



‘Ekam sad viprā bahudhā vadanti’ – Inclusivism – the Idea of a Reformed Hinduism in the Iconographic Program of the Birla Temples¹

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Abstract

Fundraising activity initiated by the Birla family in India resulted in the construction of more than 20 Hindu temples, commonly referred to as the Birla Mandirs. Although they vary in terms of architectural forms and iconographic programs, it seems that one basic, common theme remains: to show reformed Hinduism as the religion that is the pillar of the identity of the people of New India. It is understood as being separate from, but at the same time higher than, the other great religions, while assuring a place within its confines for all of them. It is – as the authors argue in this paper – the practical realization of the thought expressed in the *R̥gveda* (1 164.46) and repeatedly referred to in the Birla temples as ‘ekam sad viprā bahudhā vadanti’, which seems to be the motto of all the foundations of the Birla family.

¹ This work was supported by the National Science Centre, Poland within the ‘Opus 5’ program, number UMO-2013/09/B/HS1/02005.

Keywords: Advaita-Vedānta, Birla, inclusivism, Lakshmi Narayan, modern Hinduism, Upaniṣads, Śiva

Słowa kluczowe: Advaita-Vedānta, Birla, inkluzywizm, Lakshmi Narayan, współczesny hinduizm, upaniśady, Śiva

The aim of this paper is to present the analysis of selected elements of the iconographic program developed in the Hindu Birla temples. As we claim, the symbols, motifs, topoi and figures presented there were composed to express a fundamental, universal message conveyed by the famous Rigvedic line ‘ekam sad viprā bahudhā vadanti’ [that which is one, the sages call multiple] (RV I 164.46), which is often cited in the temples along with quotations from other scriptures. The selection of these, and not other, passages does not seem accidental. The analysis indicates that they not only support and develop the inclusivist formula from *Ṛgveda*, but give a more devotional accent, in the spirit of *bhakti*.

The article will first outline the documentation that has been collected in all the temples visited and reviewed by us, and this will form the basis for an interpretation that will show why the message conveyed to the visitors contains these passages – what their meaning is and their function in the whole program. Due to the vastness of the material collected, in this article we will focus solely on the theme expressed in the ‘ekam sat...’. For the same reason, we will focus only on the Hindu tradition, leaving others aside. It is best illustrated in the decoration of the earlier Birla Mandirs – founded mainly until the late 1960s, still prior to the formation of the independent states of India and Pakistan. That is why they have been chosen for analysis. Other contemporary temples do not express the idea of inclusivism so literally (i.e. using panels containing fragments of traditional texts, specifically RV I 164.46, proving or convincing that unity or building a sense of community is possible, regardless of the many paths followed, even within Hinduism, by the inhabitants of India), and in the Birla group itself there is a significant change in decoration over time and thus the character of message conveyed, which will be explained in detail below.

The Birla Temples

Fundraising activity initiated by the Birla family in India resulted in the construction of many Hindu temples.² The *spiritus movens* behind the venture was that of

² As far as we have been able to establish, there is no reliable source for the exact number of sacred objects founded by the Birla family. According to M. Kudaisya, the Birla initiative established over forty temples, but it seems that this number includes not only the temples built by family members, but also those rebuilt or restored with their financial support (M. Kudaisya, *The Life and Times of G.D. Birla*, New Delhi 2006, p. 393). In the course of the research conducted in India in 2014–16, we managed to collect material in 19 temples founded by the Birlas. All of them are named below in the paper. Cf. also research reports: M. Kudelska et al., *Birla mandir – współczesne hinduistyczne kompleksy świątynne jako przykład modernizacji przez powrót do tradycji*, “Estetyka i Krytyka. Series: The Polish Journal of

Jugalkishore (1883–1967), whose initiative – with the financial support of his father Raja Baldeodas (1864–1957) – resulted in the oldest of the shrines: Shri Lakshmi Narayan in Delhi³ [Fig. 1]. This in fact became the model for the Birla temples until the end of the 1960s – both for those erected by Jugalkishore himself and those by other members of his family. This group includes temples in Patna (Lakshmi Narayan, 1942⁴), Mathura (Krishna, 1946), Brajrajnagar (Lakshmi Narayan, 1950), Brajrajnagar (Shiva, 1960), Kurukshetra (Shree Geeta, Krishna, 1956), Akola (Rama, approx. 1960⁵), Bhopal (Lakshmi Narayan, 1964), and Varanasi (New Vishwanath Mandir, Shiva 1966). Among these temples, the Delhi temple architectural form was partly duplicated, along with its iconographic program. All the temples constructed at this time are architecturally quite homogeneous⁶ and refer to the shape created for the needs of a national art following the model of a new, modern Hindu temple ascribed by Sris Chandra Chatterjee. The project of a national temple for a new, independent state was aimed at creating a standard for Hindu sanctuaries in accordance with the ideas of revivalism and the Modern Indian Architectural Movement.⁷ It is in these temples the idea of reformed Hinduism appears clearly, as they form a kind of medium conveying this particular idea. The early Birla Mandirs have a distinctly traditional, religious-ritualistic character, which would then change significantly in the temples that were founded in the decades to come. They are also richly decorated with many panels containing mostly bas-relief, polychrome representations of deities, gurus and religious leaders, kings, or mythological scenes, together with appropriate quotations from sacred texts. However, some of panels feature only inscriptions. There is no

the Arts and Culture” 11 (3), pp. 27–53; M. Kudelska et al., *Birla Mandirs – The Contemporary Hindu Temple Complexes as an Example of Modernization by Going back to Tradition – 2015 fieldwork report*, “The Polish Journal of the Arts and Culture. New Series” 3 (1), pp. 149–170, [http://www.ejournals.eu/PJACNS/2016/1\(2016\)/art/7648/](http://www.ejournals.eu/PJACNS/2016/1(2016)/art/7648/) [access: 29.05.2021]; M. Kudelska et al., *Birla mandir – współczesne hinduistyczne kompleksy świątynne jako przykład modernizacji przez powrót do tradycji – sprawozdanie z badań terenowych, styczeń/luty 2016 rok*, “The Polish Journal of the Arts and Culture. New Series” 4 (2), pp. 93–107, [http://www.ejournals.eu/PJACNS/2016/2\(2016\)/art/8804/](http://www.ejournals.eu/PJACNS/2016/2(2016)/art/8804/) [access: 29.05.2021] along with the monography presenting the final results: M. Kudelska et al., *The Temple Road Towards a Great India. Birla Mandirs as a Strategy for Reconstructing Nation and Tradition*, Kraków 2019. Efforts were made to obtain direct information from those of the youngest living generation of the Birla family – both on the number of the temples founded and the ideas behind the project. Despite considerable help from the friendly staff of many academic centres and official civil servants, the research team has not managed to meet anyone directly.

³ For names of places we use the simplified Romanization of Toponyms of the Countries of South Asia based on the Hunterian System. The names of the temples are given in their original form.

⁴ Main deity and the date of consecration are given.

⁵ Laying the foundation stone, the date of consecration has not been found.

⁶ Typical of sacral buildings in northern India commonly referred to as the *śekhārī* type, with one or three superstructures above the main shrine(s) part connected to the main hall (high and spacious *maṇḍapa* with an additional level). The main hall often leads into a vestibule, which can be accessed directly from the main and side entrances – right and left respectively.

⁷ Cf. M. Kudelska et al., *Birla mandir – współczesne...*, *op. cit.*; A. Staszczky, D. Kamińska-Jones, *Wielka świątynia Birlów w Delhi jako przykład indyjskiej sztuki narodowej (1933–1939)*, [in:] *Azjatyckie pogranicza kultury i polityki*, J. Marszałek-Kawa, K. Kakareko (eds.), Toruń 2017, pp. 227–246; M. Kudelska et al., *The Temple Road...*, *op. cit.*



Fig. 1. Sri Lakshmi Narayan Mandir, New Delhi
[photograph by Agnieszka Staszczyk]

single, once-established iconographic program,⁸ and neither do they form a coherent series of scenes, characters, or stories alongside each other. The main sanctuary mostly contains an image of a deity to whom the temple is dedicated. There may be also subsidiary shrines with other sculptures. Panels are located on the walls of main halls, in ambulatories, vestibules, and side passages, or even outside.⁹

Later Birla Mandirs – from the late 1960s – are both in their architectural form and decorative design completely different and highly diverse. Typically, their architecture is inspired by ancient regional styles in eclectic versions, while some mimic important historical places of worship.¹⁰ These temples definitely differ in terms of the content of their iconographic programs, as well as the motifs representing

⁸ Due to the number of panels, it is difficult to characterize in general terms the iconographic program of the temples of the old group, especially as there are nine of them in total. The temples are described in detail in our main documentary publication: M. Kudelska et al., *The Temple Road...*, *op. cit.*

⁹ For example, in the Delhi temple the main shrine consists of three chambers: in the central there are images of Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa and Lakṣmī, while in the right is a sculpture of Śiva and in the left of Durgā. In the ambulatory there are panels with representations of Kapila, Buddha, Rṣabha, Vyāsa, Dhanvantarī, Kṛṣṇa-Cakravartin, Rāma, Paraśurāma, and Mahādevī (Sarasvatī, Lakṣmī, Kālī). In the main hall narrative scenes were placed, including those of such famous rulers as Manu, Candragupta, Aśoka, Raghu, the Pāṇḍava brothers, and the court of Rāma, among others. This still does not exhaust the repertoire in the main part of the temple.

¹⁰ M. Kudelska et al., *Birla Mandirs – The Contemporary Hindu...*, *op. cit.*; M. Kudelska et al., *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*, “Politeja” 40, pp. 129–158.

dharmical religious and spiritual traditions, or representations referring to many other traditions – Jewish, Christian (both Protestant and Catholic), Chinese, ancient Greek, and others. Each is dedicated to a specific Hindu deity, but their main message does not seem strictly religious-ritualistic, as was the case with older temples. It has a far broader scope and is clearly perceived as tending towards inclusivism, not only with regard to the spiritual traditions of India, as in earlier Birla foundations, but also with non-Indian religions and thought. They also seem to indicate the theological dimensions of various spiritual pathways, emphasising the importance of sacred writings (the Bible, the Talmud, sayings of Confucius, numerous passages taken from the *Śruti* or *Smṛti*) in this sort of quest. Temple designs are more suited to contemplation and meditation than to specific rituals. This group of the Birla Mandirs includes temples in Pilani (Saraswati, 1960), Shahad (Vithoba, 1966), Amlai (Bhavatarini, 1970¹¹), Renukoot (Shiva, 1972), Hyderabad (Vishnu, 1976), Nagda (Vishnu, 1978), Jaipur (Lakshmi Narayan, 1985), Gwalior (Surya, 1988), Kolkata (Radha Krishna, 1996), and Salav (Ganesha, 1998).

‘Ekam sat...’ unity of the transcendental reality

It seems that whatever the form of message chosen, or its character, one basic and common theme remains: to show reformed Hinduism as the religion that is the pillar of the identity of the people of the new India.¹² It is understood as being separate from, but at the same time higher than, the other great religions, while assuring a place within its confines for all of them.¹³ It is the practical realization of the most famous sentiments occurring in the oldest *Śruti* layer, in the Vedic *Samhitās*, expressing the unity of the transcendental reality, a line from the *Rgveda* hymn (I.164.46): ‘ekam sad viprā bahudhā vadanti’. This phrase appears repeatedly in the Birla temples, either on its own or in the company of other quotations. It seems to be the motto of all the Birla foundations.

The assumptions underlying this venture are quite complex, and they are based on many elements. One of the most important is to return to the past, to the Vedic heritage, but clearly in a highly idealized form. According to such a vision, the ideally conceived Indian society was formed during the Vedic period, seen almost as a ‘golden’ period when everyone co-existed harmoniously, along with the surrounding nature. People were morally perfect because they were guided in their conduct by the authority of the *Śruti* laws, strictly following the rules of *dharma*, and thus deserving of the term *ārya* – noble. Any hierarchy that is signalled here is supposed to be based on authentic values. The mechanism of including everything and everyone

¹¹ Laying the foundation stone, the date of consecration has not been established.

¹² Cf. also the idea of creating the *raṣṭra mandir* articulated by Swami Shradhananda (1856–1926), see: S. Shradhananda, *Hindu Sangathan: Saviour of the Dying Race*, Delhi 1926. For details on this idea in relation with the Birla Mandirs cf. M. Kudelska et al., *The Temple Road...*, *op. cit.*

¹³ With the exception of Islam.

that is considered valuable to the whole community is best illustrated by the way in which inscriptions in the Birla foundations define the concept of *ārya*.¹⁴ This can be understood as a process by which the reformed Hinduism incorporates whatever is considered as the most precious and valuable in other dharmic traditions. Ultimately, however, all these values are manifested in an idealized Hinduism, which refers to the ‘pure Vedic revelation’. By the same token, on the one hand in our vision of the iconographic programs at the Birla temples we can see references to the oldest mythological and mythologized layers of tradition, while on the other hand they reach out to newer stories and fresher interpretations, without sticking too much to the facts. There are clear references to and inspirations from contemporary ideas, including those created outside India. It cannot be denied that influence on Indian thinkers and reformers, whose ideas could be developed here, was exerted by British views on Indian society, culture and tradition, and the potential seen as a result. Since the 19th century and propagated primarily in conservative and oriental circles, various proposals for reforms with or without preserving the model of an eternal social order, and with the recognition of ancient civilization and its achievements gave rise to the search for the basis upon which to build the identity of a new nation of India.¹⁵ A commonly recurring theme lies in references to the *Śruti* passages from culturally-based narrations of epics and the *Purāṇas*, which aim to show that antiquity and the early Middle Ages are not closed cards of history but still carry a living message, one which can be constantly re-interpreted and embedded in completely new contexts. At the same time, this ideology is steeped in the ideas expressed by the creators of the Indian Renaissance, especially with regard to the reform of Hinduism. Opening the temple doors to all members of Indian society, regardless of social status or gender, is highly significant in this context. This is undoubtedly the legacy of the thinker and reformer Shradhdhananda, but also of Malaviya (1861–1946) and Gandhi (1869–1948), who were close to the Birla family.¹⁶ It is worth noting that at the entrance of several Birla Mandirs there are panels with an inscription saying that the temple is open to ‘all Hindus (including Harijans) without distinction of high and low’.¹⁷ If the group to which the temples are open is so broadly treated, this message – addressed to a diverse audience – must also be universal. For the originators of the project, the challenge was to try to reconcile their own views on the Vedic religion – elitist in nature, excluding many groups and strata of society – with an openness to all. At the same time, it is a departure from strict, orthodox divisions: the exclusion and combining of *varṇas*, religions and sects (or even selected elements), the blurring of borders, then the smooth transition between the Vedic and the later traditions, is the ‘brand’ of the

¹⁴ Cf. the inscription at the entrance to the Gita Mandir in the Delhi complex: ‘An Arya is one who is cultured, gentle, noble and virtuous. The ten principles of dharma forbearance, forgiveness, suppression of the internal and external enemies, non-stealing, purity, control of senses, discretion, knowledge, truthfulness, and non-anger – all these eternal virtues, taken together, constitute dharma or religion’.

¹⁵ T. Ballantyne, *Orientalism and Race. Aryanism in the British Empire*, New York 2002; U. Misra, *Nineteenth Century British Views of India. Crystallisation of Attitudes*, “Economic and Political Weekly: Review of Political Economy” 1984, 1, pp. 14–21.

¹⁶ M. Kudaisya, *The Life... , op. cit.*

¹⁷ Birla Mandir in Patna; similar writings can be found in the Kurukshetra and Delhi temples.

entire undertaking of the Birlas. One of the leading ideas serving to achieve this was the above-mentioned interpretation of the foundations of the oldest Indian religion. As we will see below, this was brought about by the shift of focus onto certain ideas and concepts functioning initially in the texts of the traditions, although in previous times these ideas did not seem to convey the main message. First and foremost, this is the idea that at the basis of diversity – experienced on many levels and perceived from different perspectives – lies one of the realities understood in the religious experience as being connected with a deity. As we know, Indian thinkers have been developing concepts since the dawn of time to explain why and how the same thing is experienced in many ways. The most common answer was to assume that everything depends on the cognitive perspective, using more technical terms: whether this is the perspective of absolute or only relative truth. When the *darśanas* – orthodox Brahmanical philosophical systems – were formulated this idea became the guide for the *Vedānta*, especially in its *nirguṇa* form of *Advaita*. This conception claims that in the end there exists one true reality – the *sat*, which is called by more or less abstract names such as Brahman, Ātman, Puruṣa, Īśvara, or in later schools with different devotional affinities by names of the chosen deity: Viṣṇu, Kṛṣṇa, Rāma, Śiva, Kālī, or figures from other, sometimes local cults. Throughout these concepts, however, one thing remains common. The reality, including the object of worship, is one whose name points to the particular power of its manifestation, and the whole variety of the reality presented and the empirical are only manifestations of it. Such a vision of Hinduism has gained popularity thanks to the actions of Vivekananda, who frequently used the Vedic ‘ekam sat...’ to emphasize way the sugar-coated or idealized image of not only Hinduism but also the original, perfect India, operating on the basis of this principle. This form of Hinduism (Neo-Hinduism) preached the fundamental unity and equality of different religions, urging mutual tolerance. It combined Western values with Hindu tradition and openly referred to the native, ancient tradition, but it included new foreign elements that appeared after contact with the traditions of the West. In this way, classic, native concepts were reinterpreted and provided with new meanings. Neo-Hinduism, as the ideal universal religion (but also, as should be emphasized, more perfect than others), openly introduced Vivekananda beyond the borders of India: paradoxically, in 1893 in Chicago at the Parliament of the World’s Religions the idea of a single religion open to all Indians, one which may adopt the character of a universal religion, was initially accepted outside of India.

Documentation

Since there is no complete documentation of the temples, initially we will present a list of the inscriptions with interpreted passages expressing the main idea ‘that which is one, the sages call multiple’. The panels we selected¹⁸ will be put in order:

¹⁸ The main key of this selection is to highlight the RV verse and other crucial texts (also AV and *Upaniṣads*) put in the Birla Mandirs to illustrate multiplicity in unity. It was interesting for us how they were juxtaposed with representations of gods or sages around which the main traditions of Hinduism are

the temple in which they appear and the accompanying bas-relief polychrome image will be indicated, if they have been matched with any.

The image of Śiva

Eight panels bear the image of Śiva (Delhi, Varanasi, Patna, Mathura (x 2), Brajrajnagar, Akola, and Sanskrit Maha Vidyalaya in Varanasi) [Fig. 2]. The god is presented against a neutral background or in a mountain landscape. He represents an ascetic type, hence the lotus sitting position of meditation, on an animal skin, part of which serves as a cover. His hands are held in a gesture of meditation. The thick strands of his tangled hair are wrapped in a bun additionally decorated with a crescent moon. From the crown of his head flows the River Ganges. His other adornments include earrings, necklaces and bracelets of snakes as well as *rudrākṣa* seeds and a sacred thread. He has a third eye on his forehead, and some representations also feature a *tripuṇḍra*. Only in Akola is a trident depicted, shown separately, not in the hands of the deity. The final significant element is the halo that surrounds his head, although this was not introduced in Delhi, Patna or Mathura. The representations are generally extremely coherent, with minor differences only. Everything that is characteristic of the standard representation of Śiva's asceticism in his Kailasa mountain retreat is shown here. In terms of the style and method of representation, the image in Delhi is outstanding; the others, unfortunately, appear to have flowed from the hands of less skilled artists. It is worth adding that these are usually polychrome relief cuts.

Quotations under the images

It is undoubtedly interesting to note the combination of Śiva's image with 'ekam sat...'. In Mathura, under the image inscribed as 'Shiva', alongside 'ekam sat...' there are passages from the *Upaniṣads*: 'Smaller than the small, greater than the great lies the Self hidden in the heart of every being. From desires free, man sees the Self – to transcend all sorrows. He sees its majesty when he of mind and senses is serene' [S¹⁹] (*Kaṭha* 1.2.20),²⁰ and: 'All this that moves on earth is to be covered with the Lord. With that given up, protect yourself. Covet not, for whose is the wealth?' [S] (*Īśa* 1).²¹

Thus, the figure that in classic iconography is called Śiva sometimes appears in the temples inscribed with other names such as Śaṅkara²² or Mahādeva²³ [Fig. 3],

focused. Except for the chosen figures, described in this article, there are only three more panels in this group: one with Brahmā, one with Saptarṣis, and one with a mountain landscape, altogether 30 panels.

¹⁹ "S" stands for Sanskrit and "H" for Hindi to indicate the original language of the inscription.

²⁰ S.R. Gupta, *The Word Speaks to the Faustian Man*, vol. I, Delhi 1995, p. 274.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 1.

²² Meaning of the name: auspicious, benevolent, bringing luck/wealth, used in the case of Rudra, Śiva. The iconographic type for Śiva in the form of Śaṅkara corresponds to almost all the images of the Birla Mandirs, cf. F.W. Bunce, *A Dictionary of Buddhist and Hindu Iconography, illustrated. Objects, Devices, Concepts, Rites and Related Terms*, New Delhi 1997, pp. 500–502.

²³ This byname appears interchangeably with the terms Maheśa or Maheśvara and refers to the form of the supreme deity that unites his main aspects. It is worth noting, however, that this byname already



Fig. 2. The image of Śiva, Ram Mandir, Akola
[photograph by Agnieszka Staszczyk]



Fig. 3. The image of Śiva Śaṅkara, Gita Mandir, Mathura
[photograph by Agnieszka Staszczyk]

which makes it possible to emphasize, on the one hand, the syncretic nature of the Vedic god that evolved with the development of Hinduism, and on the other, by using the byname of Mahādeva, the reference to the form of the supreme deity, which combines all aspects. The Birla Mandirs also feature inscriptions of Śiva, referred to as Rudra. As we know, the very term śiva was originally the byname of the frightening ascetic god, Rudra. Clearly his image as an ascetic type refers to this. Taking into account the earliest anthropomorphic representations of the deity, it can be stated that from the very beginning this type was presented in art.²⁴ One might safely call him the god of the *Śramaṇas*, the ascetics, the holy men, the yogis, and therefore all those who burned the ascetic fire. They were the inspiration for creating an image of a deity with such a character.²⁵ Thus, in various places in the Birla temples under the image of Śiva, often even inscribed exactly in this way, there is a Sanskrit text in which the name Rudra is mentioned.

In the youngest texts of the *Śruti*, in the *Upaniṣads*, the word *rudra* usually appears in the plural form and indicates a group of deities. In this meaning it occurs in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* 1.4.12, 3.9.2, and 3.9.4, and in the *Chāndogya* 2.24.1, 2.24.7, 2.24.10, 3.7.1, 3.7.3–4, and 3.16.3–4. This situation only really changes in the *Śvetāśvatara*. There, the word Rudra refers to the name of the highest realm of reality and comes to be associated with the name of Śiva, and in two places (3.5 and 4.21) they are identified with each other. Just as the *Bhagavadgītā* refers to older texts and builds the cult of Kṛṣṇa, so the *Śvetāśvatara* builds the cult of Śiva. In verses 3.2, 3.4–5, 3.11, 4.14, 4.16, 4.18, and 5.14 he is presented as a supreme being who permeates everything but at the same time is above everything, the principle and the source of everything, and as an object of worship for the attainment of liberation. In verses 3.5 and 4.21 it is stated outright that Rudra is benevolent (*śiva*) to his followers and that the form he takes to represent himself depends on God. In verse 4.22, it is recalled that this divine nature can be very dangerous, so it is necessary to offer sacrifices for his goodwill. This brief reference to the religious-philosophical concept associated with the form of Śiva shows the importance that the *Śvetāśvatara* plays in this process. In this way the summoned form of Rudra-Śiva, a deity with a much more complex nature than any of forms of Viṣṇu, whose emanations allow various aspects of the god to be created – is a perfect ‘vehicle’ for building the idea of a single reality that manifests itself in so many, often quite different from each other. Probably

functions in the *Atharvaveda* amongst aspects of Rudra-Śiva, linking it with the directions (regions) of the world: Bhava is associated with the east, Śarva with the south, Paśupati with the west, Ugra with the north, Rudra with the central region, and Mahādeva with the upwards direction, while Īsa is connected with all directions, as quoted, among others, by J. Gonda, *Viṣṇuism and Śivaism. A Comparison*, London 1970, p. 38.

²⁴ He appears in the form of an ascetic and great soothsayer in the *Mahānārāyaṇopaniṣad* (223) and *Śvetāśvataropaniṣad* (3.4 and 4.12), e.g.: ‘He is the source of the gods and their beginning, the Lord of the universe, Rudra, the great soothsayer’, cf.: M. Kudelska, *Upaniszady*, Kraków 2004, pp. 301 and 304.

²⁵ E.g. in P. Pal’s opinion the basic model for the images of Śiva, as well as the Buddha and the *tīrthankaras* were the yogi, the holy men. Cf. P. Pal, *Asian Art at the Norton Simon Museum*, vol. I, New Haven 2003, p. 23.

this is why statements that ultimately there is only one reality – *sat* – are most commonly associated with the figure of Rudra-Śiva.

Rudra-Śiva, as especially may be observed in the references to him in the above-mentioned *Upaniṣads*, is therefore considered to be one of the divine beings whose name is called Absolute (e.g., *Śvetāśvatara*. 3.2–3 ‘One, indeed, is Rudra – there is no one else, He governs all the worlds with his power’). As a deity with a very long and solid tradition, one of the major deities of the *Purāṇas*, and thus of the Hindu divisions gathered under the common name of Śivaism, Śiva is undoubtedly one of those whom the shrines discussed here cannot be without, and not only because of his place in the Trimurti. The texts also provide us with a basis for connecting the form of this deity with ‘ekam sat...’, and thus with Brahman. The connection of our quotation with the representation of Śiva is therefore obvious.

The image of Dattātreya/Trimūrti

In the above context, the following group illustrating the deity known here as (Śrī) Dattātreya is perfectly natural (carved reliefs in Delhi, Varanasi, and Bhopal) [Fig. 4]. The panel in Delhi is inscribed: ‘Conception of one and only one God’. This of course refers to the concept of the Trimurti, which is often presented in various forms in all the temples discussed. In this case, we see clearly in the representation of the deity that ‘The One’ has adopted a common form. From an iconographic point of view, the take on this is classical – the god has three faces, and six arms in which he holds the standard attributes of each of the three: a water vessel, a lotus (Delhi) or *Vedas*, a conch, a disc, a mace, and a trident. Only in Delhi does the image of a bull appear. Apart from this depiction, the rest are polychrome.

Quotations under the images

In addition to the main quote appears the phrase ‘Many are the names and imaginations of the figures/aspects of the one and only god’ [H],²⁶ which is then supplemented by a passage from *Kaivalya Upaniṣad* (1.8) [S]: ‘He is Brahma, He is Shiva, He is Indra, He is the Immutable, the Supreme, the Self-luminous, He alone is Vishnu, He is Prana, He is Time and Fire, He is the Moon’.²⁷ Placing a quote from *Kaivalya* under the image is significant. This text belongs to the later, so-called ascetic *Upaniṣads*. Its name clearly refers us to the classical tradition of *Sāṃkhya–Yoga*. The term *kaivalya* means a state of liberation, understood as absolute freedom, uniqueness in the meaning of realization as a result of the cognitive distinction (*vivekakhyaṭi*) of the full separateness of the *puruṣa* from the *prakṛti*, and can also be understood as the *puruṣa* remaining as the absolutely only one (*kevala*) in its actual state. This text seems to be extremely important for the Birla family’s message, as it points to a state considered to be not only the most perfect, but also the simplest, meaning the most undifferentiated, closest to the supreme Brahman who encompasses all of the divine

²⁶ Translated by A. Staszczuk.

²⁷ *Kaivalya Upaniṣad*, transl. S. Madhavananda, Advaita Ashram, Kolkatta, on-line: www.advaita.it/library/kaivalya.htm [access: 11.05.2020].



Fig. 4. The image of Dattātreya, Sri Lakshmi Narayan Mandir, Bhopal
[photograph by Agata Świercowska]

manifestations mentioned above. All this refers to the absolutely free *kaivalya* reality, distinct from the unreal; therefore, here we have an example of pure inclusivism.²⁸ In this case, however, when it comes to defining the highest state of liberation, this is not a hierarchical incarnation, and all the definitions come from an orthodox Brahminic tradition. Thus, the redefined philosophical assumptions form the perfect basis for Neo-Hinduism as the greatest universal religion.

In Varanasi and Bhopal, under the Dattātreyā's image after 'ekam sat...' there is also the already quoted passage from the *Kaivalya Upaniṣad* (1.8). The full quotation from this text also appears in three places (Varanasi, Bhopal, Akola), always under the image of Śrī Lakṣmī and Nārāyaṇa. In English it appears on the Dattātreyā panel in Delhi, Akola, and Varanasi, under the images of Lakṣmī and Nārāyaṇa: 'That Almighty, all-pervading God is Brahma the creative form, Vishnu the protective form and Shiva the destructive form. He is Indra; he is immortal, he is self-existent and self-effulgent. He is life-form, he is time, he is fire and he is moon.'

There are also frequent quotations²⁹ from the *Śvetāśvatara*. Only one passage (6.11) from this text was selected for the analysis, given that its contents are perfectly in line with the quotations mentioned above: 'The One God hidden in all beings, pervading the universe, the inner self of all beings, the overseer at the work, dwelling in all beings, the witness, the avenger, alone, devoid of qualities'³⁰ [S]. This passage is found in the Temple of Delhi under the image of Lakṣmī and Nārāyaṇa, on one of the panels without any image and along with passage 6.14 from the same work. As we intend to reveal, its interpretation complements the interpretations of those panels where, under the image of Dattātreyā, quotations from *Kaivalya* (1.8) were also placed under the image of Lakṣmī and Nārāyaṇa.

Image of Śrī Lakṣmī and Nārāyaṇa

The representations of deities are standard and almost identical in all temples [Fig. 5]. Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa is depicted as a four-armed figure, holding a disc, conch, mace and lotus in his hands, while Śrī-Lakṣmī with one hand makes an *abhaya* gesture and in the other holds a lotus. The image in Delhi is the oldest of this Birla Mandir group. It can therefore be assumed that the others reproduce the iconographic type used here. In the context of the above quotations as well as the panels, which clearly indicate that this ONE may also be called by the name Viṣṇu, it is not surprising to describe the representations of the divine pair here with the main quotations analysed, or to provide supplementary commentary – for example from the *Upaniṣads*.

It seems most natural that the *Śvetāśvatara* is the text so often referred to. There are several reasons for this: it belongs to the so-called *Sāṃkhya-Yoga Upaniṣads*, and the

²⁸ In the understanding of Paul Hacker, cf. *Inklusivismus. Eine indische Denkform*, G. Oberhammer (ed.), Wien 1983.

²⁹ There are altogether several dozen quotations from *Śvetāśvatara* placed in various temples, source not always specified. *The Early Upaniṣads. Annotated Text and Translation*, transl. P. Olivelle, Oxford 1998, p. 454.

³⁰ *Ibidem*.



श्री लक्ष्मीनारायण

एकही ईश्वर के अनेक नाम

स ब्रह्मा स शिवः सेन्द्रः सोऽक्षरः परमः स्वराट् ।

स एव विष्णुः स प्राणः स कालोऽग्निः स चन्द्रमाः ॥

सर्वशक्तिमान और समस्त जगत् का प्रकाशक वह परमात्मा ही ब्रह्मा (सृष्टि-कर्ता) है वही शिव (विनाशक शक्ति) है, वही विष्णु (पालन करने वाली शक्ति) है, वही इन्द्र है, अविनाशी है, वही सर्वव्यापक है, वही जगत् का जीवनाधार है, वही काल है, अग्नि है और चन्द्रमा है ।

Fig. 5. The image of Śrī Lakṣmī and Nārāyaṇa, Sri Lakshmi Narayan Mandir, Bhopal [photograph by Agnieszka Staszcyk]

theoretical assumptions of these *darśanas* as well as the practical yoga procedures in the paradigm of the discussed undertaking play an extremely important role. Without delving here into an analysis of the theoretical basis of the whole concept, one should pay attention to a very important fact: Evidently, the *darśana* that plays the leading role in the whole Birla family venture is a *Vedānta*. Images of the representatives of this very current are displayed in almost all the temples: mainly Śāṅkara, Rāmānuja, Vallabha, and later Caitanya,³¹ Rāmākṛṣṇa and Vivekananda. These last two and, let us emphasize, Vivekananda in particular, on the foundation of the *Vedānta* built a vision of one religion accepting all others. The superiority of the representatives of the *Advaita Vedānta* can confirm our interpretation that all philosophical and religious concepts are subordinate to the idea of hierarchical inclusivism.

The *Śvetāśvatara* is also the so-called devotional *Upaniṣad*. Much is said about worshipping the chosen deity – *devata* and in the context of other canonical *Upaniṣads*, the *Śvetāśvatara* can be described as the text of *bhakti*. The deity most frequently mentioned here is Rudra, although there are many passages in this *Upaniṣad* where the highest Being is described as being above any qualities. For the founders, as well as for pandits preparing inscriptions and choosing quotations in the Birla temples, this is an extremely convenient situation. Various deities which were worshiped, especially in the period after the classical *Upaniṣads*, could be assigned with any praise fragments from any scripture. Although the Lakṣmī and Nārāyaṇa are not worshiped in any of the classic *Upaniṣads*, in three Birla Mandirs we may see quotations from the *Śvetāśvatara*: in Delhi – 6.11; in Akola – 6.7, 6.11, and 6.14; and in Varanasi – 6.11.

The image of Vyāsa

Vyāsa is initially represented by panels from Delhi where the sage is shown sitting on an animal skin. He features long hair tied at the top of his head, and a beard. He is dressed in yellow robes covering his whole body except the left arm. His right hand holds a manuscript, which is inscribed ‘veda’, and the left rests on his knee. In the version from the main temple his head is encircled by a halo. The rest of the images reproduce this representation with minor modifications. One standout panel is undoubtedly that from Varanasi, in which Vyāsa is illustrated in a scene along with his son. They both stand in front of a hut, under a tree, on a path leading up into the mountains. Vyāsa stretches out both hands above his son’s head, who approaches his father, pressing his hands together in a gesture of greeting. The figures are depicted in the type prescribed for sages and ascetics (leather loincloth, modest decoration, sacred threads).

³¹ Admittedly, Caitanya is not Advaitist per se, but in Indian philosophical discussion he functions in the interpretation of the brilliant 17th century philosopher and fervent *bhakta* of Kṛṣṇa – Madhusudana Sarasvatī, see: S. Gupta, *Advaita Vedānta and Vaisnavism. The Philosophy of Madhusudana Sarasvatī*, London–New York 2015.

Quotations under the image

In Bhopal for example, there are, among others, the following quotations: ‘the one who is one (simple)’ [S]³² and its source is referred to *Atharvaveda* 13.4.20, further (on two panels) ‘One Brahman, nothing other than him’ [S]³³ referred to as ‘Veda’, and finally the ‘ekam sat...’ passage. The same set of quotations appears under the image of the sage in the Birla Mandirs in Delhi and Mathura, but no reference is given. The combination of these quotations appears also under the image of seven ṛṣis in Mathura, with further passages. Here one can see, among others: ‘where Soma is there is it ever excellent’ (AV 7.18.2) [S],³⁴ ‘Don’t pray anything else! Comrades, don’t do yourselves harm’ (RV 8.1.1) [S]³⁵ and ‘Creep upon this mother earth’ (RV 10.18.10) [S].³⁶ The scene that we observe here is quite a common take on the gathering of sages, one of whom (in this case Vyāsa) is seated in an elevated position in the role of the guru. He holds a manuscript in his left hand and lifts his right hand in the gesture of teaching. In Varanasi below the scene with Vyāsa and his son, besides the quotation ‘One Brahman, nothing other than him’ [S] there is a more comprehensive yet unreferenced quotation in Sanskrit as well as its loose English translation: ‘God is one. He is omnipresent, omnipotent and the creator of the whole universe’.

One might think that including the ‘ekam sat...’ quotation as well as other passages from the *Vedas* under the figure of a mythical soothsayer is an attempt to show Vyāsa as the epitome of the entire Indian tradition, the author of both the *Śruti* and the *Smṛti*. The sentence regarding the uniqueness and superiority over all Brahman expresses the nirgunic idea of the absolute, which here carries the name of the Brahman, and in its more well-known, most abstract form, ‘ekam sad advitīyam’ occurs in the *Chāndogya* (6.2.1). The pronunciation of the quotation from the *Praśna* (VI.7) is very similar: ‘Naught is there higher than that’.³⁷ The context of this *Upaniṣad* is highly significant in light of our considerations. This is a text belonging to the *Atharvaveda* lineage and associated with the ascetic community, for which ascetic-yoga practices were the basic procedure leading to liberation. However, the radical nirgunic nature of the absolute does not sit so well with the concept of God, who is not only absolutely real, but also a subject of worship. Therefore, it seems that the interpretation of the *Vedānta* adopted by the authors of the whole Birla project is at the same time of the *nirguṇa* and *saguṇa* character, evidenced by the English translation of ‘God is one, one without a second, he is omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient, beginningless, all – existence, all – knowing and all – bliss, all this visible universe is the manifestation of that one immanent Supreme Being’ located under the sentence ‘ekam brahma dvitīyam nāsti’, which one may find in the Gita mandir in Delhi. It expresses the idea

³² Translated by M. Kudelska.

³³ Translated by M. Kudelska.

³⁴ *Atharvaveda Samhitā*, vol. I, transl. W.D. Whitney, Delhi 1993, pp. 400–401.

³⁵ *The Rigveda. The Earliest Religious Poetry of India*, transl. S.W. Jamison, J. P. Brereton, Oxford–New York 2014, p. 1022.

³⁶ *The Rigveda...*, *op. cit.*, p. 1401.

³⁷ S.R. Gupta, *The Word...*, *op. cit.*, p. 442.

that God is ‘one without another’ (*ekam advitīyam*) but is at the same time ‘all – existent – *sat*, all – knowledge – *cit*, all – bliss – *ānanda*’. It seems significant that this interpretation is in a separate part of the temple, presenting the cult of one God in the form of Kṛṣṇa, the principal hero of the *Bhagavadgītā*.

Discussion

A look through the material selected from the group of older Birla Mandirs and analysed above proves that the authors of the iconographic programs purposefully elected not to depict one particular Hindu deity for the whole undertaking, as in different places in the main shrine they placed various figures. Despite this diversity, it is clear that the gods associated with Viṣṇu appear more often in forms such as Śrī Lakṣmī Nārāyaṇa or Rādhā Kṛṣṇa, which may be due to the fact that this was a form of worship that the Birlas took from home, and also because in their family *Bhagavadgītā* was treated with great respect.³⁸ However, to express the message that reality is one, and that it is divergent in its chosen form, Śiva is more often used as an illustration combined with the oldest *Śruti* texts as well as passages from the *Samhitās* or *Upaniṣads*; still, the link of this very name with quotations from such works is definitely a later phenomenon.³⁹ As we know, no material images of deities dated to the Vedic period have been proven so far. Everything indicates that their representations appeared much later than the earliest mention of them in the oldest texts. Due to changes in the form of worship, as well as the rise in the importance of minor cults, often over a local area, the old pan-Indian gods are paradoxically not the first to receive an anthropomorphic form in stone or terracotta. For them, their iconographic types are created second.⁴⁰ Moreover, the gods mentioned in the texts of tradition, such as Rudra, Brahmā or Viṣṇu, were not ‘pure’ Vedic beings at that time, but rather syncretic deities of the Vedic pedigree that had absorbed other gods along the way. Of these three, Brahmā is the most abstract and at the same time the least suitable for the cult of a personal god. Therefore, in the early sculpture his representation features the least.⁴¹ Iconographic types are shaped more than once, taking into

³⁸ Cf. e.g. M. Kudaisya, *The Life...*, *op. cit.*; R.N. Jaju, *G.D. Birla. A Biography*, New Delhi 1986; M.M. Juneja, *G.D. Birla – Life and Legacy*, Hisar 2000.

³⁹ The text that deliberately builds the worship of Rudra-Śiva and introduces the concept of Śiva, as well as this name as the main name of deity, is *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* and it belongs to the group of younger canonical texts.

⁴⁰ ‘The need for the anthropomorphisation of supernatural phenomena and deities not finding in the earlier centuries dominated by the Vedic culture any meaningful reflection in art, as Sarasvati goes on to write, began to emerge through indigenous cults. They adopt a new shape in relation to the ancient philosophical and religious systems, bestowing upon their followers images devoted to an individual cult’. For more, cf. A. Staszczyk, *Rzeźba hinduistyczna w Mathurze od II do IV w. n.e.*, Warszawa 2013, pp. 45, 59–62, 71–72.

⁴¹ P. Mus, *Has Brahma four faces?*, “Journal of the Indian Society of Oriental Art” 1937, V, pp. 60–73. Interestingly, in the Birla temples we do not have many representations of this deity. This is even visible in the group of panels discussed here. Brahma appears only on one more as a decorative motif in the upper part, rather than like the other gods, as the main image.

account the character of the figure described in the texts of tradition. The authors of the images used in the Birla Mandirs that were compiled here with specific citations have combed through whole centuries of sacral art from which they can draw. There is a tendency to use a standardized image that can be easily recognized and at the same time capture multiplicity in unity. It should not be forgotten, however, that at the time when the concept of how to decorate the temple in Delhi was emerging, from which any analysis should surely begin, there was a background discussion about the creation of a new sacral art in the context of national art and the search for a language of artistic expression for the renewal of Hinduism⁴². This returns to the Vedic roots. However, as often mentioned in this article, it is a return to idealized times and is certainly filtered through many centuries of temple Hinduism, which, after all, assumed the cult of a personal god in the image form.

It seems that thanks to this type of endeavour the following result was obtained: classical, orthodox Vedic thought could be eventually addressed to everyone, not only to the priests of the Brahmin *varṇa*, but to everyone who accepts the generally understood *dharma*. The detailed instructions for sacrificial ceremonies that exclude many groups do not stand in the way of a concept presented in this way. In the foreground is the idea that reality is one, God is one, *dharma* is one, and there are many ways to express or visualize these truths and many ways to achieve them, yet they all lead to one goal. Likewise, there are many deities, but ultimately all of them are only concrete, personal manifestations of the supreme, divine reality. Such interpreted Vedic thought becomes the basis for the contemporary concept of inclusive Hinduism, which is open and can accommodate all pathways within itself. Probably this is why among the creators of the Brahmanical *darśanas*, representatives of pluralist and orthodoxist ritual systems are not called up. The consequence of such an interpretative line are references, in the form of an elaboration or commentary, to the above-quoted passages of the *Upaniṣads*. These are fragments from the *Kaṭha*, *Īśa* and *Śvetāśvatara*. Emphasised in them is the all-pervasive aspect of the absolute, the only reality, then the penetration by this divine (*īśa*) power of everything as well as the paradoxical, impossible to unambiguously define, in any category, character of its nature. The message is obvious: Vedic thought from the very beginning, from the *Samhitās* stage to its halcyon days in the *Upaniṣads*, presents the same idea of one single reality that eludes unambiguous characteristics and is recognised and referred to in many ways.

At the beginning of the reflections in this article, it was mentioned that in the first, oldest temples sponsored by the Birla family, there were many images, engravings, panels and quotations from Indian cultural texts, referring to traditional forms of worship. The diverse ideas symbolism, and religious content conveyed encompass all the dharmic Indian traditions. The younger temples are more abstract, eclectic and, more importantly, inclusivist, embracing other dharmic religious traditions or philosophical concepts. One might wonder: Is it possible to point to one particular moment of transition or connection between these two forms of conveying a message? It seems to us that a clue may lie in the panels with the images, analysed here,

⁴² M. Kudelska et al., *The Temple Road...*, *op. cit.*

of Śrī Lakṣmī, Nārāyaṇa, and Dattātreya, inscribed with an interpretation of the sentence from *R̥gveda* 1.164 in the Hindi version and a quotation from the *Kaivalya Upaniṣad*. This time, the sentence expressing the unity of reality is to be found under the pair of deities to whom most of the Birla temples are dedicated. The idea of one absolute reality presented and named differently is not primarily related to the forms of *nivṛtti* – the cult of the ascetics, for whom the main deity is Śiva – but also to the *pravṛtti* tradition, more closely connected to the cult of Viṣṇu worshiped in one of his avatars. Such an interpretation of the *Vedānta*, both nirgūnic and sagūnic at the same time, becomes a perfect platform for the construction of hierarchical inclusivism, which can be an appealing form for a new, reformed Hinduism that is universal in its message.

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