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## G.D. Birla – Bhagirath for the New India<sup>1</sup>

### ABSTRACT

Ghyanshyamdas Birla (1894–1983) is one of the most recognised Indian entrepreneurs and philanthropists. He is also considered to be the father of the modern Indian economy as well as one of the architects of Indian independence. His biographies started to appear even during his life time. As the author of the paper claims, they were not mere accounts of his life but in fact created the heroic myth of Ghyanshyamdas Birla and presented him as a national hero realising the ideal of a sage as exposed in the *Bhagavadgita* and the ideals of *sthitaprajna*, *anashakti* and *karma yoga*, described accordingly by Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Mahatma Gandhi and Swami Vivekananda in their interpretations of the *Gita*.

### KEY WORDS

Birla, Pilani, myth, hero, biography, *Bhagavadgita*

In 1894 a boy was born in a prosperous business family in Pilani. There was nothing unusual in this event except that Pilani was a little known village in the Rajasthan desert and yet it could boast a very large banyan tree with copious branches reaching the earth, the day was one on which thousands of years ago Purushottam (the best amongst men) Rama was born, and the child, in the words of Wordsworth, was father of the man – G.D. Birla. From time to time inherited genes – like the roll of the dice, roulette ball, the fall of cards-play a thousand-to-one trick, and turn up a Shankaracharya,

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Vivekanand, a Gandhi, a Tilak, who by a further coincidence of time and circumstances, exercises his special genius to ultimate capacity. G.D. Birla was such a man.<sup>2</sup>

Ghyanshyamdas Birla (1894–1983), commonly known as G.D., is one of the most recognisable and most influential person of the contemporary Indian world of economics and politics, but his name is equally renowned in the field of social, educational and religious activity. G.D. is popularly considered to be a person who, as one of his biographer stated, “[...] had played a vital role in shaping modern India,”<sup>3</sup> who, in fact, created the modern Indian economy “[...] effectively nurturing the plant of capitalism in India and saw it grow, into a blossoming tree.”<sup>4</sup> He also laid the groundwork for modern Indian industry. This exceptionally successful businessman developed his enterprises in many various fields. Trade, banking and speculation (the legacy of his father Raja Baldeodas Birla, 1864–1957) jute mills, factories of rayon, cotton, cement, cellulose and chemicals as well an aluminium processing plant (Hindalco Aluminum is one of his most successful projects) are only a few examples of G.D.’s unfettered business activities which may be viewed as having constituted a strong stimuli to the just emerging modern Indian economy and business climate.<sup>5</sup> His ideas on monetary policy, inflation, taxation, bank reserves, wages etc.<sup>6</sup> even if not implemented directly or even openly criticised by his political opponents were always seen by the decisive forces as a strong and important voice in the discussion on India’s new pursuit of full independence. But then G.D., since the very beginning of his conscious social life, was in the very centre of the freedom struggle which brought him close to the most influential Indian political leaders and thinkers (mostly those from the right wing of the political spectrum whose ideas left a strong mark on his own political thinking) such as – the most important – Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948) whom he considered to be not only his mentor, but even a guru and also a friend,<sup>7</sup>

<sup>2</sup> *The Glorious 90 years: G.D. Birla, Ramnaomi 1894 – 11th June 1983*, Bombay 1983, p. 22.

<sup>3</sup> M. M. Juneja, *G.D. Birla – Life and Legacy*, Hisar 2000, p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>5</sup> For more details on the economic activities of G.D. as well as the whole Birla family cf. for example: M. Kudaisya, *The Life and Times of G. D. Birla*, New Delhi 2006; G. Piramal, *Business Legends*, New Delhi 2010; A. Nayak, *Indian Multinationals: the Dynamics of Explosive Growth in a Developing Country Context*, Basingstoke 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. for example G. D. Birla, *The Path to Prosperity. A Collection of Speech and Writings*, Allahabad 1950.

<sup>7</sup> For a detailed description of the relationship between G.D. and Mahatma Gandhi cf. for example: *idem*, *Bapu: A Unique Association*, Bombay 1970; *idem*, *In the Shadow of*

Madan Mohan Malaviya (1861–1946), Vallabhbhai Jhaverbhai (Sardar) Patel (1875–1950) or Lala Lajpat Rai (1865–1928). His involvement in political pro-independence activity (though it would be too much to call G.D. a politician) along with his business undertakings brought him also within the circles of the most influential world politicians, such as Winston Churchill (1874–1965), Nikita Khrushchev (1894–1971), Charles de Gaulle (1890–1970), Josip Broz Tito (1892–1980) or Dwight Eisenhower (1890–1969).

Equally important was G.D.'s engagement in wider social activity aimed at the realisation of three basic goals that can be broadly described as the building of social welfare, popularising education (with particular emphasis on the promotion and development of modern technologies) and reviving Hindu religious values. G.D. implemented these ideas by conducting a wide-ranging philanthropic campaign resulting in hospitals, orphanages, research centres, schools, universities (BITS<sup>8</sup> being the most famous educational project initiated by G.D.) and some extremely popular temple complexes, commonly known as Birla Mandir.<sup>9</sup> All these actions were to serve, however, the realisation of one imperative, and for G.D. the fundamental goal – the formation

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*the Mahatma: A Personal Memoir*, Bombay 1953; N. Pyarelal, *Mahatma Gandhi. The Last Phase*, Ahmedabad 1958.

<sup>8</sup> The Birla Institute of Technology and Science, established in 1964 in Pilani (Rajasthan, G.D.'s hometown) and currently with branches in Hyderabad, Goa and Dubai is one of the leading science and higher education institutions in India, cf. homepage of BITS <http://www.bits-pilani.ac.in/> (accessed August 2015).

<sup>9</sup> G.D. himself founded several impressive temple complexes: Surya in Gwalior (1988), Vishnu in Nagda, Saraswati in Pilani (1960) and Shiva in Renukoot (1972). But it must be remembered that he, in fact, continued the Birla family tradition, which was started by his grandfather Seth Shivnarain Birla (1838–1910) who restored the dilapidated temple in Pilani. G.D.'s father – Raja Baldeodas Birla founded the temples in religiously and also politically significant locations – the Lakshmi Narayan temple in Patna (1943), the Srimadbhagavadgita temple in Mathura (1946), the Krishna temple in Kurukshetra (1956). With the prominent participation of Baldeodas and his son Jugalkishore (1883–1967) the Lakshmi Narayan temple in Delhi (1939) and the Shiva (New Vishwanath) temple in Varanasi (founded in 1931, but only completed in 1956) were built. Inspired by G.D.'s brother (1904–1981) Braj Mohan and with the financial support of his son Ganga Prasad (1922–2010) 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) were founded. In Shahad (Mumbai) Rameshwardas, G.D.'s brother (1892–1973), established the Vithoba temple (1966). 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). So far Birla Mandirs have never undergone any systematic research.

of an Indian nation and the creation of a strong and modern India that would be an equal partner with the world powers on every level. Thinking about so many achievements of this “national hero” – as one of G.D.’s biographers called him,<sup>10</sup> and his significant influence on the shape of modern India, it is not surprising that the biographies detailing G.D.’s life and documenting in detail his political, economic, and social activities, as well as recounting and analysing his views began to emerge during his life time. They also showed – and this is of special interest – G.D. as a human being and hence focused on his unique character traits that determined the shape of his life and defined his line of thought and action in all his undertakings. It seems that at this very spot lies the source of the G.D. myth – of a man who could act as a national hero only because he was a hero as a man.

Before we present some selected elements constituting the myth of G.D. it must be clarified how the term myth, used so often, with so many different notions and in so many various contexts, is understood in these analyses. It seems that the concept of the myth proposed by Joseph Campbell would be particularly useful for our purpose. It is, however, worth referring not to his well-known discussion on the monomyth, but to recall briefly the views of the mythologist on the political and social role of the myth, the myth understood not as a narrative, but above all as a complex of symbols, values and images which rules man’s thinking and acting – an active power shaping the social and political life. The myth comprehended exactly in this way was considered by Campbell as a source of spiritual power and the base of individual and social identity and hence the active force strengthening one’s functioning within the frame of political order and the political order itself.<sup>11</sup> Analysing the political importance of myth in Campbell’s thought, Robert Elwood highlights two issues very important for our reflections –

First, societies need a cohesive story about **who a people are, what they can accomplish, and what their deep level values are**. Second, the social myth can only be **received and employed by individuals through individual choice**.<sup>12</sup>

What is particularly important, according to Campbell, the myth realises its political and social functions not by presenting ready-made solutions, but by showing its users “generic, «archetypal» categories, reducing individuals and

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<sup>10</sup> M. M. Juneja, op. cit., Hisar 2000, p. 306.

<sup>11</sup> R. Ellwood, *The Politics of Myth. A Study of C. G. Jung, Mircea Eliade, and Joseph Campbell*, Albany 1999, p. 155.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 168 (emphasis mine).

racas or peoples) to types and roles, stereotyping them as Hero or Trickster, as Good or Evil.”<sup>13</sup> In this way a man can, in the words of Campbell, “follow his own myth” – can follow these general formulas expressed in the form of myth incorporating them into practice and thus influencing the social reality and politics. It is also very important, as Łukasz Trzeciński notes, that a myth, in particular, the myth of a hero, acts as a kind of regulator of social life. This happens on two levels – a more profound one, where the myths alive in a particular community (which does not necessarily mean that its members are always aware of them), harmonise social life, and a reflective one, associated with social self-consciousness, where the myths take part in the creation of institutions regulating social life in accordance with the specific principles of fairness and justice. The myth is seen as a force that enables social homeostasis, for which the foundation would be justice (which Trzeciński defined according to Aristotle as giving each one what he deserves).<sup>14</sup>

In India, such a myth, a “hard-worked active force”, to recall the words of Bronisław Malinowski,<sup>15</sup> is the *Bhagavadgita*. This text is commonly considered to be one of the most important and with the largest impact the scripture of Indian tradition. Its importance, though always significant, grew in a special way at the turn of the 18th and 19th century. It was connected not only with the first translations of the *Gita* appearing during that time, but primarily with the evolution of modern Hinduism, searching for its own identity, as well as wanting to become a platform of agreement for various religious and philosophical trends and hence reaching for the text that presents the greatest synthesis of thought, the text which is clear evidence of ideological syncretism so characteristic for the whole tradition of India.<sup>16</sup> Recognising the *Gita* as the most representative Hindu scripture elevated it to a very special status – the scripture “nearly achieved the status of the Bible.”<sup>17</sup> It is not surprising that very soon the *Gita* became an inexhaustible source of inspiration for the nationalist movements emerging at the same time, whose representatives, seeking legitimacy for their proclaimed views (as well as how to implement them as social action) made the scripture the subject of endless interpretation.<sup>18</sup> For

<sup>13</sup> Ibidem, p. 177.

<sup>14</sup> Ł. Trzeciński, *Mit bohaterski w perspektywie antropologii filozoficznej i kulturowej*, Kraków 2006, p. 17.

<sup>15</sup> B. Malinowski, *Magic, Science and Religion*, New York 1948, p. 101.

<sup>16</sup> M. Kudelska, *Hinduizm*, Kraków 2006, p. 144.

<sup>17</sup> N. Gowda, *The Bhagavadgita in the Nationalist Discourse*, New Delhi 2011, p. IX.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. for example ibidem or S. Kapila, F. Devji, *Political Thought in Action. The Bhagavadgita and Modern India*, New Delhi 2013.

the reflections presented in this paper three interpretations are particularly important – Mahatma Gandhi's expressed in his various speeches, papers and statements, Bal Gangadhar Tilak's (1865–1920) precisely described in his *Gita Rahasya* (1915)<sup>19</sup> and Swami Vivekananda's presented mostly in his *Thoughts on the Gita* (1897). In all of them, the *Gita* was placed on a pedestal, as a text showing in the fullest manner the highest ethical ideals which, most importantly, not only can, but indeed must be implemented through active engagement with world affairs. Only such action, although variously described by the aforementioned thinkers, was the key, in their opinion, to, also variously understood, the spiritual development of man.

For Gandhi, the central category for understanding the meaning of the *Gita* but also the highest ideal, was *anasakti* or non-attachment to all that the world has to offer. At the same time, however, *anasakti* imposed an obligation to engage in world affairs for the betterment of the whole universe. What constituted the essence of *anasakti* was love and compassion “characterized by truthfulness, forgiveness, pity, sympathy, fearlessness, tyaga, resourcefulness, constancy, spiritedness, generosity, tranquility, devotion to duty.”<sup>20</sup> These features were, according to Gandhi, to push a man to act, to motivate him to serve the nation and later the whole of humanity in the fullest manner possible. “By the compassion – Gandhi stated – I only understand that we should dedicate ourselves wholly, body, mind and possessions to relieving the suffering of those around us whom we find in distress.”<sup>21</sup> This kind of acting must be, however, entirely free from all kinds of attachment to its fruits, it must be in perfect accordance with the *nishkama karmi* ideals and this could only be achieved through *bhakti* (understood as the “constant application of one's heart to action”<sup>22</sup>) and *jnana* (understood as “a constant relation between the mind and the self in the search of truth.”<sup>23</sup> Only this perfect blending of *karma* – action, *bhakti* – devotion and *jnana* – knowledge would purify one's heart and bring the realisation of *anasakti* which, as Gandhi saw it, is central to patriotism. According to Gandhi, as Nagappa Gowda stressed, “[...] patriotism is a corollary of selfless-action”, and it results in a strong commitment to the nation<sup>24</sup> and “*anasakti* is «unattached» attachment for patriotism, universal love,

<sup>19</sup> The text was published for the first time in Marathi in 1915. The Hindi edition appeared two years later and the first English edition was issued in 1935.

<sup>20</sup> N. Gowda, op. cit., p. 196.

<sup>21</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>22</sup> Ibidem, p. 178.

<sup>23</sup> Ibidem, p. 177.

<sup>24</sup> Ibidem, p. 196.

and active engagement with the world.”<sup>25</sup> As was particularly important for Gandhi, patriotism or the selfless, desireless, unattached pursuit of the public good should be identical with religious or spiritual strivings, in pursuit of God.

Tilak in turn was convinced that the *Gita* expressed the ethical values of the Indian culture in the fullest manner and hence may be seen as a base for building a long-lasting social and political order. Two closely related categories around which he built his interpretation of the *Gita* are *karma yoga* and *sthitaprajna*. The first is the way, the other is the aim of human activities. *Karma yoga*, or selfless action is, according to Tilak “[...] the combination of all that is best in spiritual science, in actual action and in an unselfish meditative life. Compliance with this universal law leads to the realisation of the most cherished ideas of man.”<sup>26</sup> *Sthitaprajna* was understood as

[...] a completely integrated person whose reason is steadied by the practice of Karma yoga combined with jnana and bhakti, whose heart throbs with the heart of all humanity – as the central figure, who is to set himself an ideal for ethical pursuit, or set an example of performance of one’s duties without any expectations for the common.<sup>27</sup>

The man who succeeded in realising this deeply spiritual ideals described in the *Gita* is, as Tilak characterises him, full of virtues, having a pure mind, devoid of all desires and free from attachment to the external world. What is more, by the practice of *karma yoga* he was able to fully control his mind and get to know the Absolute Self. Tilak stresses that in such a person there is a perfect interaction of pure discriminatory reason and pure practical reason which makes any action he undertakes altruistic – they are focused only on the public good.

As his discriminatory reason (*vyavasayatmika buddhih*), by erasing ego presence, has acquired purity and equability, and follows the dictates of pure practical reason (*vasanatmika buddhih*) he cannot indulge in any sinful deeds contrary to the will of the society.<sup>28</sup>

It is very important to note the fact that, as Tilak saw it, the characteristics of *karma yogi sthitaprajnan* should be seen as an example, an illustration of proper conduct which should be followed by everyone, and above all by

<sup>25</sup> Ibidem, p. 197.

<sup>26</sup> B. G. Tilak, *Srimad Bhagavadgita Rahasya or Karma Yoga Sastra*, Poona 1971, p. XXVII.

<sup>27</sup> N. Gowda, *The Bhagavadgita in the Nationalist Discourse*, New Delhi 2011, p. 53.

<sup>28</sup> Ibidem, p. 69.

ordinary people both while making the everyday decisions and in spiritual quests. *Karma yoga* and *sthitaprajna* were to become the foundation for ethical values and standards for the entire nation. For Tilak, as Gowda states, “the nation is not expressed through the framework of constitutional democracy but the heroic personality – *karma yogin sthitaprajnan*.”<sup>29</sup>

The third interpretation of the *Bhagavadgita* important for our reflections is the one proposed by Swami Vivekananda. In this case, the axis of argumentation is determined by the ideal of *nishkama karma*, or non-attachment to the effects of the action undertaken. As Vivekananda explains – “This is the one central idea in the Gita; work incessantly, but be not attached to it.”<sup>30</sup> *Nishkama karma* implies, according to Swami, four things. They are: a pure mind which means controlling it to such an extent that it shuts out the outside world, thereby, in other words, developing an appropriate indifference to the world; a pure heart, which should remain free from the feeling of “mine-ness” and thereby free from the attachment to the results of one’s actions; absence of passion, excitement and sentiments which underlie each form of attachment; full concentration on one’s work which requires a strong and steady mind. The last factor, as Vivekananda saw it, is the most important aspect of *nishkama karma* as it is the concentration that annihilates the ego and the attachment and allows to “merge” one’s mind completely within the action. The doctrine of *nishkama karma*, according to Vivekananda, puts the poor and underprivileged areas of society in the spotlight. This is not a coincidence. As Swami claimed, the *Bhagavadgita*, puts in fact a very strong emphasis on economic issues as crucial for religion. According to Vivekananda, as Gowda stresses, the *Gita* “overturned the spiritual and altruistic religion of the Vedas into economic religion through the concept of *daridra-narayana*.”<sup>31</sup> The religiosity of the *Gita* is not, therefore, the religiosity of the religious cult (for example, worshipping gods, performing sacrifices, reciting mantras) or pursuing god on the path of *samnyasa*, but of full and active engagement in serving the poor. “Therefore”, Gowda adds “it called on its followers to worship ‘daridra’ as ‘narayana’ and seek transcendence in their service.”<sup>32</sup> We may add that according to Vivekananda, transcendence can be variously defined, as the *Bhagavadgita* leaves here a choice depending on the different conditions, needs and temperaments of each human being.

<sup>29</sup> Ibidem, p. 53.

<sup>30</sup> Swami Vivekananda, *Karma Yoga, Collected Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol. I, [online] <http://estudantedavedanta.net/Complete%20Works%20of%20Swami%20Vivekananda.pdf> [accessed August 2015].

<sup>31</sup> N. Gowda, op. cit., p. 104.

<sup>32</sup> Ibidem.

These interpretations, mentioned here briefly, although they differ from each other in many points, draw a very clear picture of an ideal man – a citizen, a “national hero” as Tilak called him, and present him as a person whose *dharma* – main duty – is selfless work for others to change the existing order of reality for the better. What is important, this *dharma* was no longer determined by varna affiliation, but by the intelligent and conscious choice to follow the ideals expressed in the *Gita* (whether it be *anasakti* or *sthitaprajna* or *nishkama karma* and *daridranarayana*). Following such a defined *dharma* was also regarded as a religious activity par excellence, which could bear appropriate fruit – union with transcendence.

For G.D., the *Bhagavadgita* was a special book. Members of his family and friends knew this and spoke widely about it, highlighting the fact that the contents of the scripture had a real impact on the practice of G.D.’s everyday life. For example G.D.’s son, Krishna Kumar says: “[...] the message of the *Gita* formed the core of his life. He discovered that the *Gita* epitomized the philosophy of the *Upanishads* and *Vedic scriptures*. He could find answers to all human problems in *Gita*.”<sup>33</sup> One of G.D.’s close friends – D. P. Khaitan pointed out:

He has been an ardent student of the *Upanishads*, particularly of the *Geeta*. He has tried to practice the teachings of the *Geeta* in his own life. He believes in the basic and the eternal truths expounded by the ancient *Rishis* and bothers little about the rituals and the dogmas.<sup>34</sup>

G.D. inherited this attachment to the *Gita* as a family tradition, or so it seems, since his father Raja Baldeodas Birla and older brother Jugalkishore Birla (1883–1967), who after his father’s death served as the *pater familias*, were the founders of temples in which the *Bhagavadgita* had a special place. For example, the Lakshmi Narayan Temple in Delhi (1939) boasted a whole separate pavilion (*Gita Bhavan*) dedicated to the *Bhagavadgita*, and the Krishna Mandir (also called *Gita Mandir*) in Kurukshetra (1956) or New Vishvanath Temple in Varanasi (1965) were inscribed with the whole text of the *Gita* on the temple walls. Without a doubt G.D. also knew the aforementioned interpretations of the *Gita* and just as the scripture itself, they influenced his course of action. G.D. had the most intimate contact with Gandhi’s thinking about this “Bible of Hinduism” due to his close personal and long lasting relationship with the Father of the Nation. As a young man

<sup>33</sup> K. K. Birla, *Brushes with History. An Autobiography*, New Delhi 2007, p. 27.

<sup>34</sup> M. M. Juneja, op. cit., p. 82.

G.D. encountered Tilak's interpretation of the *Gita*, and it was Tilak, with his extreme views and radical socio-political demands that constituted for him and his companions an attractive model and in contrast to the moderate Gandhi who "spoke with common sense and not excitement" Tilak was a reference point to them.<sup>35</sup> One can also assume, although there is a lack of direct evidence, that G.D. was familiar with Vivekananda's interpretation of the *Gita*, too. It was commonly known in the patriotic circles of India during that time. For G.D.'s biographers *Bhagavadgita* also became a key to interpret his private and public life and became a kind of template which was imposed on G.D.'s life to reveal it as an example of the perfect embodiment of the principles taught by Krishna. It can therefore be argued that the *Gita* became a text that formed the basis for the creation of G.D. as a mythical hero. It should be stressed that for a myth itself (as well as for its receivers) the hero figure is extremely important since it confirms the veracity of the myth. As Ł. Trzeciński states: "There must be someone who confirms [...] that such and such behavior leads to such and such effects, whichever is of course about the effects of salvation. He must guarantee himself the truth of the myth."<sup>36</sup> The recipient of a myth is convinced that the mythical hero is or was the person who actually committed certain acts and lived as it has been shown in the tale. The hero is "the embodiment of what the listener of the myth believes in" and what he is going to repeat in his own life. This is why the role of the mythical hero is so significant and the more important it is, the more difficult and more uncertain are the times and circumstances faced by a society. The virtues and ideals embodied in the character of a mythical hero allow individual people as well as social groups to determine a certain direction to follow. As Ł. Trzeciński clarifies:

[...] the "guarantee" of the aptness of an adopted course of action taken by a community is the belief in the real existence of [...] the timeless order, certified by the lives of saints and heroes. Of course, if there is faith, there are also doubts justified by the fact that a saint or a hero is always someone "different". In this situation, however, there is always the possibility to personally test this belief, to follow this path.<sup>37</sup>

It is G.D. who is, or at least portrayed in this way by his biographers, such a hero, the embodiment of the most important and most sublime ideals of the Hindus. He is pictured as a national hero who throughout all his life and in all

<sup>35</sup> Cf. M. Kudaisya, op. cit., p. 39.

<sup>36</sup> Ł. Trzeciński, op. cit., p. 20.

<sup>37</sup> Ibidem, p. 15.

his actions pursued the principles exposed in the *Bhagavadgita* in a perfect way and this brought him success in his private life, a successful career and ensured effective work to reform and modernise India.

In trying to reconstruct the figure of G.D. as a mythical, national hero the author draws on the material from three sources. There are primarily two G.D. biographies most useful in terms of details: R. N. Jaju, *G.D. Birla. A Biography* (New Delhi 1986)<sup>38</sup> and M. M. Juneja, *G.D. Birla Life and Legacy* (Hisar 2000). Both of them are based on recollections, memoirs and reports of various members of G.D.'s family, friends and co-workers, as well as his private correspondence, unpublished notes and resources available to a wide audience – lectures, speeches, books and press materials. The third source is the commemorative volume published on the occasion of G.D.'s 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary – *The Glorious 90 Years – Ramnaomi 1894–11th June 1983* (Bombay 1983). This publication is also filled with memories devoted to G.D., but of a specific character. While the two aforementioned biographies predominantly describe his activities, this volume focuses on G.D. as a person – his exceptional character, traits, talents, skills and interests. In this volume, apart from a brief outline of G.D.'s life and a few recollections there are mainly descriptions of his personality completed by fragments of literary works by G.D. himself (e.g. *Krishna Vande Jagadgurum*<sup>39</sup>), the *Bhagavadgita*, as well as various poems (e.g. by W. E. Channing<sup>40</sup> or R. N. Jaju, who was one of G.D.'s biographers and his “ardent devotee”<sup>41</sup>) as well as fragments of funeral homages and tributes addressed by various people. All of these texts were to emphasise or illustrate the unusual nature of G.D. The book contains also many photographs showing Birla in different perspectives and situations.

In showing biographical (and perhaps even hagiographic) threads that build a picture of G.D. as a mythical hero, the author of the paper decided to focus primarily on the social context of his activity and try to highlight those themes in which one can find the qualities mentioned above, i.e. those of *anasakti*, *sthitaprajna*, *nishkama karma* or *daridranarayana* which collectively form the character of a national hero. We have almost completely excluded from deliberations any mention of G.D.'s private or family life which would require a separate analysis.

<sup>38</sup> First edition in Hindi: R. N. Jājū, *Marubhūmi kā vaha megha: Ghanaśyāmadāsa Bīṛalā kā jīvana-carita aura jīvana-darśana*, Dili 1984.

<sup>39</sup> G. D. Birla, *Krishnam Vande Jagadgurum*, Mumbai 1981. The book contains selected episodes from the *Bhagavata Purana* and *Mahabharata* recounted by G.D. Birla in a way that highlights the message of each story.

<sup>40</sup> William Ellery Channing (1818–1901), American poet, transcendentalist.

<sup>41</sup> *The Glorious 90 years...*, op. cit., p. 44.

The monument of G.D. Birla at the front of the Surya Mandir (Gwalior). The inscription on the monument reads: “I want to say right here that you should do virtuous deeds and invoke the God’s name. May God bless you. Ghyanshyamdas.” It also gives G.D’s dates of birth and death: “Born [sc. descent/incarnation] on Ramnavami [the ninth day of the light half of the month Cait] 1864 and died [sc. immersed in Brahma] on the 11th June 1983.”



Translated from Hindi by A. Staszcyk.  
Photo by A. Świerzowska.

## “BIRLAJI’S LIFE WAS A LIVING TRANSLATION OF BHAGAVADGITA”<sup>42</sup>

As previously mentioned, the myth of G.D. is consistently built on the basis of the *Bhagavadgita*. G.D.’s biographers repeatedly emphasise that we are dealing here with a full, even perfect translation of the *Gita* into both personal and professional life and, consequently, the social activities of G.D. This perfect “living by the *Gita*” was to make G.D. a person described as: “the king”, “the empire builder”, “a partiarach”<sup>43</sup> Bhagirath,<sup>44</sup> yugpurush,<sup>45</sup> Hanuman,<sup>46</sup> king Janak,<sup>47</sup> Purushottam’s son.<sup>48</sup>

The basis for this life fully grounded in the *Bhagavadgita* as well as the foundation for any actions undertaken by G.D. was *samatva* understood, according to the *Gita*, as evenness, sameness, equanimity but with “all kinds of overtones, including «balance» and «harmony». Essentially it is the attitude of looking dispassionately at life and being unruffled by its ups and downs.”<sup>49</sup>

When he completely withdraws the senses  
from sense-objects, as the tortoise (withdraws)  
its limbs from all sides, his knowledge is steady

Bhagavadgita II.58<sup>50</sup>

G.D. realised the state of *samatva* thanks to his innate and extraordinary fortitude which allowed him to take full control over his senses. As R. N. Jaju asserts –

He was not a slave to the senses, and mastered them not by suppression but by sublimation. He was not the subject to man’s six enemies – sex, indignation, arrogance, covetousness, infatuation, jealousy. Not that he forcibly discarded them; just that he disarmed them.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Ibidem, p. 98.

<sup>43</sup> Ibidem, p. 90.

<sup>44</sup> R. N. Jaju, *G. D. Birla. A Biography*, New Delhi 1986, p. 237. Bhagiratha was a mythical king of Kosala, who brought the river Ganges from heaven to earth.

<sup>45</sup> *The Glorious 90 years...*, op. cit., p. 156.

<sup>46</sup> Ibidem, p. 99.

<sup>47</sup> R. N. Jaju, *G. D. Birla. A Biography*, op. cit., p. 310.

<sup>48</sup> *The Glorious 90 years...*, op. cit., p. 22.

<sup>49</sup> G. Feuerstein, *The Yoga Tradition. Its History, Literature, Philosophy and Practice*, Prescott 2001, p. 7.

<sup>50</sup> All quotations from *Bhagavadgita* come from: *The Bhagavad Gita*, trans. A. M. Sastry, Madras 1977.

<sup>51</sup> R. N. Jaju, *G. D. Birla. A Biography*, op. cit., p. 313.

The most effective weapon G.D. used in the battle with his own senses was, as the biographies emphasise, a firm and unshakable discipline that he maintained at every level of his life and in every situation, with no exceptions for anybody.

To lead a detached life, unmindful of results, one has to be self-disciplined and conscientiously regulate one's activities. G.D. had inherited discipline and executive acumen, and these he further improved. Throughout his life he meticulously observed a daily he made for himself. With the passage of time he made certain changes but he never compromised with his basic principles.<sup>52</sup>

G.D.'s biographers willingly and in detail describe the daily regimen of Birla, planned carefully almost to the minute. At the same time they demonstrate the absolute intransigence of G.D. regarding its fulfilment. As an example, they mention the situations in which G.D. refused to accept invitations to evening receptions due to the fact that he went to bed at a certain time. It was not only family members and friends who received such refusals, but also VIPs. M. M. Juneja quotes fragments of several letters in which G.D. explains: "I am in bed without fail at 9.15 and I am fully asleep at about 10 o'clock during the process of reading. I get up early in the morning for my long walks and, therefore like to be in bed early."<sup>53</sup> Some experienced G.D.'s steadfastness in this matter, regardless of the gravity of the situation. R. N. Jaju describes, for example, a dinner arranged by the American industrialist Edward Kaiser (1908–1981) to honour G.D. to commemorate the founding of the Hindalco aluminum processing plant. At precisely 7.30 p.m. G.D. demanded his meal and having eaten it, left the reception and returned to the hotel.<sup>54</sup>

He attains peace, into whom all desires  
enter as waters enter the ocean, which, filled from  
all sides, remains unaltered; but not he who desires objects.

Bhagavadgita II.70

G.D., as described by his biographers, was a man who, although fully engaged in worldly matters and played a full part in the life of this world and, moreover, even influenced it and by his actions modelled it according to accepted ideals, was in no way attached to it. He belonged to this world but the world did not have any power over him. This specific detachment of G.D. is vividly described by his biographer – R. N. Jaju –

<sup>52</sup> Ibidem, p. 104.

<sup>53</sup> M. M. Juneja, op. cit., p. 277.

<sup>54</sup> R. N. Jaju, *G. D. Birla. A Biography*, op. cit., pp. 107–108.

His characteristics were purity and goodness, but he was not a Mahatma. He was dutiful, devout man who never renounced the world. I once wrote in a poem that though he seemed attached, in essence he was always detached, though not so entirely detached as to be above defeat or victory. He wanted to be a man not a God [...]. To me [...] he appears more-of-the-world than otherwise. His star made him a king, but a king of this world.<sup>55</sup>

He was a king of this world, but at the same time, as R. N. Jaju asserts, he was as Janak, who “was a king, yet a detached one [...]. Like Janak G.D. wanted to be above physical needs”, wanted to be “incorporeal.”<sup>56</sup> The same biographer also describes G.D. as a yogi and a king, adding that although traditionally these two paths, as a rule, are mutually exclusive, in this case “God willed G.D. to be both king and a yogi.”<sup>57</sup>

[He] to whom a clod of earth  
and stone and gold are alike...

Bhagavadgita XIV.24

G.D.’s attitude towards material goods was also portrayed as a model one – wealth had no charm for him hence influenced neither his character nor his actions. The “kingship” and the majesty, dignity and integrity linked with it were also not associated with material status, but were to stem directly from his nature. R. N. Jaju stresses that

G.D. earned plenty of money, but it seems that had he learned less, it would have made no difference to his character and personality. The soil that bore him was intrinsically dignified. His kingship was inherent: it did not lie in his prosperity. During the long span of his life there were occasions when it seemed that the Birlas would decline, but he showed no grief whatever.<sup>58</sup>

The biographer quotes also an extract from a letter written by G.D. to one of his sons, where he explains his position regarding material wealth:

Wealth is no virtue [...]. I don’t forget that while I have in this letter strongly condemned rich men, I myself am a rich man. I am trying to mould my life in a manner which may, God willing, clear me of all vices.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Ibidem, p. 311.

<sup>56</sup> Ibidem, p. 310.

<sup>57</sup> Ibidem, p. 311.

<sup>58</sup> Ibidem, p. 315.

<sup>59</sup> Ibidem, p. 311.

According to G.D. the only thing which justifies the multiplication of profits is their proper use. As he would always say: “Money is easy to make but difficult to spend properly”. Such an ability, as the biographies show, G.D. possessed to perfection – “He not only spent his money properly, but also gave a detailed account of his life – a life which had become a synonym of economic patriotism.”<sup>60</sup>

He to whom pain and pleasure are alike...

Bhagavadgita XIV.24

According to the biographers, G.D. had one more very special quality which defined his attitude towards death. In the face of this experience – the most difficult for any human being – G.D. remained totally unmoved. He was able to retain that stoic calm while experiencing the loss of his closest loved ones – his father, wife, brother – as well as contemplating his own transience. This theme, so close to every man, and therefore appealing so vividly to the imagination and emotions, often reoccurs in the descriptions of G.D. He stands as a rock unmoved by the most violent emotional storms. G.D.’s biographers frequently operate with such images while writing about his experiences of death –

Unmoved he bore this calamity with fortitude [...]. He was possibly reminded of what was communicated to the bereaved King Aja on the death of his beloved. It was (as given in *Raghuvansa* by Kalidasa): “What difference will there be between a tree and a mountain if both were to be shaken by the wind?” G.D. remained unshaken by the storm.<sup>61</sup>

The figure of G.D. retaining this unruffled calm in this difficult situation is for his biographers (and likewise for the readers) direct proof of the truth of the message conveyed by the *Gita* and is considered to be evidence of the effectiveness of the guidance contained in it as long as they are fully – as in G.D.’s case – put into practice. So Birla appears here as a mythological hero par excellence, as a hero, whose conduct testifies the validity and effectiveness of the messages transmitted by the myth. Suffice to recall the personal testimony of R. N. Jaju:

The news of G.D.’s father’s demise left him unmoved. His stoic attitude was unbelievable. He was not the least restless [...]. As a human being he must have felt the separation but he controlled his feelings. He gave no opportunity to others to express their condolences and went about his work normally. He returned to India accomplishing

<sup>60</sup> *The Glorious 90 years...*, op. cit., p. 158.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 89.

all he had set out to. I had read of such dispassionate behaviour in *Gita*, but in G.D.'s demeanour I saw it proven true.<sup>62</sup>

G.D., as R. N. Jaju describes, remained equally unmoved when he too was heading towards the end of his life –

When G.D.'s relations and others close to him uncovered the body to have the last look at him, he seemed to be enjoying eternal sleep with cool brow. He seemed absorbed in prayer, and if he would soon rise after his silent prayer.<sup>63</sup>

G.D.'s face was uncovered [...]. Surrounded by wreaths and bouquets his face was luminous. Everybody present felt that such a blessed end is the privilege of sages in intense meditation.<sup>64</sup>

The *das* (i.e. G.D. a servant of God) is united with Gyanshyam (Lord Krishna).<sup>65</sup>

In these biographical narratives, G.D. adopts the role of the archetypal sage as described in the *Bhagavadgita*, and is presented as “a model as a man”<sup>66</sup> who, due to his qualities both natural or adopted thanks to strict and severe discipline, was able to achieve that goal which is most important for each human being – union with God. At the same time these characteristics also enabled him to – and this is the prevailing quality in the image of G.D. so meticulously built – carry out important tasks in the world, and above all to work in favour of a new and modern India. He could thereby realise the ideals previously mentioned – *anashakti*, *sthitaprajna* and *karma yoga*.

First of all, G.D. was described by his biographers as a perfect karma yogi – “It is not possible to describe his many great qualities in words. He was a true Karma Yogi as described in the Shrimad Bhagavad Gita”<sup>67</sup> – in this very spot, the anonymous author of the text praising the exceptional character of G.D. quotes two particularly meaningful shlokas from the *Bhagavadgita* – Krishna's word spoken to Arjuna:

Thy concern is with action alone, never  
with results. Let not the fruit of action be thy  
motive, nor let thy attachment be for inaction

Bhagavadgita II.47

<sup>62</sup> Ibidem, p. 148.

<sup>63</sup> Ibidem, p. 184.

<sup>64</sup> Ibidem, p. 186.

<sup>65</sup> Ibidem, p. 183.

<sup>66</sup> M. M. Juneja, op. cit., p. 303.

<sup>67</sup> *The Glorious 90 years...*, op. cit., p. 60.

A Yogin is deemed superior to men of  
austerity, and superior to even men of knowledge;  
he is also superior to men of action; therefore be  
thou a Yogin, Arjuna.

Bhagavadgita VI.46

In this way, G.D. is characterised as a man of action who by action and in action attained perfection. In reading the biography of G.D., one is struck by the constant highlighting of the unusual activism of Birla realised on various levels – private, business, social, political, but always precisely targeted and planned so as to achieve the best possible results. In his activity G.D. was always guided, as his biographers emphasise, only by his infallible judgment based on a meticulous and exceptionally precise analysis of data. As R. N. Juneja stresses, G.D.’s brain worked with the precision of a computer.<sup>68</sup> This precision in thinking, and of course in acting, was possible due to the quality of mindfulness, unusual clarity of thought and the ability to fully concentrate on the task in hand, which G.D. developed to the highest possible level and applied in all circumstances regardless of whether it was the recruitment procedure for new employees during which G.D. paid careful attention to how the candidate’s shoes were polished<sup>69</sup> or writing a literary text. The personal secretary of G.D. stated: “Behind Shree Birla success in diverse fields is his trait of being deeply involved in whatever work he is doing at the moment.”<sup>70</sup> R. N. Jaju emphasised that although G.D. was always extremely busy, he never acted mechanically, but always gave his full attention to whatever he undertook.<sup>71</sup> All these qualities, as well as others mentioned by G.D.’s biographers – wisdom, intuition, a “sense of proportion”, “unity of thought and action”<sup>72</sup> and deep spiritual involvement – make G.D. the personification of *sthitaprajna*, the ideal described by Tilak. Birla mainly realised this ideal in action. This activism of G.D., as the biographers claim, did not stem from his nature but from his perfect assimilation of the *Gita*’s message. Or, to put it in a different way, we may say it stemmed from his very nature if we assume that the ideals of the *Gita* had been fully internalised. Analysing G.D.’s attitude to action, especially that aimed at the proliferation of material goods (and, as the author shows it in the further parts of this paper, using them for *publico bono*), R. N. Jaju quotes the statement of Birla himself:

<sup>68</sup> M. M. Juneja, op. cit., p. 118.

<sup>69</sup> Cf. Ibidem, pp. 118–120.

<sup>70</sup> Ibidem, p. 246.

<sup>71</sup> R. N. Jaju, *G. D. Birla. A Biography*, op. cit., p. 109.

<sup>72</sup> Ibidem, pp. 142, 127.

The mental impressions of *dharma* inspire me to action. The basis of the *Gita* is nothing but action. Slackness in action gives rise to slackness in *dharma*. In the absence of action, *dharma* is sure to vanish. *Dharma* is inspiration and action is the path. Therefore man's chariot has to move on. The salvation of the chariot and the path lie lies in its movement. The chariot and the path are complementary to each other. *Dharma* has always established the relationship between man and action. In this sense *dharma* is the greatest strength. There is no higher power.<sup>73</sup>

One can add that G.D. fulfilled his *dharma* in a perfect manner – as R. N. Jaju asserts, in his public life as a vaishya<sup>74</sup> (though, in fact, it was a realisation of *dharma* in a much broader dimension, transcending the limitations of varna affiliation and corresponding well with the ideas outlined by Tilak or Vivekananda) and in his private life as a perfect son, brother, husband and father.

The activism of G.D. had a special character – despite such an intense commitment and the effectiveness of his activity (not without a reason G.D. is considered to be the actual founder of the Birla family fortune<sup>75</sup>) Birla was, as his biographies show, completely detached from the effects of his actions. This theme reoccurs frequently in G.D.'s biographies. It may be argued that it intentionally builds up the tension between the exceptional economic success of G.D. – “the empire builder”, and his almost ascetic renouncement of the fruits of his actions, as the *Gita* calls it,<sup>76</sup> between an unusual commitment to all of his duties and full concentration on the actions undertaken and, at the same time, a complete absence of attachment to what those actions may bring or have already brought – “G.D. was known for his devotion to his duty, but he was unmindful of results”<sup>77</sup> – asserts R. N. Jaju. In this selfless action G.D. not only accurately fulfilled the message of the *Gita*, but he was also a faithful disciple and follower of Gandhi who, as he believed, fully realised the ideals of *karma yogi* and *anashakti*. So, in all his actions, G.D. tried to emulate Mahatma and to fulfill as perfectly as possible the command which he was given by the Father of the Nation himself: “The country needs money. Earn it and spend it for the national good.”<sup>78</sup> The theme of selfless work for others and thus for the whole of India is dominant in G.D.'s biographies. His biographers reveal its two complementary dimensions – religious and, as it may

<sup>73</sup> Ibidem, p. 294.

<sup>74</sup> Ibidem, p. 308. The biographer explains that G.D. was a Vaishya “which means earn money by the right means, use it as means, and not as an end”.

<sup>75</sup> Ibidem, p. 163.

<sup>76</sup> Cf. *Bhagavadgita* II.47.

<sup>77</sup> R. N. Jaju, *G. D. Birla. A Biography*, op. cit., p. 179.

<sup>78</sup> Ibidem, p. 260.

be termed, social-patriotic. G.D., who declared himself openly as indifferent towards religion and skeptical about traditional temple cults, is at the same time portrayed by his biographers as a person of deep spirituality, as *bhakta* – a devotee, whose devotion was realised in action and through action, through the activity in the world and through service to others or *karma yoga*. G.D. is presented as the perfect personification of the idea of *daridranarayana* – service to the poor perceived as the embodiment of a god, treated as the primary and the most important religious activity of man. Moreover, it is considered as the activity that, as the life of G.D. shows, brings the desired results – a life in accordance with *dharma* and realisation of the ultimate goal – union with transcendence (as mentioned above).<sup>79</sup> G.D., as shown by his biographers, was able to define his duty in a perfect manner (as a service to others) and its equally perfect fulfilment was for him identical with the religious, devotional act. “He identified his devotion to duty with his devotion to God”<sup>80</sup> – stated S. Ramakrishnan, describing the rules which G.D. obeyed in his life. In various places in G.D.’s biography, R. N. Jaju cites the statements of Birla in which he explicitly identifies his actions and even all his life with the service to others and at the same time with devotion to God. For example, talking about his trek to Kedranath<sup>81</sup> Birla said: “My trek to Kedranath is not quite a pilgrimage, since God who is consecrated in Kedranath is everywhere. As such I cannot call it a pilgrimage since my entire life is one of religious duty.”<sup>82</sup> In another place R. N. Jaju explains:

He often said that good stems from one’s action. He saw no contradiction between repeating God’s name and doing good deeds in God’s name [...]. Later he saw this action as religious consciousness. When a man worships God, he serves all men, because God is everywhere [...]. He quoted Gandhiji: “Let a man be God, but not separate from him.”<sup>83</sup>

The service to another man and, as a consequence, to the entire nation and the whole India, the service understood as *daridranarayana*, was, as shown by the biographers, G.D.’s goal of life. S. Banerjea, characterising G.D.’s attitude to others, in the text under the meaningful title “G.D. Birla:

<sup>79</sup> Cf. also *ibidem*, p. 182.

<sup>80</sup> S. Ramakrishnan, *A Maker of Modern India*, [in:] *The Glorious 90 years...*, op. cit., p. 93.

<sup>81</sup> Kedranath (Uttarakhand) is a famous pilgrimage place with a Siva temple hosting one of the twelve *jotirlingas*.

<sup>82</sup> R. N. Jaju, *G. D. Birla. A Biography*, op. cit., p. 173.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 299.

I am trying to be a good guy” quotes Birla’s words which he considers as his life motto:

I want everybody to work for the good of the people whether they do business or are doctors or lawyers. The object should be to serve. Serve yourself? No. Serve the society, your surroundings. For example, if you have this light [...] and you carry it to the other side, it’ll also serve the other room.<sup>84</sup>

In this way, through his selfless service to others, G.D. wanted to carry out a revolution in poor and underdeveloped India. It must be emphasised, however, that this revolution was to be of an economic, educational and moral character. As the son of G.D. – Krishna Kumar underlined, his father was convinced of the need to serve “the people of the country, to spread knowledge and to lay the foundations to make the country strong and rich.”<sup>85</sup> Hence the first and foremost activity of G.D. focused on the economy, education and ethics, as the three main pillars of a strong state. R. N. Jaju stresses that Birla “was a leading convener of India’s economic independence” and everything he did was in fact aimed at ensuring India’s economic success.

In education, he realised the prime importance of engineering and technology and established its centre at Pilani [...]. In religion, he supported the aspects of Hinduism that made people diligent. In the social field, he tried to eradicate evils that could not survive in modern times. Though he did not favour traditional religion he contributed handsomely to the construction of temples, because they were still capable of keeping people within the moral fold.<sup>86</sup>

It is worth noting that although in the image of G.D. undoubted successes in the economic sphere are an important theme, it is education and moral formation that take the predominant position. Mostly in these two areas G.D. realised the ideal of *desh seva*, the service to the nation by supporting the intellectual development and moral formation of India’s inhabitants. It is not *ad hoc*, one-off and not very effective help, but is nation-building *par excellence*. This idea can be clearly seen in G.D.’s son’s statement about his father’s aims and visions:

Education is the most important single factor in achieving rapid economic development and technological progress and in creating social order founded on the values of freedom, social justice and equal opportunity [...]. What one sees in BITS today is the

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<sup>84</sup> S. Banerjea, *G.D. Birla I am trying to be a good guy*, [in:] *The Glorious 90 years...*, op. cit., p. 174.

<sup>85</sup> K. K. Birla, op. cit., p. 42.

<sup>86</sup> R. N. Jaju, *G. D. Birla. A Biography*, op. cit., p.193.

dream come true of my father an founder chairman Ghanshyam Das Birla, who was a visionary. The aim of education is not merely to impart knowledge but also to instil appropriate habits of thoughts and action, inculcating in students at the same time a sense of social responsibility [...]. Our effort at BITS, Pilani, 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>87</sup>

The biographers go even as far as to compare Birla to Swami Vivekananda, whose main goal was to propagate education understood not as the mere passing of information but as the formation of a human being in such a way that would bring out his talents, abilities and skills, to express his full human potential. This was also, as emphasised by the biographers, the intention of G.D., who wanted new generations of Indians to grow up in conditions in which they could realise their innate but latent possibilities and then utilise them for the benefit of national development. Shiv Dayal, a contributor to the G.D.'s commemorative volume, expresses this idea clearly:

He established great educational institutions at various places. This was a product of his urge for "Desh Seva" by contributing to intellectual development of the younger generation which has to lead the country tomorrow. His conviction was that genuine reconstruction of the Nation lies in raising the standard of education to the highest level possible – not only the standard of knowledge but also of morality and ethics. In the field of education, his objective corresponded to Swami Vivekananda's definition: "Education is manifestation of perfection inherent in man."<sup>88</sup>

But, in fact, this "genuine reconstruction of the Nation" was for G.D. only a means to the ultimate goal – building a new and modern India, whose power would equal, or even surpass other countries: "[...] in course of time our India may be the strongest nation in the world."<sup>89</sup> – G.D. used to say. Almost all G.D.'s undertakings are described by his biographers but also the family members as the effect of his deep concern for India and the desire to raise them to the rank of a world power. In this context G.D. is shown as a Bhagirath, a hero whose actions undertaken with the utmost determination would change the shape of the world. As R. N. Jaju says: "G.D. was truly the *Bhagirath*, bringing the waters of the Gods down to earth."<sup>90</sup> The water mentioned by

<sup>87</sup> K. K. Birla, op. cit., s. 283.

<sup>88</sup> *The Glorious 90 years...*, op. cit., p. 99.

<sup>89</sup> R. N. Jaju, *G. D. Birla. A Biography*, op. cit., p. 207.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 237. It also worth noting how the same biographer explains the meaning of G.D. name, i.e. Ghyanshyamdas: "*Ghan* means cloud. And *Ghyanshyamdas* actually become a cloud – a cloud that was deep, and that possessed the energy of lightning and the

the biographer is understood here both metaphorically and literally. The water which G.D. brought India is the water of the rejuvenating power of knowledge, culture and ethical values as well as the “water” of economical goods and prosperity rejuvenating deserted areas of India. An excellent example of such an image are the descriptions of Pilani, the home town of the Birla family. Additionally, Pilani is regarded as the heart, the source from which the “water” brought by G.D. –Bhagirath spurts all over India –

Pilani was a desert – physically, mentally and spiritually. It was difficult to get two drops of water and two fistfuls of cereals to eat. Any considered scheme of literature, culture, philosophy and science at such a place was a cry in the wilderness. In a small school on a verandah, G.D. dreamed of temples of education that could compare favourably with the best institutions in the world. Many years later *Barwali* Pilani was transformed into a *bodhipath*, an incomparable intellectual centre. If G.D. was truly the major catalyst of industrial prosperity in India, then Pilani may well be called the pulse of India.<sup>91</sup>

G.D.’s biographies do not present an ordinary description and analysis of his life and achievements nor do they aim at passing down to future generations mere knowledge about this person. They, in fact, create an image of G.D. which is supposed to be a role model, an example which by appealing to the imagination and emotions as well as culturally assimilated ideals could compel men to act in a certain direction. They are to develop in men, to quote the well-known expression of C. Geertz – “powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations,”<sup>92</sup> which enable them not only to interpret reality, but also, most importantly, actively change it according to certain delineated ideals and, at the same time, realise transcendent goals. Hence, it may be argued that these biographies create the heroic myth of G.D. in the form and with the functions identified by Ł. Trzeciński:

The heroic myth [...] is an idealisation of each man’s life. Such a myth, showing on the one hand the possibility of colloquial, imperfect existence, and on the other hand the conditions for going beyond it, is so important because it speaks most about the man himself, about his possibilities and models of behaving in various difficult situations in life. It also reveals the difficult and generally complicated path one has to take to get to

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liquidity of water; a cloud that is the source of food and water for all and transform an oyster shell into a pearl. That boy was the cloud to bless arid lands” (ibidem, p. 44).

<sup>91</sup> Ibidem, p. 283.

<sup>92</sup> C. Geertz, *Religion as a Cultural System*, [in:] idem, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York 1973, p. 90.

the destination [...]. The myth creates an emotional motivation to action, exploration and imitation in the hope of gaining liberation and happiness [...].<sup>93</sup>

It is worth noting that in much the same way Tilak saw the role of the ideal of *sthitaprajna* which he himself described: “[...] the description of *sthitaprajna* as an exemplar for ordinary people of poor intelligence for deciding the propriety and impropriety [...] of action and surmise the subtleties of the Absolute Self.”<sup>94</sup> Moreover Tilak himself felt that his life could serve as the perfect ideal of *sthitaprajna*, which can be followed by people from all social strata.<sup>95</sup> So too, as demonstrated by the biographers, did G.D. himself imagine his role, in his desire to be an example. He wanted his actions and determination to be the inspiration for others. Asked about the purpose of the expedition to Kedranath Birla was to answer: “I am going because of my ego. I want to show others, that even at this age my legs can carry me to Kedranath. This ego can be beneficial to others. If my example inspires them, it will do them good.”<sup>96</sup> So, the biographies analysed here reveal that G.D. achieved his goal and become the mythical, national hero, who “[...] become a legend in his lifetime and inspired millions of his countrymen to achieve higher goals.”<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Ł. Trzeciński, op. cit., pp. 198–199.

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