a great king.<sup>9</sup> Although he did not become a ruler, he left behind a body of work worthy of the greatest and most generous Indian maharajas. In this text, as stated in the title, we focus mainly on one representative of the Birla family in the form of G.D.

The worldview affiliations<sup>10</sup> of G.D., as well as the values he cultivated have three main sources – home, the Marwari community and his association with Mahatma Gandhi. G.D. came from a traditional Indian family in which religious education was more important than qualifications (G.D. did not have any).<sup>11</sup> Although G.D., as mentioned above, did not consider himself to be a religious person and in fact rejected all external forms of religion taken from his home background, it is his upbringing that largely influenced his perception of reality, and determined how he would understand and define *svadharma* (swadharma) – or one's own duty. For him, the key was to read the *Bhagavadgita*, to which he had become attached while still growing up in the family home. The *Gita*, as G.D.'s son – Krishna Kumar – recalled [...] *formed the core of his life. He discovered that the Gita epitomised the philosophy of the Upanishads and Vedic scriptures. He could find answers to all human problems in Gita.*<sup>12</sup> In this text, however, he found above all the perfect representation of the ideal of *karmayogin* that through action, through appropriate deeds, through the service to others, God himself is served.<sup>13</sup> This ideal would also become a bridge between G.D. and Gandhi, whom he considered to be a paragon of *karmayogin*. This relationship lasting more than a quarter of a century,<sup>14</sup> however, was never one between two activists engaged in political, social and economic campaigns. This relationship was primarily spiritual in nature and in many ways resembled the one between a guru and his disciple. For G.D., Gandhi was the final authority in matters of morality and worldview. He was an adviser to him in matters of everyday life – from dietary issues to opinions on family problems and

<sup>9</sup> R.N. Jaju, *G.D. Birla. A Biography*, New Delhi 1986, p. 305.

<sup>10</sup> We have deliberately avoided the word "religion" here, as G.D. himself considered himself a man of religious indifference, a man who kept his faith in God, but rejected any external manifestations of religiosity (symbols, rituals, etc.) cf. R.N. Jaju, *G.D. Birla...*, pp. 289 ff.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. for example: K.K. Birla, *Brushes with History...*; R.N. Jaju, *G.D. Birla...*; M. Kudaisya, *The Life and Times...*

<sup>12</sup> K.K. Birla, *Brushes with History...*, p. 27.

<sup>13</sup> God, according to G.D.'s biographer was for him a source of strength with no attributes. R.N. Jaju, *G.D. Birla...*, p. 299.

<sup>14</sup> G.D. met Gandhi in Calcutta in 1916, where Mahatma was hosted by the Marwari community who really valued the religious and nationalist views of Gandhi. The real and close contact, however, only began in 1921, after G.D. financially supported one of Gandhi's initiatives.

even spiritual doubts.<sup>15</sup> Not without significance for G.D.'s ideological formation was, as mentioned above, his belonging to the Marwari community. The term "Marwari," according to an expert on the history of the community and one of the founders of the Akhil Bhartiya Marwari Sammelan (All India Marwari Federation)<sup>16</sup> – Bhimsen Kedia – refers to *One who is a follower of the Sanatan Dharma and Ahimsa in the Jain style, one who wears his native dress and follows the life-style, a follower of the old culture, a staunch believer in God, one who cares for the poor and homeless, one who builds dharamshalas wherever he goes, and one who is known among all the jatis for his trading abilities and his business acumen.*<sup>17</sup>

G.D. Birla's main activity began in the first half of the twentieth century. On his importance as someone who shaped recent developments in India a lot has already been written. His own political activity as well as that of his immediate family has been described and analysed in significant detail. G.D.'s relations with the key political figures of India and the world are well-known. Much has been said of his work as a great entrepreneur, the form and scope of whose business supported the reform efforts that both ideologically and materially contributed to the building of an independent India.<sup>18</sup>

In the shadow of the aforementioned activities stands another – an important aspect of G.D.'s activity, namely the foundation of temples. Ghanshyamdas was neither the first nor the only representative of the Birla family to be involved in this type of endeavour. On the contrary, he was a faithful follower of the family tradition. Even Seth Shivnarain (G.D.'s grandfather) restored the temple in Pilani, which was falling into ruin, and then continued to maintain it. G.D.'s father – Raja Baldeodas – founded temples in religiously and also politically significant locations – the Lakshmi Narayan temple in Patna (1943), the temple in Mathura Srimadbhagavadgita (1946), the Krishna temple in Kurukshetra (1956). With the prominent participation of Baldeodas and his son Jugalkishore he also built the Lakshmi Narayan temple in Delhi (1939) and the Shiva (New Vishwanath) temple in Varanasi (founded in 1931, but only completed in 1956)<sup>19</sup>. Inspired by Braj Mohan, Ganga Prasad (1922-

<sup>15</sup> To be precise, as the repeatedly cited M. Kudaisya claims unequivocally, Ghanshyamdas describes these relations in his memoirs *In the Shadow of the Mahatma. A Personal Memoir*, Bombay 1953. Cf. also *Bapu. A Unique Association*, Bombay 1970, publications including four volumes of correspondence between G.D. and Gandhi.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. All India Marwari Federation, at <<http://www.marwarisammelan.com>>, 10 March 2015.

<sup>17</sup> R.B. Parson, *The Bazaar and the Bari: Calcutta, Marwaris, and the World of Hindi Letters*, a dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in South and Southeast Asia Studies in the Graduate Division of the University of California, Berkeley, UC Berkeley Electronic Theses and Dissertations, 2012, p. 20, at <<http://escholarship.org/uc/item/7ng958qz>>, March 2015, emphasis ours. Analysing the conceptual foundation of all Birla Mandir complexes, one may notice that they are fully in line with the ideals nurtured by the Marwari community.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. M. Kudaisya, *The Life and Times...*

<sup>19</sup> The founder of the temple (and the entire Banaras Hindu University) was Madan Mohan Malaviya (1861-1946), closely related to the Birla family. The Birlas were generous sponsors of the entire project. Cf. for example M. Kudelska, A. Staszczuk, A. Świerżowska, 'Birla mandir – współczesne

-2010), he created the impressive Venkateswara temple complex in Hyderabad (1976), as well as the Lakshmi Narayan temple in Bhopal (1964) and the Lakshmi Narayan temple in Jaipur (1988). In Shahad (Mumbai) Rameshwardas established the Vithoba temple (1966). G.D. himself founded some impressive temple complexes: Surya in Gwalior (1988), Vishnu in Nagda,<sup>20</sup> Saraswati in Pilani (1960) and Shiva in Renukoot (1972). Such ventures were continued by successive generations of Birlas. They initiated, among others, the Ganesha temple in Alibaug/Salav and the Radha Krishna temple in Kolkata (1996).

The above list, although fairly extensive, covers only the most famous and most representative temple buildings sponsored by the Birla family – the focus of the research carried out by the authors of this article. However, there does not exist, at least in the observation of the authors, any list of the religious constructions founded by the Birlas which can be considered complete. According to the scant written sources available, there are supposed to be more than forty of them.<sup>21</sup> It should, however, be mentioned here that the Birla family also used to support temples already in existence. Thus, their foundation work includes not only the construction of the new temples but also the reconstruction and renovation of the old. This great contribution from the Birlas allows those temples to be called “Birla mandirs” too. The authors of this study focus only on the new Birla temples that so far have never undergone any systematic research. Information on them, though prevalent, is quite superficial and typically appears almost exclusively in tourist guides and on tourist websites whose aim is to encourage people to visit them as a tourist attraction rather than provide any real in-depth historical information. One exception is the New Vishvanath Temple in Varanasi, whose origin, embroiled in the socio-political context, is described in greater detail. This temple is the only one with its own website containing some detailed descriptions.<sup>22</sup>

The temples founded by the Birla family, are located primarily in Northern and Central India, and the places where they are built were carefully picked for their significance to Indian tradition such as: Delhi, Kurukshetra, Varanasi, Patna and Kolkata. Several temples were built away from the main tourist or pilgrimage centres, at the newly established industrial agglomerations that have grown at factories belonging to the Birlas. These include, for example, Renukoot (aluminium processing), Shahad (textiles), Alibaug/Salav (steel processing, cellulose) and with a much longer historical tradition – Gwalior (cotton).

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hinduistyczne kompleksy świątynne jako przykład modernizacji przez powrót do tradycji’ *The Polish Journal of the Arts and Culture*, Vol. 11, *Estetyka i Krytyka*, No. 3 (2014), p. 34 ff.

<sup>20</sup> So far the authors were not able to find in any source the date of the consecration of the temples in Nagda and Alibaug/Salav.

<sup>21</sup> M. Kudaisya, *The Life and Times...*, p. 393. As it seems, the number covers not only the religious objects founded by the family, but also those which were built with the financial support of the Birlas as well as those whose renovation and/ or maintenance were possible thanks to the financial involvement of the family.

<sup>22</sup> <<http://www.bhu.ac.in/VT/>>, March 2015.



These temples do not merely perform a religious function, but also serve secular interests: education, culture and some were also intended to be considered as places of recreation. Thus, for example, near the temple in Kolkata and Jaipur astronomical observatories were built, frequented particularly by children and secondary school students; near the temples in Hyderabad is the B.M. Birla Science Centre – a complex which includes a planetarium, museum of science, archaeological museum, museum of modern art, doll museum, dinosaurium, library, as well as a huge conference hall. Next to the temple they founded the Bhopal G.P. Birla Museum, which houses a great collection of religious sculptures. The temples, as mentioned, also function as cultural centres – a clear example of which is the one in Kolkata, whose lower section holds an amphitheatre of considerable size, hosting various shows dedicated to the traditional Indian performing arts. Almost all of the temple complexes are also located in huge and carefully tended gardens<sup>23</sup> that – especially in the industrial areas – are the sole, or one of the few, attractive recreational facilities. A perfect example is the temple in Alibaug/Salav – a small Ganesha temple with modern architecture located in a well-groomed park located on a hill overlooking the entire area, whose skyline is dominated by the chimneys of the cellulose factory belonging to the Birlas. Everyone knows that such establishments are not harmless for the environment. Perhaps that is why in the temple garden full of carefully selected flowers there is information that the sites are maintained by the cellulose plant. But the temple in Delhi has a recreational dimension – in the impressively sized garden there is a large fountain and a playground for children.

All these enterprises of the Birla family may seem highly complex, well thought-out and with a definite aim. The temple founders did not choose one particular Hindu deity to whom all the temples could be dedicated. We can observe quite the reverse; the Birlas decided to exemplify their crucial idea of religious inclusivism and promoted various Hindu gods. This deliberate campaign meant that the main deity of the temple would be either the most popular god of the region, or somehow tend to embody the leading concept of the temple in the form of a god. It is also possible that the main, pan-Indian deity understood as the possible theistic manifestation of the Absolute is chosen. Still, the main deity is not the only god installed in the temple sanctum. Obviously, it takes centre stage, but in the side sanctuaries there are other important deities of Hinduism.<sup>24</sup> For example, in the New Delhi Lakshmi-Narayan temple except for the idols of the main deities, in the subsidiary shrines to the left and to the right, there are representations of Durga and Shiva. This means that every temple should promote the various Hindu cults, but may also step beyond Hinduism and include Buddhist, Jain and Sikh images.

The choice that the Birlas made in selecting the particular deity is very significant, considering regional concerns, and aims to support the local tradition (for example, the Vithoba temple in Shahad). At the same time, the founders did not try to force the

<sup>23</sup> Exceptions are those where, due to the surrounding buildings, it was not possible to create a garden (e.g. the temple in Kolkata).

<sup>24</sup> Or Buddha in the Patna shrine.

local communities to accept some other gods that were not traditionally worshipped in those places. In the Birla foundations the most popular god is Vishnu, including his different aspects: Narayana, Rama, Krishna, Venkateshwara, Vithoba. Additionally, Shiva is the main deity of three temples (Varanasi, Renukoot, Brajrajnagar). A temple dedicated to Krishna was founded in Kurukshetra, believed to be the location of the great ancient battle described in the *Mahābhārata* (*Mahabharata*). Krishna is one of the greatest heroes of the epic but at the same time the god giving Arjuna in the *Bhagavadgita* instructions about one's own duty etc. The Birlas consider the *Gita* as one of the most important learnings for the Hindus, so it is not surprising that the only god who should be promoted in this place is Krishna. At the same time, we have also such temples as the Gwalior Surya shrine and the Saraswati temple in Pilani. The former is situated at the site of the ancient cult of the Sun god. It is believed that in ancient times in Gwalior the oldest Surya temple in India was founded. This explains the fact that sometimes the gods worshipped in the Birla temples are less popular deities of the Hindu pantheon, originating from the old tradition and generally absent in the main shrines of modern temples. Therefore, the idea of making a temple the best symbol of the Hindu dharma for the particular region is clearly visible here. Although not present in every temple, there are consistent strands that can be interpreted as an attempt to universalise Hinduism and portray it as a religion, which could become a platform of agreement for all (or almost all) religions and spiritual paths. This idea is not new in India. Once again this recalls the heritage of the Indian Renaissance and the thoughts of Swami Vivekananda, who saw the opportunity to create a universal religion based on the philosophy of *Vedānta* (Vedanta) – a religion whose pillar would be the conviction of the eternal, divine nature of every human being, which, under appropriate circumstances and with appropriate discipline, could have a chance of complete manifestation. Doctrinal issues would be marginal, indicating only the fact that people in their quest for transcendence refer to different aspects of the same, one god. In this way, various routes leading to variously conceived transcendence were valued, while blurring the differences between them. At the same time, however, Vivekananda and later on those who absorbed or were inspired by his thought, reinterpreted Hinduism in the Vedantic spirit and acknowledged this as the best platform for this specifically understood religious dialogue. This is, to recall classic terminology, the hierarchical inclusivism described by Paul Hacker.<sup>25</sup> This idea was expressed in almost every temple founded by

<sup>25</sup> The "inclusivism" category was applied by Hacker to describe the specific Indian way of thinking and dealing with other religions and worldviews. It consisted in including one component or entire complexes into its own religious system. This inclusivism Hacker combined with hierarchy – individual ideas are not considered to be non-orthodox, heretical, but treated as having different, more or less important functions and thus they are arranged in hierarchical order. Hacker argued that the non-dualistic Vedanta is particularly inclusivist, which, although it recognises that all spiritual paths lead to the same destination, at the same time recognises itself as a pillar, the highest truth of any religion or spiritual path. In other words, all religions and spiritual paths are equal because all are included in this, the most perfect, which is the Vedanta. Cf. P. Hacker, 'Inklusivismus' in G. Oberhammer (ed.), *Inklusivismus. Eine indische Denkform*, Leiden–Wien 1983, pp. 11–28, and W. Halbfass, *Indie i Europa. Próba zrozumienia na gruncie filozoficznym*, trans. by N. Nowakowska, R. Piotrowski, Warszawa 2008,

the Birla family, in which there are representatives of different religions and spiritual paths, passages of scripture from different traditions or the religious symbols that represent them. Especially pronounced in this regard are the temples in Jaipur (on the walls of which are, among others, Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary, St. Francis, St. Peter, Moses, Zoroaster, Confucius, Kabir, Mira Bai, Guru Nanak), Hyderabad (where there is a separate section containing extensive passages from the writings of Confucius, the *Talmud*, the *Old and New Testaments*), or even the temple of Saraswati.

The last temple mentioned here is at the same time an example of the aforementioned inclusivism, but also one of the shrines where G.D. Birla decided to install the idol of a less popular goddess. Perhaps his idea was to promote the old Vedic goddess of wisdom, learning, crafts and arts in the centre of the BITS Vidya Vihar campus founded in the Birlas' home town – Pilani.

The temple architecture is inspired by the style of the most famous Khajuraho Chandela foundations of the Western temple group. However, it does not imitate all the architectural elements of the Kandariya Mahadeva or any other temple of the complex. The sculptural decoration is also devoid of the famous erotic sculptures. Thus, it cannot be simply described as a replica of the Kandariya. We may classify the Pilani mandir in the category of temples architecturally inspired by different regional styles; still, this inspiration does not follow the traditional style of a particular region. So, for example, in the Pilani temple located in Rajasthan we simply cannot find Rajasthani architecture.

In this group we should also list the temples researched in Jaipur, Hyderabad, Kolkata, Renukoot, Shahad, Gwalior and Nagda. Among these, the Gwalior temple – in form – seems to be the closest imitation of the temple in Konark (Orisa); however, its style is not extremely accurate. In fact, it is somewhat far from the excellent original.

Still, in their architectural form, many temples do not conform to the exact image of their prototypes. On the contrary, some examples of the Birla temples may be given here whose style could be described as eclectic – in fact the bodies of the shrines consist of elements of a different origin. This means that a temple may collate elements that were inspired by more than one style. In the preliminary remark it could be summarised that the group of temples under discussion here is mostly the result of blending the styles of the Madhya Pradesh, Orisa, Gujarat and Maharashtra regions, freely incorporating particular elements according to the requirements. The same rule applies to the sculpture decoration that is usually concentrated on the outside walls.

In the other group of Birla mandirs that may be identified on the basis of their architectural forms, there are temples built in the particular style of twentieth century sacral architecture. In their structure, the temples vary in their complexity of design, sometimes two-storeyed, with pillared and windowed bright halls (often decorated with stained-glass windows), enclosing up to three sanctuaries in one line in the cella or *garbhagrha* (garbhagriha) area. The main sanctum is positioned in the middle. The

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p. 605 ff; W. Halbfass (ed.) *Paul Hacker – Philology and Confrontation. Paul Hacker on Traditional and Modern Vedanta*, Albany 1995.

outside walls are painted in yellow, red and white (except for Varanasi, where pink is used). The first Birla mandir, opened in New Delhi in 1939, belongs to this group. Additionally, temples in Patna, Kurukshetra, Bhopal, Mathura, Akola and Varanasi should be listed here. The interior of those temples, even if they are rather small, is planned in such a way that the main section could form a spacious *maṇḍapa* (mandapa) with sanctum(s) at one end. The sanctuaries are usually circumambulated and at the same time provide another space for various figural representations. The decoration of the outer walls is limited, but inside there are many images, mostly on the relief panels. In addition, between the two groups distinguished above – temples such as the ones in Delhi, Patna, Bhopal, Kurukshetra, etc. – are cult buildings, with plenty of inscriptions and quotations from the Holy Scriptures. The second group has almost no inscriptions, and besides the main deity, to whom the temple is dedicated, in the naves as well as on the exterior and interior walls there are illustrations of characters – usually historical – which can be read as an eminence or imagination of the power embodied by the main god of the temple. As mentioned above, this group includes mainly temples in Jaipur, Pilani and Hyderabad. Their design is more suited to contemplation and meditation than specific religious rituals. While analysing the philosophical message, which probably lay in the assumptions of particular temples, one may be tempted by an initial interpretation that the first group of temples belongs to the *Saguna* (Saguna) strand of Vedānta while the other can be described as *Saguna-Nirguna* (Nirguna). In the oldest classical period, this strand does not exist, but was in fact developed on the basis of the sixteenth century thinker from Bengal – Madhusudana Saraswati. It can be assumed that his views influenced the thinking of G.D. Birla. The Madhusudana Saraswati system is a highly specific Vedānta that is neither a pure *Advaita*, nor *Saguna*. He is the author of several texts, including polemic texts from various positions. He took a strong stand against any form of dualism. In his philosophical outlook, he was a definite supporter of monism, but from a religious point of view, he was a theist and consistently followed the path of *Bhakta*. Surendranath Dasgupta writes: *Madhusūdana attempts to prove that it is only the Vedantic concept of salvation that can appeal to men, all other views being unsatisfactory and invalid.*<sup>26</sup> The concept of inclusivism certainly fits the philosophical and religious assumptions of many Indian thinkers from ancient times until the present day. Madhusudana is one of the many representatives of this trend. This concept is not confined to a rigid dogma, so individual thinkers may assign to it particular characteristics, often associated with individual experiences and often mystical. Therefore, this sixteenth century Bengali thinker of philosophical principles and personal experience developed a comprehensive system. As Sanjukta Gupta noted in his monograph:

*Madhusūdana, a monk, was a follower of Śaṅkara's non-dualist school of Vedānta. [...] He was a formidable writer on the Advaita-Vedānta dialectics. As a theologian of the Bhāgavata school of bhakti he stands unique even though he was close to the Vaiṣṇava theologians of the Bengal school of Vaiṣṇavism promulgated by the followers of Śrīkṛṣṇa Cai-*

<sup>26</sup> S. Dasgupta, *A History of Indian Philosophy*, Vol. 2, Delhi 1975, p. 227.

*tanya of Navadvīpa in Bengal. [...] He has forged a bridge between the Śaṅkara – school of philosophy and the Caitanya's school of theology.*<sup>27</sup>

Similar philosophical messages may be observed in the ideological assumptions of those who founded the complexes of the Birla Mandir.

Despite the fact that the temples have existed and functioned for almost a hundred years, there has not yet been any research or systematic analysis of the ideological assumptions underlying the foundation of the temples. Their reconstruction would exceed the scope of this article. Therefore, at this point the authors will focus on a detailed analysis of one temple only – Saraswati (Sharada Peeth) in Pilani, located at the Birla Institute of Technology and Science (BITS). The choice of this particular temple is not accidental; it is curious for several reasons. Firstly, with regard to its very name (the goddess Saraswati), secondly due to the iconographic program on the walls as a kind of worldview of its founder – G.D. Birla, and thirdly, for its location on the campus of the BITS.

The temple in Pilani is unusual not only because of the final architectural effect, which is delightful and designed to be extraordinary from its very conception, located in the beloved hometown of the Birlas. G.D. Birla in particular dreamt about the splendour of Pilani. He wanted to transform the small provincial Pilani into a great educational, scientific and spiritual centre comparable with institutions of this type around the world. *Running industries was his way of life; to take Pilani to the top was his religion.*<sup>28</sup> The Birla's undertaking was diverse and complex from the start. As an Indian patriot he dreamt of a better future for India and its citizens. He knew that in this regard, he could primarily help people to receive a decent education. Yet, he did not want to blindly imitate Western models because in all his endeavours he took care to uphold Indian cultural and religious traditions – hence the idea to construct not only educational centres, but also temples. This combination is significant. G.D. Birla did not think so much about teaching (understood as the transmission of information), as about formation, the shaping of a person, so that he could become a conscious citizen of India. This formation consisted of three levels – education, religious and spiritual formation (but understood specifically as the promotion of these elements that make people industrious, diligent and righteous), and social.<sup>29</sup> G.D.'s way of thinking and also that of his successors in terms of the role his ventures played is clearly stated in the ideological statement of perhaps the most well-known of G.D. Birla's "children" – the Birla Institute of Technology and Science.<sup>30</sup> Here is the mission of the BITS:

*[...] is to advance knowledge and educate students in science, technology, and other areas of scholarship that will best serve the nation and the world in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The Insti-*

<sup>27</sup> S. Gupta, *Advaita Vedanta and Vaisnavism. The Philosophy of Madhusudana Saraswati*, London–New York 2013, pp. 13–14.

<sup>28</sup> R.N. Jaju, *G.D. Birla...*, p. 284.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 193.

<sup>30</sup> The Birla Institute of Technology and Science was established in 1964 and currently has branches in Hyderabad, Goa and Dubai.



*tute is committed to generating, disseminating, and preserving knowledge, and to working with others to bring this knowledge to bear on the world's great challenges. BITS is dedicated to providing its students with an education that combines rigorous academic study and the excitement of discovery with the support and intellectual stimulation of a diverse campus community. We seek to develop in each member of the BITS community the ability and passion to work wisely, creatively, and effectively for the betterment of humankind.*<sup>31</sup>

The "heart" of the BITS is a temple located in a small park, dedicated – unusually for India – to the goddess of wisdom – Saraswati. This temple also stands as a manifesto of the worldview of its founder – G.D. Birla.

*G.D. must have wanted to make Pilani not only an "Oxford" but also an "Taxila" and Nalanda. He believed in an eclectic approach and wanted to incorporate the best form all over the world, without overlooking his own heritage [...]. The educational centre at Pilani is a splendid confluence of the knowledge of East and West. Ancient Indian spirituality and modern scientific and technical knowledge coexist in harmony. [...] The Saraswati Temple there shows his deep faith in Indian culture and traditions. It has the splendour of old Indian architecture and the atmosphere of Pilani is permeated by this sacred temple.*<sup>32</sup>

The original idea of building such a temple in Pilani is ascribed to Raja Baldeodas Birla, G.D. Birla's father.<sup>33</sup> As previously mentioned, G.D. Birla's choice of the main deity for the temple in his beloved Pilani was not accidental. Saraswati is the Vedic goddess of wisdom and knowledge. One must bear in mind that knowledge in the Indian tradition does not only have a purely intellectual character, but also a deep spiritual dimension.

The word Sarasvatī (the Flowing One) contains the term *saras* – water; this term comes from the root *ṣṛ* – swim, flow. Therefore, Saraswati is associated with the waters, the forces and powers that water brings – fertility, fertilisation, with what gives life and therefore inspiration, not only in the earthly sense, but an invigorating impulse. In the Vedic hymns she was asked to descend from the heavens because it was thought that she comes from the heavenly waters. She embodies and gives strength, knowledge and wisdom. Originally, Saraswati was the name of an ancient river, mentioned in the *R̥gveda* (*Rigveda*), and so the goddess was related to a heaven sent river and water in general, and said to be present in the creation of the earth, the atmosphere and the heavenly spheres. She cleanses all with her waters. Supplications are offered her for wealth, children, sustenance as the giver of sons.<sup>34</sup> Also *Saras*, which means fluid, refers to anything that flows and as such applies to speech and thought as well as water.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>31</sup> <<http://www.bits-pilani.ac.in/Overview>>, 20 March 2015.

<sup>32</sup> R.N. Jaju, *G.D. Birla...*, p. 285 and 288-289.

<sup>33</sup> S.N. Prasad, 'Sharda Peeth: The Saraswati Temple at Pilani' in *Modern India. Heritage and Achievement. Shri Ghanshyam Das Birla Eightieth Birthday Commemoration Volume*, Pilani 1977, p. 881.

<sup>34</sup> F.W. Bunce, *An Encyclopaedia of Hindu Deities, Demi-Gods, Godlings, Demons and Heroes with Special Focus on Iconographic Attributes*, Vol. 1, New Delhi 2000, p. 476.

<sup>35</sup> A. Daniélou, *The Myths and Gods of India. The Classic Work on Hindu Polytheism*, Rochester 1991, p. 260.

However, this is not the end of the wealth of meanings and contexts associated with the name Saraswati. Stella Kramrisch,<sup>36</sup> while discussing the great Indian goddesses significant in the Vedic tradition, as well as those continuing or taking over their roles in the later period, very convincingly depicts the relationships between the three goddesses, namely Vedic Saranyū, Sarama and Sarasvatī. Due to the possible etymology (all three names are derived from the core *sar* – ‘quickly fall,’ ‘drop,’ ‘to fall with great force,’ like a waterfall, for example) Kramrisch combines all three, and argues that in these relationships one should look for the source of the characteristics that in later times were assigned to Saraswati, i.e. speed, aggression and power. Kramrisch writes:

*She is one of seven sisters, or she has seven sisters (RV 6.36.10) and their mother is the river Sindhu (RV 7.36.6) [...] Seven is the star number, the seven Ṛṣis of the Great Bear are a constant constellation. [...] the power of Sarasvatī manifests in the cosmos as the daughter of lightning, that is the voice of thunder, works on and within the mind of man. [...] It is she who rules over all intuition (RV 1.3.12) [...] Sarasvatī, a flowing onrush of creative power, is a form of the great goddess.*<sup>37</sup>

Yet another goddess, referred to by Kramrisch in an attempt to present the specifics of the goddess Saraswati is the Vedic goddess of speech, Vāk (Vak). In the Indian tradition, Vak fulfils a role similar to that of Logos in the European tradition. Vak and Logos have the power to create the world, although Vak seems even stronger and more independent. Both Vak and Logos permeate all beings. Let us quote the famous Vedic hymn to speech (RV 10. 125. 1-8), which perfectly demonstrates the essence of Vak:

*I move with the Rudras, Vāsus, Adityas, with the All – Gods,  
I carry Mitra and Varuṇa, Indra and Agni, the two Aśvins,  
I carry Soma, Tvaṣṭṛ,  
I am the mistress who collects treasures – I assume many shapes.  
[...] my origins is in waters, in the ocean.*<sup>38</sup>

It seems that Kramrisch convincingly demonstrates the relationship between these two extremely important Vedic goddesses. Saraswati – the goddess emerging from the heavenly waters, invigorating, fertile, giving inspiration, a flash of true knowledge – can be imagined as the daughter of lightning, the voice of thunder, while Vak is born of water, from beyond earthly creation. In later tradition Saraswati was known as a goddess of knowledge, wisdom and art, and as such the tutelary deity of all artists, learners, scholars, etc. She is often described as the “Divinity of Knowledge” and since she *represents the union of power and intelligence from which organised creation arises*,<sup>39</sup> she is often depicted as a beautiful, white woman, two- or four-armed. Her most common attributes are a *vīṇā* (vina), manuscript or book (*pustaka*), lotus (*padma*) and rosary (*akṣamālā*, akshamala). They all symbolise an association with the arts (particularly music, literature and the fine arts), learning, the old Vedic tradition and the spiritual

<sup>36</sup> S. Kramrisch, ‘The Indian Great Goddess,’ *History of Religions*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (1975), pp. 235-265.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., pp. 245-246.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 247.

<sup>39</sup> A. Daniélou, *The Myths and Gods of India...*, p. 259.

realm. She sits on a lotus or a goose (*hamsa*, *hamsa*). The representations of Saraswati in the Pilani temple may be thus considered to be highly typical (Photo 2). She is invoked to provide inspiration for any activity that may be connected with creation and intellect. The goddess is also known under other names, as Daniélou explains: Bhārati (Bharati, Eloquence), Mahā-vidyā (Maha-vidya, Transcendent Knowledge), Vāc (Vac, Speech), Mahā-vāṇī (Maha-vani, Transcendent Word), Āryā (Arya, Noble-One), Brahmi (Brahmi, Power-of-the-Immense-Being), Kāma-dhenu (Kama-dhenu, Wish-Cow), Bīja-garbhā (Bija-garbha, Womb-of-the-Seed or Womb-of-the-Elements-of-Speech), Dhaneśvarī (Dhaneshvari, Divinity of Wealth).<sup>40</sup>



Photo 2. Birla Mandir in Pilani, representation of Saraswati, lower inner part of the sanctum (A. Staszczuk)

There is no doubt that the choice of this goddess of the old Vedic tradition as the main deity of the Pilani shrine is deliberate and significant. One of the changes that may be observed in the Hindu pantheon from the Vedic period up to the times of temple Hinduism and further is that the Vedic gods became tutelary deities. In fact, they were considered to be second-class gods, often patrons of various aspects of human intellectual activity – for example, learning or science and the arts. Their place in the temples was therefore definitely not in the main shrine. However, the founder of the Pilani temple, bearing in mind the idea of the revival and idealisation of the old tradition, built an outstanding monument of Wisdom in the university area and consecrated it to Saraswati. This is one of the best examples of a “return” to the so-called “Arya” tradition. However, it just does not simply recall the Vedic goddess or create a sacred space

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 260.

by borrowing the architectural form of the Khajuraho temples. Here, as will be discussed below, the founders built a new and most universal form, appropriate to modern times and a renewed Hinduism. Thus, they incorporate the secular images of historical figures of both Indian and Western traditions. It may be simply assumed here that the common feature of these characters is that they all could potentially worship Saraswati or invoke her to provide some inspiration necessary for creation.

However, Saraswati – the main patron of the temple and the surrounding complex – is not merely considered here as the Vedic idea of the river goddess. The philosophical concept of Madhusudana Saraswati, if directly related, must have been very close intellectually to G.D. Birla.

*God, to G.D., was a power both with and without attributes. Then in 1956 he built a temple at Pilani, it was distinct from all other temples in the country; it was dedicated to Saraswati – goddess of learning but from his study of Vedic literature, in the Vak hymn of Rigveda; it is said all gods and powers are propelled by her. G.D. saw Saraswati as a goddess of strength. Thus learning was not just reading and writing; it conferred physical wellbeing.<sup>41</sup>*

The monument of the founder – G.D. Birla (Photo 3) – is situated at the start of the path leading to the Pilani shrine. G.D. stands facing the temple with his hands in the *namaskāra mudrā* (namaskara mudra). The structure of the temple, as previously mentioned, was inspired by the Khajuraho style and is one of the most beautiful and elegant architectural designs, not only among all the Birla foundations, but also among contemporary Hindu temples in India. It is described by one of Birla's biographers in this way:

*It is a monumental marble shrine dedicated to Maa Sharda, the goddess of learning. While developing Pilani as an educational nucleus of India, G.D. made efforts to combine the three great things – Art, Science and Culture – at one place. [...] It is, in brief, the marble temple of the goddess of learning, unique for its architectural splendour, cultural harmony and universal appeal.<sup>42</sup>*

The author compares here the Pilani campus and the location of the temple to other campuses in India and abroad (BHU in Varanasi among them). The temple is called “the brainchild of G.D.” and was constructed in four-five years. Dr. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, the then Vice President of India, laid the foundation stone on 27 February 1956.<sup>43</sup> The main constructor (*sthapati*) of the temple was Vindhreshwari Prasad.

The construction works were supervised by H.C. Laddha, the then Estate Supervisor of the Birla Education Trust and by Mr. Ghulama Faridi from Makran. There were 410 artisans from Rajasthan working at the site. The inauguration took place on 6 February 1960<sup>44</sup> and Mr. Morarji Desai, the Finance Minister, who inaugurated the temple,

<sup>41</sup> R.N. Jaju, *G.D. Birla...*, p. 299.

<sup>42</sup> M.M. Juneja, *G.D. Birla – Life and Legacy*, Hisar 2000, pp. 199-200.

<sup>43</sup> S.N. Prasad gives somewhat different information: *On 20th January 1956, Sri S.D. Pande, the then Kulapati, performed the preliminary rites in connection with the foundation laying ceremony of the temple. Dr. Radhakrishnan, the then Vice-President of the Republic of India, laid the foundation stone on 29th February, 1956. Cf. S.N. Prasad, 'Sharda Peeth...', p. 881.*

<sup>44</sup> At the entrance to the temple there is a plaque informing that it was established in 1960. Also S.N. Prasad gives that date in the already cited article. However in Juneja's book year 1961 is given.

said on this occasion: *The educational complex of Pilani is in itself the abode of the goddess of learning. This is because, thousands of students, hailing from different parts of the country, are already worshipping the goddess silently. By installing the idol of Saraswati, Shri Birlaji has only enhanced her sanctity.*<sup>45</sup>



Photo 3. G.D. Birla monument in front of the Pilani temple (A. Staszczyk)

S.N. Prasad writing on the opening ceremony as well gives additional information that Acharya Vinoba Bhave advised them that the complex should be named Sharda Peeth, a term translated by the author as *the abode of the Goddess of Learning*.<sup>46</sup> In order to explain the other name used here for Saraswati – i.e. Maa Sharda or Sharda Peeth used for the shrine – we have to revisit Kashmir. There is a place near the Sharda village called Sharada or Sharda Peeth(a) that is considered to be a most ancient place of worship for Sharada<sup>47</sup> – a goddess of knowledge and learning, and very popular pilgrimage centre from ancient times. Sharada is often referred to as one of the Saraswati names, especially popular in Kashmir.<sup>48</sup> The Sharada Peeth, also known as Sarvajnapeetha, is

<sup>45</sup> M.M. Juneja, *G.D. Birla...*, pp. 199-200.

<sup>46</sup> S.N. Prasad, 'Sharda Peeth...', p. 881.

<sup>47</sup> The word *śārada*, as the base for this name, means *produced or growing in autumn, autumnal, mature, that which offers a shelter in autumn*; Śāradā is used as a name for a kind of vina or lute and a name of Saraswati. M. Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, Delhi 2005, p. 1066.

<sup>48</sup> We refer in this analysis only to this particular place of Saraswati-Sharda worship, not to the places of the Saraswati cult in India in general since, as we understand, the Pilani shrine is somehow, according to the founders' intention, reminiscent of Shar(a)da Peeth in Kashmir. These links, however, are still to be investigated in more detail.



described as a well-known and important centre of learning (university) in the Kashmir region. As M.Q. Raina indicates:

*Goddess Sharda is believed to be the earliest representation of Shakti in the valley, which is embodying three separate manifestations of energy, i.e. goddess of learning, fine arts and beauty. Goddess Sharda is the presiding deity of Kashmir and that is the reason why Kashmir is referred to as Sharda desha and also Sharda peeth (seat of Sharda).*<sup>49</sup>

It is believed that the Sharda temple is built on the very spot where she manifested herself to Muni Sandalya and this place was marked with a stone slab. Albiruni, Bilhana and Hemachandra described the temple in some tenth-eleventh century writings.<sup>50</sup> It may be thus assumed that by recalling this place and this name in Pilani the founders or their advisers wanted to create here an important and popular shrine to the Goddess of Knowledge comparable to the Sharda temple in Kashmir. Following this idea, the Pilani shrine should become a well-known destination for all admirers of education or learning and worshippers of wisdom. The Pilani temple is also mentioned in the chapter entitled 'The temples for spiritual uplift' in the G.D. Birla commemorative volume *The Glorious 90 years: G.D. Birla, Ramnaomi 1894 – 11<sup>th</sup> June 1983*. G.D. Birla's foundation work is materialised as 'Temples of Worship' for spiritual upliftment and peace, 'Temples of Prosperity' for the economic development of the nation and improving the living standards of the masses and 'Temples of Learning' for the advancement of the mental faculties of the new generation.<sup>51</sup> On the following page there are three photos with a short description of the shrine concerning its location, main deity and the carved decoration of the outer walls.<sup>52</sup> The idea of this spiritual uplifting in Pilani manifested itself in two ways – in establishing the BITS campus as an important centre of knowledge and in building the Saraswati temple. It may be thus, in the ideological aspect, somehow compared to the Kashmiri Sharada Peeth as the ancient centre of education and sacred location of the Sharda/Saraswati cult.

The Saraswati temple in Pilani (Photo 1) is rather small with a 33-metre-tall sanctum tower situated in the beautiful garden, on a platform around 2-metre-tall and 2,300m<sup>2</sup> in area, encircled by a small fence. It was made entirely of white marble quarried in Makrana.<sup>53</sup> The entrance steps, flanked by the coloured sculptures of two elephants, lead to the platform top, where on the both sides there are pavilions with seated statues of G.D. Birla's parents – Raja Baldeodas (left) and his wife Rani Yogeshwari (right) (Photo 4 and 5). The Pilani shrine is considered to be an outstanding example of temple architecture resembling, as already mentioned, the famous temples of Khajuraho and, to some extent, the Kandariya Mahadeva as its main source of inspiration. It stands on 70 pillars<sup>54</sup> and is arranged in four sections – running from the entrance –

<sup>49</sup> M.Q. Raina, *Kashur. The Kashmiri Speaking People. Analytical Perspective*, Haryana 2014, p. 84. Sincere thanks to Ms. Natalia Nadkańska for drawing our attention to this source.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., pp. 84-85.

<sup>51</sup> *The Glorious 90 Years. G.D. Birla, Ramnaomi 1894 – 11th June 1983*, Bombay 1983, p. 72.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 73.

<sup>53</sup> S.N. Prasad, 'Sharda Peeth...', p. 881; <<http://www.templenet.com/Articles/Pilani>>, 11 May 2013.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 882.

*ardha-* or *mukha-maṇḍapa* (entrance portico), *mahā-maṇḍapa* (central hall) with transepts, *antrāla* (antrala, vestibule) and *garbhagṛha* (inner chamber) with the *pradakṣiṇāpatha* (pradakshinapatha, ambulatory). In the *mahā-maṇḍapa* (2 for the transept openings) and *garbhagṛha* sections (3) there are five balconies (*candrāvalokanas*, *chandravalokanas*) altogether (Photo 6). On the outer and inner walls there are 446 representations of *saints, seers, statesmen and scientists including Karl Marx and V.I. Lenin*.<sup>55</sup> Among many admirers of art, Jawaharlal Nehru, visited and praised the architectural beauty of the temple in February 1961.<sup>56</sup> The front portico is accessed from the North with eight long steps and twelve short steps with railings. The *ardha-maṇḍapa* is a half-open pillared space with a very elegant *torāṇa* (torana) of the *makara* type, an approximate copy of the torana of the Kandariya Mahadeva temple in Khajuraho.<sup>57</sup> In neither this section nor the next are there any representations except for the dwarf goblins (*bhūtas*, *bhutas*) crowning the pillars, as well as some small reliefs of gods on the top friezes under the ornamental ceilings deeply carved with floral designs. From the antrala section we may proceed to the circumambulated *garbhagṛha* (Photo 7). Its outer walls are richly decorated with images. The door to the inner space is open; there are four steps and a small fence of the *jālī* (*jali*) type. In the cella stands the main 1.5m tall idol of Saraswati installed on a marble pedestal standing in an ornamental *maṇḍala* (*mandala*). The goddess is four-armed and holds a highly stylised musical instrument, probably a *vina*, with a *hamsa* head (in her front right and left hands), a manuscript (rear left hand) and lotus (rear right hand). The goddess is dressed in a blue garment and has golden ornaments, a nimbus and a garland (Photo 8 and 9). The sanctuary is not decorated inside, but on the outer walls there are carved images located within differently sized niches on all four sides. We may find there various gods and goddesses (also representations of Saraswati) such as: Vishnu and his avatars, Shiva and his aspects, Ganesha, Mahishasuramardini, etc. There are also sculptures of graceful ladies usually described as *surasundarīs* (*surasundaris*) – heavenly damsels or as *apsarās* (*apsaras*). Additionally, there are decorative motifs called *vyālas* (*vyalas*, leogryphs) distributed in the recesses. It may be generally assumed that some images recall the particular decorations of the Khajuraho temples. The appearance and usage of the religious images is rather common, and since the main topic discussed in this study does not relate to the religious decoration of the temple, the representations of the gods and goddesses will not be analysed here in detail; however, we will focus on the figural representations carved on the outer walls.<sup>58</sup> They are definitely more intriguing and, in fact, rather outstanding. This figural decoration outside is arranged in three rows.<sup>59</sup> The top one contains depictions

<sup>55</sup> M.M. Juneja, *G.D. Birla...*, p. 200.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 200.

<sup>57</sup> Cf. K. Deva, *Temples of Khajuraho*, Vol. 2, New Delhi 1990, pl. 87.

<sup>58</sup> There are located in different areas of the walls, from the base to the roof of the outer walls. The current analysis does not include all of them. The most important and significant are the three rows of *jaṅghā* (*jangha*) – i.e. the central portion of the temple walls.

<sup>59</sup> Except for the first representation on the East side on the outer *maṇḍapa* wall, following the pra-

of Hindu myths or epic stories. The middle one consists of the portraits of the eminent characters, known not only from the Indian tradition, embodying the greatest achievements of mankind in the fields of science, knowledge and progress. Jesus Christ, Zoroaster, Indian holy men and priests, Nobel Prize winners, as well as various presidents and leaders of nations are all present. The top or the bottom rows are generally composed of religious representations, mostly Vaishnava and Shaiva<sup>60</sup> (Photo 10). There are a few exceptions in these rows, where we can also see portraits such as in the middle row or single representations of gods (cf. in the table below, they are indicated in italics). According to the analysis of the character of these representations, the usage of *philosophers, saints and scientists* reflects *the cosmopolitan nature of the monument and the vision of the builders to bridge the gulf between spirituality and modern scientific thought and technological advances*.<sup>61</sup> A detailed description of the decoration is given in the table (Tab. 1). The most surprising images of a secular nature, rather untypical in a Hindu temple, are of the greatest interest here (in the table indicated in Bold). In fact their usage is a novelty among the Birla mandirs and makes the Pilani shrine so extraordinary. However, it must be emphasised that using the images of great teachers (or gurus), sages, saints, reformers etc. is not unusual for the Birla temples. This we can observe as early as in the first temple in Delhi. Still there are exclusively Indian characters, but from different traditions – in other words, not only Hindu representations may be observed there. Yet, there are no Western scholars, so the Pilani shrine is the oldest among all the Birla foundations, incorporating outsiders, Western eminences, in the decor of the Hindu temple.<sup>62</sup> This idea would be repeated, if many years later, in the Hyderabad and Jaipur temples. In fact, all representations of scientists, teachers, politicians, etc. seem to have been chosen in order to pay the greatest homage to the Goddess of Knowledge and Learning and encourage all students. As S.N. Prasad remarks:

*To depict real apostles of the Goddess of Learning irrespective of nationality, religion, caste, and creed, political and geographical frontiers was a novel idea. It is a rare feature unknown in any religious architecture on the globe. This praiseworthy experiment of secularism in religion, first in the whole history of mankind, is the culmination of one of the aspirations of Sri G.D. Birla and of the evolution of his religious attitude into a living concept of religion. It holds out a solemn promise to inspire faith among those who visit it.*<sup>63</sup>

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dakshinapatha, and the very last one on the right (West wall) where only one image stands in the middle row.

<sup>60</sup> In the table below the Shaiva images are simply described as Shiva and Parvati, since the main topic discussed in this analysis is not religious sculptural decoration. However, it should be noticed here that these are various aspects/emanations of Shiva and Parvati.

<sup>61</sup> <<http://templenet.com/Articles/Pilani.html>>, 11 May 2013.

<sup>62</sup> So far the authors have not found any similar examples of sculptural decoration in Hindu temples. It is difficult to claim, without any doubt, that the Birla mandir in Delhi was the first one to use images of Indian gurus, saints, ascetics, etc. The same problem is observed in the case of Western images in the Pilani shrine, it seems that nowhere earlier did such decoration appear, however this is still to be confirmed.

<sup>63</sup> S.N. Prasad, 'Sharda Peeth...', p. 882.



**Photo 4.** Rani Yogeshwari (?), G.D. Birla's mother, Pilani (A. Świerżowska)



**Photo 5.** Raja Baldeodas (1864-1957), G. D. Birla's father, Pilani (A. Świerżowska)



**Photo 6.** Birla Mandir in Pilani, the garden view (A. Staszczyk)





**Photo 7.** Birla Mandir in Pilani, mandapa interior (A. Staszczuk)



**Photo 8.** Image of Saraswati in the sanctum (A. Staszczuk)



**Photo 9.** Sanctuary, Saraswati Temple, Pilani (A. Świerzowska)





**Photo 10.** Birla Mandir in Pilani, sculpture decoration of the garbhagriha outer wall (A. Świerzowska)

**Tab. 1<sup>64</sup>:** Representations of the outer walls in the Pilani temple with the indicated group number.

Location	Top row	Middle row	Bottom row
East side, ardha-mandapa	–	Vyasa (2)	–
East side, maha-mandapa	Shiva Nilakantha (drinking poison)	Brihaspati	Shiva and Parvati
East side, maha-mandapa	Krishna Govardhanadhara	Valmiki (2)	Narayana and Lakshmi
East side, maha-mandapa	Mother with child and maidens (? probably Rama's or Krishna's childhood story)	Manu (1)	Shiva and Parvati
East side, maha-mandapa	<i>Tukaram</i> (1)	<i>Panini</i> (2)	<i>Ganesha</i>

<sup>64</sup> The identification in few difficult cases is based on the information given by S.N. Prasad in: 'Sharda Peeth...', pp. 883-884. However it doesn't follow Prasad's identification completely and uncritically. It is also based on the information given by the temple priest during the field study in Pilani (personal communication).

Location	Top row	Middle row	Bottom row
East side, maha-mandapa	<i>Mira Bai</i> (1)	<i>Bhaskaracharya</i> (2)	<i>Shiva and Parvati</i>
East side, antrala	<i>Buddha</i> (1)	<i>Patanjali</i> (2)	<i>Vishnu or Balaramavatara and his consort</i>
East side, antrala	Krisna with Gopis	Madan Mohan Malaviya (3)	Vishnu and Lakshmi
East side, antrala	Shiva as an ascetic / meditating Shiva	Kautilya (3)	Shiva and Parvati
Garbhagriha	Shiva and Sati	Mahatma Gandhi (3)	Shiva and Parvati
Garbhagriha	The Ramayana story (Rama and Ahalya)	Kabir (1)	Shiva and Parvati
Garbhagriha	<i>Guru Nanak</i> (1)	<i>Dayananda Saraswati</i> (3)	<i>Shiva and Parvati</i>
Garbhagriha	The Ramayana story (Sita with Kusha and Lava)	Vivekanada (3)	Shiva and Parvati
Garbhagriha	Churning of the Ocean of Milk	Balagangadhar Tilak (3)	Narayana and Lakshmi
Garbhagriha	The Shakuntala Story?	<i>Srinivasa Ramanujan</i> (2)	Shiva and Parvati
Garbhagriha	<i>Nara and Narayana</i>	<i>Vishnu as Dhanvantari?</i>	<i>Shiva and Parvati</i>
Garbhagriha	Ravana shaking the Kailasa Mountain	Rabindranath Tagore (2)	Shiva and Parvati
Garbhagriha	<i>Vishnu Sheshashayin</i>	<i>Karl Marx</i> (6)	<i>Christ the Pantocrator</i> (5)
Garbhagriha	<i>Shiva Nataraja</i>	<i>Marie Sklodowska-Curie</i> (4)	<i>Mabishasura-mardini</i>
Garbhagriha	Gajendramoksha	Chandrashekhara Venkata Raman (2)	Shiva and Parvati
Garbhagriha	<i>Ramakrishna Paramahansa</i> (1)	<i>Alexander Fleming</i> (4)	<i>Abraham Lincoln</i> (6)
West side, antrala	Karttikeya	Louis Pasteur (4)	Shiva and Parvati
West side, antrala	<i>Hari-Hara</i>	<i>Thomas Edison</i> (4)	<i>Vladimir Lenin</i> (6)

Additional  
row – G.D.  
Birla

Location	Top row	Middle row	Bottom row
West side, antrala	Balarama	Albert Einstein (4)	Shiva and Parvati
West side, mandapa	<i>Zoroaster</i> (5)	<i>Galileo Galilei</i> (4)	<i>J.F. Kennedy</i> (6)
West side, mandapa	<i>Jina Mahavira</i> (1)	<i>Isaak Newton</i> (4)	<i>Shiva and Parvati</i>
West side, mandapa	Surya	Shankaracharya (1)	Shiva and Parvati
West side, mandapa	Martanda	Chaitanya (1)	Shiva and Parvati
West side, mandapa	<i>Brahma</i>	<i>Tulsidas</i> (2)	<i>Vamana</i>
West side, ardhmandapa	–	Ramanujacharya (1)	–

As previously commented, the middle row is the most interesting for our research, and therefore it will be shortly discussed in the next passage. Of course, if there are any representations of this type in other rows, they will be also included. There are a few groups of historical figures that may be distinguished here (without differentiating them into ancient or modern): 1. Indian great teachers, sages, ascetics, religious reformers and holy men (poets and bhaktas among them): Manu, Buddha, Jina Mahavira, Guru Nanak, Ramanujacharya, Chaitanya, Shankaracharya, Ramakrishna, Tukaram, Mira Bai, Kabir; 2. Indian writers, composers, authors of treatises, scientists: Vyasa, Valmiki, Tulsidas, Panini, Patanjali, Srinivasan Ramanujan, Chandrashekhara Venkata Raman; 3. Indian reformers, politicians, statesmen: Kautilya, Malaviya, Mahatma Gandhi, Dayananda Saraswati, Vivekananda, Balagangadhar Tilak; 4. Western scholars, researchers, and inventors: Marie Skłodowska-Curie, Alexander Fleming, Louis Pasteur, Thomas Edison, Einstein, Galileo Galilei 5. non-Indian prophets, religious reformers: Zoroaster, Christ the Pantocrator; 6. Western reformers, politicians, statesmen: Abraham Lincoln, J.F. Kennedy, Karl Marx, Lenin. The quantities of the above groups are given in the table in brackets following the name of each figure (Photo 11 and 12).

The most curious feature here is that among all these representations there is a place for G.D. Birla – the founder of the Pilani temple. His image is located in the row (in a vertical line) under the images of Hari-Hara, Thomas Edison and Lenin. This image is installed in an empty space (in the case of the other rows, there is nothing in the equivalent spot) in the additional row below Lenin's bust. The material and execution of the bust look slightly different than in other images. We do not know exactly when it was put there, but probably after G.D. Birla's death.



Photo 11. Figural representations on the outer wall, Saraswati Temple, Pilani (A. Świerzowska)



Photo 12. G. D. Birla's image on the outer wall, Saraswati Temple, Pilani (A. Świerzowska)



The above classification clearly shows that both India and the West have their most famous and prominent “noteworthy” represented there. They reflect different periods and disciplines. Their images, as can be witnessed at the Pilani temple, correspond with their actual portraits. We are familiar with the physiognomy of most of them since there are photos or paintings preserved until our times. In a few cases, the Pilani images look as if they have been copied from popular effigies, for example as may be observed in Ramakrishna’s or Galileo’s portraits. Of course, still there are many figures, especially those of ancient scholars, whose representations are rather imaginary, since there exists no sculpted or painted effigy of them. In the case of Buddha or Jina, whose images have been preserved from as early as the first centuries AD, we could notice that the sculptors of the Pilani shrine followed some common iconographic patterns. Moreover, in this temple we can see an interesting intercultural fusion in the discussed decoration outside. Not only non-Hindu, but also non-Indian representations are interspersed in the traditional Hindu religious figurative sculpture. There are many Indian historical figures, sages, men of letters, reformers, i.e. all those who contributed to the Hindu/Aryan lore. The religious character of the temple is therefore retained and enriched by the intriguing and outstanding iconographic program that uses representations of the greatest scientists, scholars, politicians etc. It is not surprising that they are present here since this temple is dedicated to Wisdom and Knowledge.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that this unusual and innovative figural decoration is only one of the reasons for making this place so special. The other is definitely the elegant and remarkable architectural form of the temple. In all the sources accessed so far, their authors praise the Pilani shrine as the most beautiful modern Hindu temple in India. One such opinion shall be quoted here:

*There is no room for doubt that the Saraswati temple is the most elegant specimen of 20<sup>th</sup> century architecture. The majestic, imposing look, architectural harmony and unity, and the symmetrical proportions, all reveal its grandeur. Its upward thrust symbolises proportions, all higher spiritual achievement of the Sadhaka as he advances in the realm of spiritual aspiration.*<sup>65</sup>

The next author – already cited here – to write about G.D. Birla’s life and works is R. N. Jaju and he concludes his passage relating to the Pilani foundation in this way:

*I sometimes think that G.D. needs no formal memorial. The education centre imparts the best education, consisting of the old and the new, and is a splendid and resplendent memorial to him. It will last for centuries and for a much longer period than the life of formal memorials that are very often neglected.*<sup>66</sup>

The Saraswati temple in Pilani is therefore the best exemplification of the founder’s aspirations to raise education to the highest level and worship not only the goddess of Knowledge and Learning herself, but also and maybe in the first place, to honour human wisdom and ability for learning and creation hence the possibility to change the specifics of the local environment and build a new society.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 885.

<sup>66</sup> R.N. Jaju, *G.D. Birla...*, p. 289.



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