Shah Datta - A Hindu god in Muslim garb

Religious texts from medieval India sometimes combine teachings of saints from different religions. Western Indian oral and scriptural heritage preserved in the Marathi language illustrates a fusion of Hindu-Muslim beliefs, where the Hindu god Dattatreya appears as a Muslim fakir to convey a spiritual message acceptable to both Hindus and Muslims. Local imagination, shaped according to the social reality of the times, turned this Hindu deity into a Muslim fakir.

The oldest narratives on the god Datta rely on specific, action, and practice, as a devotee of the Hindu god Shiva, Parvata, stories compiled mainly in the first millennium of the common era that explain the origins of Hindu beliefs and practices, generally agree he was an incarnation of Vishnu. A lesser role played in the stories by the god-creator Brahma contributed to Dattatreya's later portrayal as a trimurti – a fusion of the Hindu trinity of Brahman, Vishnu and Shiva – further illustrating the lack of uniformity in understanding Dattatreya's personality and spiritual teachings, either at its beginnings or today. Given this, it is unsurprising that his devotees come from various Hindu sectarian streams.

All of the perceptions of Dattatreya, the predominant one is that of a great guru of yoga and ascetic teachings, with leanings towards a tantric-based explanation of all things. He is an unmatman – a 'mad' sage who cares about his teachings, and not about appearances and the 'worldly' impression he creates. In Maharashtra today, Dattatreya appeals to the religious sentiment of each social strata and creates an opportunity for his devotees to cross traditional socio-religious lines. He is the deity of yogis and sanyasis – those who are not bound by the rules of Hindu social hierarchy as well as of middle class teachers, clerks, and many Brahmans.

Despite his Hindu origins, some Hindus also accept Dattatreya dressed as a Muslim fakir, a phenomenon that is significant. This understanding of him in Maharashtra is based on traditions preserved in the Marathi language, where he sometimes appears as a Hindu, sometimes as a Muslim. This liminal belief most likely originated in the sixteenth century, as a reflection of the state of coexistence of India's two main religious communities at the time.

Fluctuating identities

Religious and social relations between Muslims and Hindus in India have been a topic of academic debate for decades, with opinions ranging from hostility, misunderstanding and contempt, to an ideal of socio-religious harmony. The variety of opinions shows the complexity of responses to data reflecting the coexistence of these dominant socio-religious groups in India. Understanding Datta’s ‘career’ as a fakir is possible if we recognize the ever-fluctuating nature of Indian religious identities, of which the most stable part is belief in a Supreme Being.

In his Muslim form, Dattatreya is known in Marathi texts as the Malanga fakir, or Shah Datta. That some devotees, including Brahmans, were able to accept a puranic Hindu deity in Muslim garb likely meant that they were able to accept Muslims as an integral part of their world. Indeed, Maharashtrian was ruled for some 120 years, from about 1240 to 1361, by Nizam Shahs, sultans of origin. Other examples of generally good communal relations are not difficult to find. The first interaction between Dattatreya and Muslims appears to date back to the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Gurucharita, the main scripture of the Maharashtra Dattatreya cult, speaks about two dominant saintly figures, Shripad Kshirvakadha (d. 1350) and Nasiruddin Nasiruddin (d. 1459). Both are worshipped today as incarnations of Dattatreya, and both are also mentioned in connection with Muslims. Shripad Shivravalabhaka promised a poor washerman he would become a sultan in his next life, and Nasiruddin Nasiruddin helped this sultan to overcome an illness. The story is set in Bidar, the second capital of the Bahmani kingdom and regional sultanate of central India in 1437-1538. There, according to the Hindu author, Dattatreya showed his power as a Muslim against Muslims for the first time, even towards the sultan himself. However, complaints against Muslim rule do appear in Gurucharita as well. How far the narrator can be believed is also questionable, since accurate historical narration never played an important role in the writings of medieval Hindu authors.

The mysterious fakir

Later, Dattatreya stood firmly as a guru to people of both religions, and assumed the form of a Malanga fakir. Malangas are known to scholars of Indian Islam as belonging to the unorthodox branch of Sufis that do not follow sharia law. This depiction of Dattatreya acting as a Muslim is shrouded in misapprehensions and misunderstandings, due to problems orthodox devotees had accepting a mysterious Datta-incarnate as a panurganu of the famous Maharashtra Brahman saint-poet Eknath (d. 1659). This Dattatreya – Malanga Chand Bodhle – could not receive official recognition and sanctification by Eknath's Brahman devotees precisely because of his Muslim allegiance. Literary sources say he was, in addition to being a Malanga, a digambara Datta in this context, meaning simply a naked ascetic), an ascetic (an ascetic not bound by social laws, who has discarded all worldly attachments) and a pir (yoga master) who resided in Daulatabad, the cultural center of Maharashtra, and is the one who influenced local Hindu and Muslim intellectual circles, then disappeared; because modern proponents of drawing clear distinctions between Hindus and Muslims could not find a suitable place for him. His tomb, an example of the fusion of Hindu-Muslim architecture, lies neglected.

Despite the attitude of the tradition’s orthodox keepers, local religious consciousness accepted Datta the fakir. New texts celebrating his deeds in Daulatabad were created and new fakir’s incarnations appeared, whose lives and teachings were recorded in writing. People may have forgotten the human name of Eknath’s passengers, but they did not forget the fakir. Thus, from the late sixteenth century, some Dattatreya devotees accepted their deity could also appear in Muslim guise. Yogis, saints, who could not be classified as Hindu or Muslim, were probably behind this “fakirization” of the Hindu god, deliberately confusing their devotees’ understanding of religious belonging through their appearance and teachings. Acceptance of a Muslim element in the local imagination must have been gradual, but it clearly reflects the socio-religious milieu of late medieval Maharashtra, where modern communalism did not exist.

Dattatreya began to appear as a fakir from then on, according to later tradition. This is not to say that his devotees neglected the traditional trinity form, but only that in popular perception, differences between Hindu and Muslim ascetics did not enter communal discourse. On a popular level, the fakir’s acceptance as a man of spiritual knowledge and power simply reflected social reality. The general Indian belief in powerful sages who save the lives of their devotees may have been behind this gradual process – what mattered was not religious adherence to deities, but the deeds following the teachings.

Later, devotees turned the poor religious mendicant into a king of spirituality. Followers of Anandasmarampara, a devotional cult based in Maharashtra and northern Karnataka, began speaking about Shah Datta Allama Prabhu, or King Datta, Lord of the World. According to them, he assumed two forms: a fakir and a Hindu Datta. He was said to reside in Daulatabad (called Mecca in the devotional text Shah Datta Kalama) and to revive true knowledge for Muslims as well. He explains the meaning of the Qur’an and is the one who saves his true devotees at doomsday: the immortal Absolute, Allah, Subhana of all ridicules, the most perfect of the perfect ones. The transformation from purely devotional to medieval fakir was thus accomplished, with territorial and celestial accommodation.

References

- Dusán Deák Datta was registered for a long time by Hindus and Baba by Muslims at the shrine of Baba Budangiri of Karnataka. The sacred area of Haji Malanga of Kalyan near Bombay was also considered to be Datta’s vantage.

Unfortunately, the blend of ideas and devotion that resulted in the tradition of Dattatreya has not found appreciation in the period of modern communalism, where political leaders and the mobs that follow them destroy anything that does not conform to their views. In their understanding, Dattatreya, even if in Muslim garb, must remain perfectly Hindu.

The transformation from Hindu to Muslim devotional groups was inspired not only to worship a particular deity or saint is not exclusive to Indian religious practice. Today, the best example of Dattatreya, a fakir’s garb is the famous Sai Baba from Shirdi, though not all his devotees would agree with this depiction. Other known Muslim saints also recognized as Dattatreya include Noori Maharaj of Thane, Tajuddin Baba of Nagpur, or even a woman, Hazrat Baba Jan of Pune. Datta was worshipped for a long time by Hindus and Baba by Muslims at the shrine of Baba Budangiri of Karnataka. The sacred area of Haji Malanga of Kalyan near Bombay was also considered to be Datta’s vantage.

Unfortunately, the blend of ideas and devotion that resulted in the tradition of Dattatreya has not found appreciation in the period of modern communalism, where political leaders and the mobs that follow them destroy anything that does not conform to their views. In their understanding, Dattatreya, even if in Muslim garb, must remain perfectly Hindu.

Leiden Traditional and Modern

One of the wonderful things about studying at Leiden University is the combination of a long tradition and veneration receptive with a youthful spirit that is completely modern. The student population has a strong voice and is carefully listened to at Leiden.

- Asian Studies
- Comparative Indo-European Linguistics
- Cultural Anthropology and Development Sociology
- Islamic Studies
- Master’s in Law, Governance and Development
- Middle Eastern Studies
- Western and Asian Art History

Leiden University Office, PO Box 9509, 2300 RA Leiden, The Netherlands
- +31 (0)71 527 7777
- +31 (0)71 527 7788
- mail@leidenuniv.nl

Leiden University
The Netherlands

Dusán Deák is a lecturer affiliated with the Department of Ethnology, University of Szeged and Methods in Trnava, Slovakia and was an IAS fellow in 2004. His research focuses on Marathi and Marathi-Pushtustad texts related to sacred Muslim-tradition stories of the Deccan plateau. His interests also include Sufism, comparative religion, and the cultural history of medieval India.

Dusán Deák is a lecturer affiliated with the Department of Ethnology, University of Szeged and Methods in Trnava, Slovakia and was an IAS fellow in 2004. His research focuses on Marathi and Marathi-Pushtustad texts related to sacred Muslim-tradition stories of the Deccan plateau. His interests also include Sufism, comparative religion, and the cultural history of medieval India.