

Birla Mandirs – The contemporary Hindu temple complexes as an example of modernization by going back to tradition – 2015 fieldwork report

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In India, the name of the Birla (Bīrlā)¹ family is widely known and commonly associated with the influential entrepreneurs whose fifth generation now runs extensive and multifarious charity work. The members of the Birla family, beginning with its nestor Seth Shivnarain (1838–1910), since the 19th century have been active participants as well as co-creators of the economic, political, social, cultural and religious life of India.

The philanthropic activity of the Birla family focuses on three main areas:

1. popularising education with a particular emphasis on the promotion and development of modern technologies (e.g. the foundation of colleges, schools, scientific institutes as well as granting scholarships or providing financial support for various scientific enterprises) but also the promotion and dissemination of literary masterpieces created and generated in the native languages of India (e.g. subsidising publications, scholarships and awards for outstanding artists);
2. building social welfare (e.g. the foundation of hospitals or various campaigns aimed at eliminating social inequalities);
3. reviving Hindu religiosity/ spirituality (founding as well as financially supporting temples and other objects of a religious character).

Initially, the charitable activity of the Birla family was locally based – the aforementioned Seth Shivnarain limited his work almost exclusively to the

¹ We decided to put all names of historical persons and geographic names in the English transcription as they are commonly used in India and in the literature.

family's cradle – Pilani (Rajasthan) – but subsequent generations, increasingly successful in business, considered the whole of India as a field for their philanthropic campaigns. Particularly well known are the charitable achievements of Jugalkishore (1883–1967), who was the *spiritus movens* behind the campaign to build temples and was responsible, to a large degree, for shaping the ideological message which the Birla temples convey and his younger brother – Ghyanshyamdas (1894–1983) who is definitively the best known representative of the Birla family – a one-man-institution in the field of politics, economy, education and, last but not least, philanthropy. He is also the founder of several Birla Mandirs (as the temples founded by the various members of the Birla family are commonly referred to).

The broadening influence of the Birla family was accompanied by the gradual elaboration of a comprehensive and wide-ranging program of ideological justification for their charitable (and also business) activity – its main goal was the systematic renewal of Indian society. The program, as the authors of this report claim, found its full expression in the numerous temples² founded by the members of the Birla family.

The temples and the message that they convey became the subject of a research project conducted by philosopher and Indologist Marta Kudelska, art historian and Indologist Agnieszka Staszczyk and scholar of religions Agata Świerzowska. The project entitled “Birla Mandirs – The contemporary Hindu temple complexes as an example of modernization by going back to tradition”³ aims to produce documentation as well as a detailed and interdisciplinary analysis of selected temple complexes founded by the Birla family in order to:

1. reconstruct the ideological assumptions underlying the temples' foundation;
2. reconstruct the message addressed by the founders to the Indian society.

It should be stressed that so far Birla Mandirs have never undergone any

² The authors of this report have not been able to find a reliable source of information on the exact number of the temples founded by the Birlas. According to Kudaisya the Birlas founded forty temples (M. Kudaisya, *The Life and Times of G. D. Birla*, New Delhi 2006, p. 393), but it seems that the number covers not only the temples founded by the Birla family, but also those which were built and/or renovated with the financial support of the Birlas.

³ The research is carried out within the framework of the “Opus 5” programme of the National Science Centre [UMO-2013/09/B/HS1/02005].



systematic research. Most of the information on them is quite superficial and appears almost exclusively in tourist guides and on tourist websites whose aim is to present the temples as tourist attractions worth visiting rather than provide any real in-depth historical information. One exception is the New Vishvanath (Viśvanāth) 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 (mostly in Hindi).⁴

As part of the research program conducted by Kudelska, Staszczyk and Świerzowska, two fieldwork projects were carried out in India. The first (February/March 2014) yielded rich and detailed material collected from seven temples – Śrī Lakṣmī Nārāyaṇ (New Delhi), Śrī Lakṣmī Nārāyaṇ (Patna), Kṛṣṇa/ Gītā Mandir (Kurukshetra), Sarasvatī/ Śārada Piṭh (Pilani), New Viśvanāth (Varanasi), Śrī Rādhā Kṛṣṇa (Kolkata), Reṇukeśvar Mahādev Mandir (Renukoot). The collected material (in part) as well as some initial hypotheses and the research strategy were presented in the paper by Kudelska, Staszczyk and Świerzowska entitled *Birla Mandir – współczesne hinduistyczne kompleksy świątynne jako przykład modernizacji przez powrót do tradycji* [Birla Mandirs – The Contemporary Hindu Temple Complexes as an Example of Modernization by Going Back to Tradition].⁵

The second fieldwork took place in January/February 2015. The research covered another eight Birla Mandirs. They were:

1 Śrī Lakṣmī Nārāyaṇ Mandir in Jaipur / Rajasthan (1998⁶)

This elegant, medium-sized temple (fig. 1) is made entirely of white marble and situated in a garden, on a small hill. Approaching it from the side entrance one can see its four distinct parts: the sanctum (*garbhagrha*) surmounted by a tower (*śikhara*), the main hall (*maṇḍapa*) with a pyramidal roof, the domed front *maṇḍapa* and the entrance portico. Outside there are open surrounding galleries. On the pillars of the galleries, as well as on the walls of

⁴ <http://www.bhu.ac.in/VT/> (retrieved April 2015).

⁵ See: “Estetyka i Krytyka” seria: “The Polish Journal of the Arts and Culture” 11 (3/2014), Kraków, pp. 27–53, available [on-line](#).

⁶ The date refers to *prāṇapratīṣṭhā* (i.e. consecration) ceremony of the temple.



the main entrance there is sculptural figural decoration of a very peculiar character. In the interior the architectural divisions are not so clear, there is one huge empty and windowed hall, with a circumambulated *garbhagr̥ha*. The sanctum thus forms the most separate part of the interior. In the cella there are images of the main temple deities – Viṣṇu in his Nārāyaṇa aspect and Śrī Lakṣmī – his consort. There are several relief panneau depicting various mythological scenes, placed in the top part of the *maṇḍapas*' walls and in the ambulatory. Additionally, there are surrounding stained-glass windows with figural representations. From the main entrance one can use stairs to go to the lower parts, where the whole construction is clearly visible. The temple is built on an approximately 1,5 high platform surrounded by a small fence. The stairs are flanked with pavilions housing the statues of the founders: Smt. Rukmani Devi Birla and Śrī Braj Mohan Birla. They both face the temple holding their hands in the *namaskāra mudra*.



Figure 1: Shri Lakshmi Narayan Mandir in Jaipur / Rajasthan (Photographed by A. Staszczyk)

This temple (just like the temples in Pilani and Hyderabad), according to Kudelska, Staszczyk and Świerzowska, is an excellent illustration of hierarchical inclusivism, as described by Paul Hacker.⁷ The main deity of the temples

⁷ cf. P. Hacker, *Inklusivismus* [in:] Oberhammer G. (ed.), *Inklusivismus. Eine indische Denkform*, Vienna 1983, p. 11–28, and W. Halbfass, *India and Europe. Trying to understand philosophically*, ed. M. Nowakowska, R. Piotrowski, Warsaw 2008, p. 605 ff Halbfass, W. (ed.) *Paul Hacker – Philology and Confrontation, Paul Hacker on Traditional and Modern Vedanta*, New York AL 1995.

is, of course, Hindu, but on the external walls of the temple the images of the representatives of different religions and spiritual paths appear (among others, Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary, St. Francis, St. Peter, Moses, Zoroaster, Confucius, Kabir, Mira Bai, Guru Nanak; see fig. 2, 3, 4).



Figure 2: Shri Lakshmi Narayan Mandir in Jaipur / Rajasthan (Photographed by A. Świerzowska)

The lower parts of the temple hold the B.[raj] M.[ohan] Birla Family Museum and Śrī and Smt. G.[anga] P.[rasad] Birla Gallery. Both exhibitions present archival pictures of the Birla family documenting their most important philanthropic achievements as well as various family heirlooms. There are also photographs showing the most important events of the Jaipur temple construction itself.



Figure 3: Shri Lakshmi Narayan Mandir in Jaipur / Rajasthan (Photographed by A. Świerzowska)



Figure 4: Shri Lakshmi Narayan Mandir in Jaipur / Rajasthan (Photographed by A. Świerzowska)

In Jaipur the Birlas also founded an impressive educational complex (known as the Birla Institute of Scientific Research) which includes, among others, M.[adhav] P.[rasad] Birla Auditorium and B.[raj] M.[mohan] Birla Planetarium.⁸ The planetarium is the second object of this type, after Kolkata, founded by the Birla family. Allegedly, at least this information may

⁸ This location is not accidental – Jaipur is proud of the oldest astronomical observatory in this part of Asia, built by the Rajput king Sawai Jai Singh in 1738. It is a UNESCO World Heritage site.

be found on the website of the planetarium, the observatory in Jaipur “was the second major Planetarium to be set up in the commonwealth countries with London having a Planetarium a few years earlier to the one in Calcutta then”.⁹

2 Vivasvān (Sūrya) Mandir in Gwalior / Madhya Pradesh (1988)

The temple, like many of those founded by the Birlas, is built in a place where the family set up one of its business ventures, namely Jiyajeerao Cotton Mills (no longer in operation).



Figure 5: Vivasvan (Surya) Mandir in Gwalior / Madhya Pradesh (Photographed by A. Staszczyk)

It is situated in a huge garden and had to be designed in rather small sanctuaries when compared with the other Birla mandirs, as well as the original it follows. On both sides of the stairs leading to the main entrance there are statues of the temple founders (G. D. Birla and his wife). The temple is inspired by the well-known Sun Temple in Konark, Orissa and made of red sandstone. It is conceived as a Sūrya (Sun God) chariot pulled by seven horses. There are representations of horses and wheels on both sides of the high plinth, which supports the main architectural structures of the temple:

⁹ [Birla Auditorium Jaipur](#) (retrieved May 2015).

jagmohana (i.e. *maṇḍapa*) with one main and two side entrances and a *deul* (i.e. *śikhara*) with three windows half-way up. Outside on the walls of the plinth, as well as on the temple itself, there are small niches with various figural representations. Inside there is a small cella with some Surya representations. Additionally, there are two sculptures on both sides of the main hall with inscribed panels underneath. Since they form the only sculptural decoration of the windowless interior it is extremely ascetic as a result. The main *maṇḍapa* that may be entered from three sides is surmounted by a *śikhara* of the pyramidal, step structure – resembling the one noted in the Orissan style temples.

The temple is visited by local Hindu devotees, especially for the evening *ārtī* that takes place daily at sunset. It is also one of the main tourist attractions of the region, but mostly for the Indian tourists who visit Gwalior. The city itself is considered to be the ancient location of the Surya cult, thus the Birlas' idea to revive the Sun worship is apparent here. It must be noted, however, that Surya is not a popular god in modern Hinduism and here is worshipped under the name Vivasvan, mentioned and explained, for instance, in the *Bhagavadgītā* that, as we observed, is used in the Birla temples as one of the most important sacred texts.



Figure 6: Vivasvan (Surya) Mandir in Gwalior / Madhya Pradesh (Photographed by A. Staszczyk)



Figure 7: Vivasvan (Surya) Mandir in Gwalior / Madhya Pradesh (Photographed by A. Staszczyk)

3 Śrī Lakṣmī Nārāyaṇ Mandir in Bhopal / Madhya Pradesh (1964)



Figure 8: Shri Lakshmi Narayan Mandir in Bhopal / Madhya Pradesh (Photographed by A. Staszczyk)

This temple is an example of the earliest of the Birlas' sacral foundations until the 1960s. The first temple of this style was designed by Sris Chandra Chatterjee in Delhi (the Lakṣmī Nārāyaṇ Mandir, opened in 1939) in order to create a standard for a Hindu shrine according to the ideas of the Modern Indian Architectural Movement. This architect was one of its prime movers. The construction in Delhi inspired the following later Birla foundations: Patna, Kurukshetra, Mathura, Akola, Varanasi and Bhopal. The main common features of this group are: 1. the pillared and windowed bright halls; 2. three separate sanctuaries with the major one in the middle; 3. numerous sculptural decorations, paintings and inscription panels inside; 4. two storeys in the large constructions such as Delhi or the Varanasi temples; 5. the yellow, red and white colours of the outside walls, with limited sculptural decoration.

The Birla mandir in Bhopal, though much smaller than its Delhi prototype, is situated on a hill in a garden. From the main gate, the long path with steps and a cascade fountain leads to the temple surmounted by a *śikhara* above the main shrine. There are also square finials on four corners of the elongated *maṇḍapa*. One may enter the main hall of the temple from a small portico. There are two side entrances as well. The pillars of the main hall divide its space into three aisles – the middle is wider with the main circum-

ambulated cella at the end. There are idols of Nārāyaṇa and Sri Lakṣmī in the centre shrine, whereas the side shrines house the images of Durgā (left) and Śiva (right).

Within the temple premises there is also the G.[anga] P.[rasad] Birla Museum which houses a great collection of religious sculptures as well as various objects donated to the museum by the founder and his wife (musical instruments, porcelain, coins).

It is worth noting here that the majority of the Birla Mandirs, most unusually for India, do not only perform a religious function, but also serve secular interests – education, culture, and some were also intended to be considered as places of recreation.

4 Vithobā Mandir in Shahad / Mumbai (1996)

This is another example of a Birla Mandir accompanying a particular business venture of the family (Century Rayon).



Figure 9: Vithoba Mandir in Shahad / Mumbai (Photographed by A. Staszczyk)

The temple is situated on a small hill, behind the wall, and one may climb there using steps on one side or a path on the other. There is a high wall surrounding the temple platform, and one stepped entrance with a beautiful *torāṇa* leads the way inside. The temple itself is a small sandstone construction on a low plinth. It consists of: 1. open pillared porticos with ornamental

torāṇas, 2. a *maṇḍapa* and vestibule with domes – forming pyramidal roofs on the exterior, 3. side entrances forming a kind of transept – thus the temple may be accessed from one main and four side entrances. A three-vestibule (*antrāla*) front and two side entrances lead to the sanctum doors; in the inner chamber, the idols of Vithobā and his consort Rūkmiṇī are located (main chamber). In the side chambers there are representations of Nārāyaṇa and Lakṣmī (left) and Bhavāni Bhuvaneśvarī (right). The cella is surmounted by three *śikharas*, the middle one being the tallest. The *antrāla* section is two-storied. Because of the pillared porticos and *maṇḍapa*, as well as its several entrances, the construction looks very light and, except for the enclosed *antrāla* and cella sections, is very bright inside. This openwork architecture makes a lot of space for the sculptural decoration that appears on almost every element outside and inside the temple.

Vithobā Mandir is particularly well known to lovers of Bollywood movies as it served as a picturesque location for filming, for example, *Suhaag* (1994), *Prem Granth* (1996) and *Tere Naam* (2003).

5 Veṅkaṭeśvara Mandir in Hyderabad / Andhra Pradesh (1976)

This enormous temple made of white Makrana marble is situated on a high rock (Kala Pahar), with particular elements fitted into the rock on different levels and surrounded by greenery. To access it, one has to climb countless steps or use a lift in a tall clock tower. The temple is not a homogenous structure; it also represents a highly individual, eclectic style, since both North Indian and South Indian architectural elements were used here. There are many separated shrines or other places of worship that are located on the lower levels. One may visit them by climbing to the main shrine which itself forms a small temple structure consisting of a portico, a main hall in the form of an Orissan *jagmohana* and a cella that is surmounted by a massive tower with balconies on three sides. In front of the entrance portico there is small Garuda shrine facing it, as well as a tall golden flag pillar (*dhvajastambha*) just as in South Indian temples. Below the uppermost structure there is a solid construction supporting it, surrounded by ornamental pillars and flanked by steps. On its white walls there are scenes from *Rāmāyaṇa*. There is also one interesting element i.e. the entrance gate to the whole construction. It takes a form of a South Indian *gopura*.





Figure 10: Venkateshwara Mandir in Hyderabad / Andhra Pradesh (Photographed by A. Świerzowska)

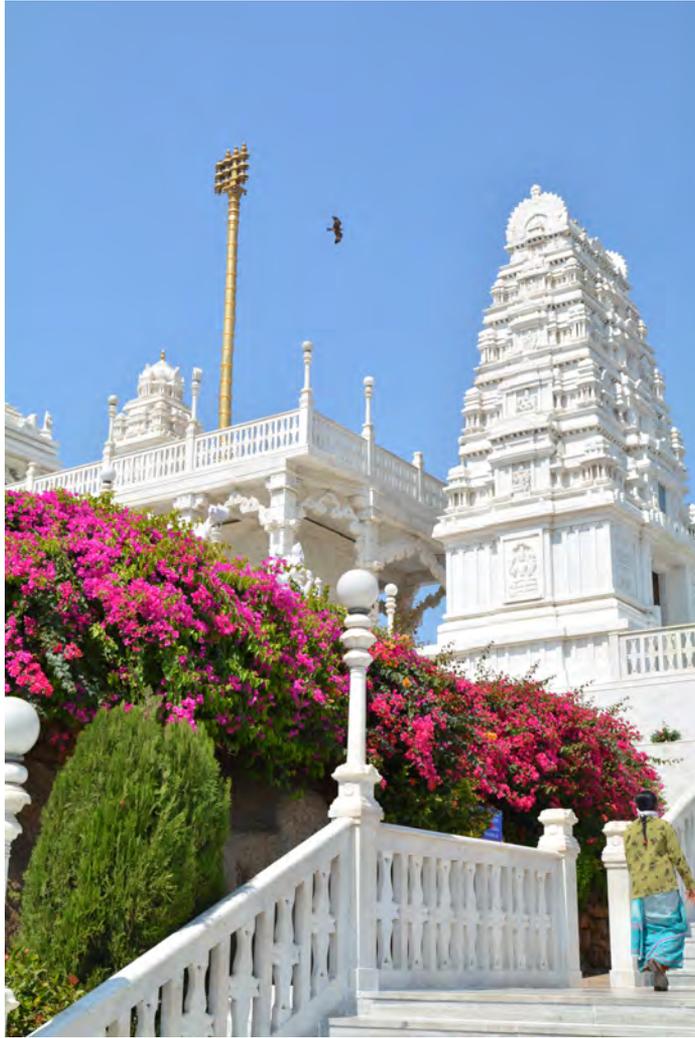


Figure 11: Venkateswara Mandir in Hyderabad / Andhra Pradesh (Photographed by A. Świerzowska)

The main shrine houses a black granite statue of Viṣṇu as Veṅkaṭeśvara.¹⁰ There are also two subsidiary shrines of Goddesses Padmāvati and Āṅḍāl on the both sides of the main hall. This section may be circumambulated using the wide, fenced platform around the central part of the temple. Outside and inside this part there are numerous figural sculptures of gods, goddesses and

¹⁰ This form is particularly worshipped in the Tirumala Veṅkaṭeśvara temple in Tirupati (Andhra Pradesh).

saints not only of the Hindu tradition. Beneath the main shrine there are also separate sacrifice hall and hall for meditation, as well as small Ālvār mandir.

The temple in Hyderabad may be seen as yet another example of the attempts made by the Birlas to universalise Hinduism and present it as a religion which could become a platform for religious dialog and agreement of all spiritual paths. This is a clear reference to the heritage of the Indian Renaissance and particularly to the thoughts of Swami Vivekananda, according to whose vision (based on the Vedānta philosophy) Hinduism would become a religion founded on the conviction of the divine nature of every human being who, therefore, deserves the highest respect and esteem, regardless of his/her physical condition. This idea is clearly visible in the Hyderabad Birla Mandir where there is a separate section containing extensive passages from the writings of Confucius, the *Talmud*, the *Old and New Testaments*, all pointing at the fact that the basic religious activity of anyone is to respect others and see them as the manifestation of divinity. The “patron” of the whole section is Swami Vivekananda himself, whose image along with his quotation is situated in the centre of this section.



Figure 12: Venkateshwara Mandir in Hyderabad / Andhra Pradesh (Photographed by A. Świerzowska)

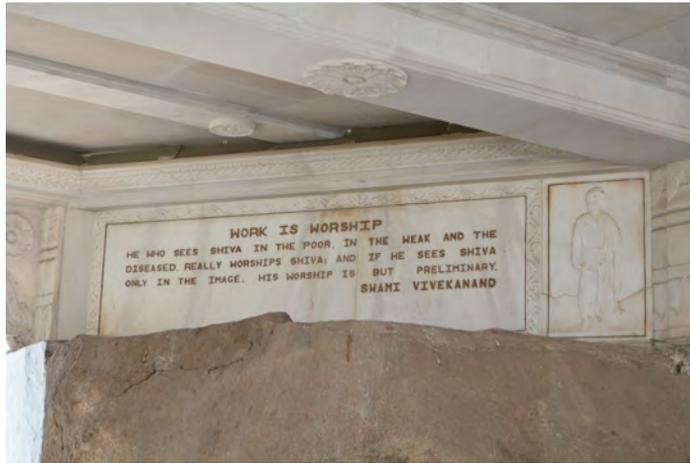


Figure 13: Venkateshwara Mandir in Hyderabad / Andhra Pradesh (Photographed by A. Świerzowska)

Next to the Venkaṭeśvara Mandir there is the B.[raj] M.[ohan] Birla Science Centre – a complex which includes a planetarium, science museum, archaeological museum, museum of modern art, doll museum, dinosaurium, library, as well as a huge conference hall.

6 Gaṇeśa Mandir (Vikram Vinayak Mandir) in Alibaug (Salav) / Maharashtra¹¹

This is yet another temple founded by the Birlas which is located in the vicinity of the industrial settlement which developed near the steel factory run by the family. This small temple with modern architecture is situated in a well-groomed park located on a hill overlooking the entire area. The park, with a tiny but comfortable stage and auditorium clearly serves recreational purposes and is frequently visited by groups of children and youngsters who have some of their school classes taught there.

The most visible and dominating element of the temple is the pillared roof-like structure covering the front space that may be considered as an assembly hall or main *mandapa*; in fact, it is a vast empty platform that may be accessed using only eight steps. This is the only temple of the whole Birla

¹¹ So far the authors were not able to find in any source the date of the consecration of the temples in Nagda, Alibaug/Salav and Akola.

group that does not follow any traditional, regional style but tries to find a new form for a modern temple. The roof in the form of a canopy with its raised edges and two “peaks”, is supported by eight pillars. The whole steel construction is visible. Behind it there is a section of the main shrine surmounted by a solid octagonal tower that is not visible when we enter the temple from the front. One may only notice it by going to the side. The main shrine may be accessed from four sides. It is constructed of white marble, smooth cubes of the same dimensions, thus forming a chequered pattern. There is no decoration outside. On the four corners of the tower there are four pavilions with dome-like tops and without any exterior openings. They house side shrines of Durgā, Śiva and Pārvatī, Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa, Sūrya Nārāyaṇa. In the inner part of the main shrine section, due to the doorless entrances clearly visible from the outside, there is an octagonal cella. It is the only enclosed structure with beautiful openwork floral carvings and locked doors on three sides. Inside there is Gaṇeśa statue.



Figure 14: Ganesha Mandir (Vikram Vinayak Mandir) in Alibaug (Salav) / Maharashtra (Photographed by A. Świerzowska)

7 Viṣṇu Mandir in Nagda / Madhya Pradesh

In Nagda, an industrial town manufacturing viscose fiber, G. D. Birla founded this small but very beautiful sandstone temple. It is situated in the centre of a large garden, on a 2m high platform – one may walk underneath, where additional shrines are located.



The temple itself may be accessed from the front or side entrances of the platform. On both sides of the steps there are statues of G.D. Birla and his wife facing the temple. The temple was planned to form a square with an additional *garbhagrha* section and has three symmetrically located portico entrances on each side of the domed *maṇḍapa*. The overall architectural structure of the temple is inspired by the regional style of south Rajasthan / Gujarat. Every architectural element outside and inside the shrine is covered with sculptural decoration. In the main cella there is a representation of Vishnu as Śeṣaśayin with the goddess Lakṣmī at his feet. In the side cellas there are idols of Rāma, Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa group (left) and Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā (right). In additional shrines there are idols of Hanumān, Gaṇeśa, and outside two separate *śivaliṅga* and Durgā shrines.



Figure 15: Vishnu Mandir in Nagda / Madhya Pradesh (Photographed by A. Świerzowska)

8 Rāma Mandir in Akola / Maharashtra

This is the smallest Birla Mandir among the temples visited so far. It follows the style described in detail above (e.g. the Birla Mandir in Bhopal), but in an extremely simplified version. The structure consists only of a very short pillared *ardhamaṇḍapa* elongated to the right side (forming a kind of veranda), a long *maṇḍapa* with two windows at either side and a low *śikhara*. The interior of the main hall is rather simple and bright due to its large windows and additional doors on each side of the cella back wall. In the sanc-

tum there are idols of the Rāma, Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa group. The decoration of this temple is extremely restrained and minimalistic. As characteristic for this group of Birla mandirs, there are panels with holy scriptures, as well as painted religious representations. Outside, at the right end of the veranda there is a separate *śivaliṅga* shrine.

The temple is located in the area of former cement manufacturing plants (now moved elsewhere), run by the Birla family. Rāma Mandir, the only one of the temples so far visited, though still functioning, is profoundly neglected. The garden, once fenced and with a fountain in the central part, today serves only as grazing land.



Figure 16: Rama Mandir in Akola /Maharashtra (Photographed by A. Staszczyk)

It seems that the data collected during this year's fieldwork confirms earlier hypotheses and, importantly, opens up new fields of interpretation. The most important clues relate the temple founding activity of the Birlas with the ideas of the Indian Renaissance. As the authors presume, the driving force behind the temple founding activity of the Birlas is the idea of a national (understood as Hindu) revival in India, although they refer both to patterns developed in Western civilisation and to the oldest remnants of local Hindu traditions. The ideas of Swami Vivekananda, one of the architects of the Indian Renaissance, were of special importance but, as the researchers believe, he is not alone. The other source of inspiration, particularly for

G. D. Birla, might have been the sixteenth century thinker from Bengal – Madhusudana Saraswati, whose ideas, as it may be assumed, influenced the religious thinking of G. D. Birla. Madhusudhana Saraswati in his philosophical outlook, was a definite supporter of monism, but from a religious point of view, he was a theist and consistently followed the path of Bhakta. This idea, however, requires further research.

The fieldwork in India will continue in 2016 and will cover, among others, Śiva temple and Śrī Lakṣmī Nārāyaṇ temple in Brajrajnagar (Orissa) and Bhavatāriṇī temple in Amlai (Madhya Pradesh).



Keywords, note about the authors

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