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.

Dušan Deák

The oldest narratives on the god Dattatreya depict the deity, in appearance and practice, as a devotee of the Hindu god Shiva; *puranas*, 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 Brahma, 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.

Of all the perceptions of Dattatreya, the predominant one is that of a great guru of yoga and *advaita* teachings, with leanings towards a tantric-based explanation of world order. He is an *unmatta* – 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 *sannyasis* – those who are not obliged to follow 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 poor religious mendicant. 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, and reflects the state of coexistence of India's two main religious communities at the time.

Fluctuating identities

Religious and social relations between Muslims and Hindus 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 Indic religious identity, 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

Dattatreya

Kāmat, R. K. ed. 1964. *Śrīgurucaritra*

part of their world. Indeed, Maharashtra was ruled for some 120 years, from about 1480 to 1600, by Nizam Shahs, sultans of Brahman origin who respected local customs and traditions and never cut themselves off from their land 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. *Gurucaritra*, the main scripture of the Maharashtrian Dattatreya cult, speaks about two dominant saintly figures, Shripada Shrivallabha (d.1350) and Narsimha Sarasvati (d.1458). Both are worshipped today as incarnations of Dattatreya, and both are also mentioned in connection with Muslims: Shripada Shrivallabha promised a poor washerman he would become a sultan in his next life, and Narsimha Sarasvati 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 1347-1538. There, according to the Hindu author, Dattatreya showed his unprejudiced attitude towards Muslims for the first time, even towards the sultan himself. However, complaints against Muslim rule do appear in *Gurucaritra* 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 *paramguru* of the famous Maharashtrian Brahman saint-poet Eknath (d.1599). 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 *avadhut* (an ascetic not bound by social laws, who has discarded all worldly attachments) and a *yogiraj* (yoga master) who resided in Daulatabad, the cultural center of Muslims in Maharashtra. He 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-incarnations appeared, whose lives and teachings were recorded in writing. People may have forgotten the human name of Eknath's *paramguru*, 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. Yogi-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 *trimurti* 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 Indic belief in powerful sages who save the lives of their devotees may have been behind this gradual process - what mattered was not religious persuasion but the deeds following the teachings.

Later, devotees turned the poor religious mendicant into a king of spirituality. Followers of *Anandasampradaya*, 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, *Siddha* of all *siddhas*, the most perfect of the perfect ones. The transformation from puranic deity to medieval fakir was thus accomplished, with territorial and celestial accommodation.

Muslim or Hindu?

That the followers of different Hindu and Muslim devotional groups unite in worshiping a particular deity or saint is not exclusive to Indic religious practice. Today, the best example of Dattatreya in 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 Budhangiri of Karnataka. The sacred area of Haji Malanga of Kalyani near Bombay was also considered to be Datta's favourite.

Unfortunately, the blend of ideas and devotion that resulted in the tradition of Fakir Datta 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. ‹

References

- Ajgāvkar, J. R. 1916. *Mahārāœœra - kavi - caritra*. Mumbaī: Jñānānjan Deshpande, Bhimashankar. 1988. *Ananda sampradāy āñi paraāparā*. Aöand: Deś pānde sāhitya sansŏdhan
- Joshi, H. S. 1965. *Origin and Development of Dattatreya Worship in India*. Baroda: Oriental Institute
- Kāmat, R. K., ed.. 1964. *Śrīgurucaritra*. Mumbai: Keśav Bhikājī Dhavaöe, 1993
- Phaèke, V. K., ed. 1980. *Śrībhaktavijaya*. Poona: Yaśavanta Prakāśan
- Talbot, Cynthia. 1995. 'Inscribing the Other, Inscribing the Self: Hindu-Muslim Identities in Pre-colonial India'. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*. October, 37-4: 692-722
- Stewart, T. K. 1995. 'Satya Pīr: Muslim Holy man and Hindu God'. Lopez S. D. Jr., ed. *Religions of India in Practice*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press

Dušan Deák is a lecturer affiliated with the Department of Ethnology, University of SS Cyril and Methodius in Trnava, Slovakia and was an IIAS fellow in 2004. His research focuses on Marathi and Marathi-Hindustani texts related to liminal Hindu-Muslim traditions of the Deccan plateau. His interests also include Sufism, comparative religion, and the cultural history of medieval India.