Iconographic Justifications of Dattatreya Aavadhuta

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"Datta" or "Dattaguru" is a paradigmatic sanyasin (monk) one of the Lord of Yoga in Hinduism[1]. He is considered as deity in many Indian states. And also considered as an avatara (incarnation) of the three Hindu gods- Brahma, Visnu and Shiva- The Trimurthis,[2] and in other region of levels such as Garudapurana, Brahmapurana and Stvavatasamhita, he is an avatar of Visnu.

His iconography varies regionally. He is typically shown with three heads and six hands, one head each for Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva and one pair of hand holding the symbolic items associated with each of these gods: rosary and water pot of Brahma, conch and Wheel of Vishnu, trident and drum of Shiva[3]. He is typically dressed as a simple monk or almost necked situated in a forest or wilderness suggestive of his renunciation of worldly goods and pursuit of a meditative yogi lifestyle. In painting and carving also, he is surrounded by four dogs and a cow, which is a symbolism for the four Vedas and mother earth that nourishes all living beings[4]. In the temples of southern Maharashtra. Varanasi, Himalayas his iconography shows him with one head and two hands with four dogs and a cow.

According to northern tradition of Shaivism Dattatreya is revered as the Adiguru (First teacher) of the Adinath Sampradaya

of the Nathas, the first "Lord of Yoga" with mystery of Tantra (techniques). His pursuit of simple life, kindness to all, sharing of his knowledge and meaning of life during his travels is eventually mentioned in the poems by Tukaram, a saint poet of the Bhakti Movement[5]. Dattatreya has inspired many monastic movements in Shaivism, Vaishnavism and Shaktism, particularly in the Deccan region of India. Gujarat, Rajasthan and Himalayan region where Shiva tradition has been strong. According to Mallinson, Dattatreya is not the traditional guru of the northern sampradaya, he was cooped by the northern tradition in about 18th century a guru, as a part of Vishnu-Shiva syncretism. This is evidenced by the Marathi text Navanathabhaktisara, states Mallinason, where In there is syncretic fusion of the Nath sampradaya with the mahanubhava. Sect by identifying nine naths with nine Narayanas.(Mallinson 2012 pp.407-411)

Several Upanisads are dedicated to him are texts of the Advaita Vedanta- Yoga tradition of Hinduism. One of the most important texts of Advaita Vedanta namely Avadhutagita is attributed to Dattatreya. (K.P. Gites-1992, p. 58,note 318).

Life History:

The mythologies of Dattatreya are diverse and regional. The puranas say he is the son of Anasuya and Atri Maharshi traditionally contribution to the Rigveda[6]. He was born in Kashmir jungles near the sacred Amarnath[7] and he was born along with his brothers, Durvasa and Chandra. Another Purana discloses him as wandering from childhood and the young Dattatreya's footprints have been preserved on a lonely peak at Girnar. The Tripur rahasya refers to the disciple Parasurama finding Dattatreya meditatiing on Gandhamandana mountain[8].

Self Education: the 24 Gurus of datta:

The young Dattatreya is famous in the Hindu texts as the one who started with nothing and without teachers, yet reached self awareness by observing nature during his sannyasi wanderings, and treating these natural observations as his twenty-fourth teacher[9].The 24 teachers of Dattatreya are - earth, wind, sky, water, fire, moon, sun, pigeons, python, bumblebee, beekeeper, hawk, ocean, moth, elephant, deer, fish, courtesan, child, Maiden, snake, spider and caterpillar.

Iconography feature of Dattatreya:

The appearance of shri guru Dattatreya in Pictures or shilpa, varies according to traditional beliefs. A typical icon for Dattatreya, particularly popular with Marathi speaking people in India, has three hands corresponding to Brahma-Vishnu- Shiva, and six hands; the lowest to hands carry rosary [mala] and water pot [kamandala] middle pair of hands hold hourglass mini-drum (damaru) and trident (Trishul) and top two hands have conch (shankha) and spinning wheel chakra.(refer.foot note no 2).

In many older medieval temples of Dattatreya, he is shown him with just one head, such as the one in Mahur and another in Pandhrapur. (rigopulus 1998 pp.223-224). The texts such Agnipurana describe the architectural features for building murti and for Dattatreya, it recommends him with one head and two hands. In Varanasi, Nepal and North Himalayan states the 15th century temples of Dattatreya show him with just one face. In western parts of Maharashtra the syncretic six armed and three faced iconography is more common.(pp.224-226).He is the motif of the honey bee yogin who has realized advaita knowledge Dattatreya the immortal guru yogin and avatara.(refer fn-2).

Another distinctive aspect of Dattatreya iconography is that it includes four dogs (Shwana) and cow. The four dogs represents the Vedas, as trustworthy all weather friends company and guardians, while the cow is a metaphor for mother earth, who silently and always provides nourishment. (refer fn-2 p.95-96).

Alternate iconography:

Dattatreya sculptures with alternate iconography have been identified in 1st Millenium CE cave temple and archaeological sited related to Hinduism.(Rigopulus 1998,pp.227-228) for eg. In Badami temple, Datta is shown to be with single head and 4 hands like Vishnu. But seated in a serene yoga posture (padmasana) carved with him are the emblems (launchana) of the Trimurti, namely the swan of Brahma, the Garuda of Vishnu and Nandi of shiva. The right earlobe jewelry and hair decoration in this art work of Dattatreya is of Shiva, but on his left, the details are those of Vishnu[10]. Rigopoulos dates this Badami sculpture to be from the 10th 12th cent.

The sculpture similar to Badami, but with some differences, has been discovered in Ajmer(Rajastan). In Ajmir temples art work Dattatreya is standing, with one head, 4 hands, he carries a Trishula of Shiva, a chakra of Vishnu, a kamandalu of Brahma and rosary common to all three. Like Badami relif work, Ajmir iconography of data shows the swan of Brahma, the Garuda of Vishnu and the Nandi of Shiva carved on the pedestal with him.

Some of the scholars like James Harle and T.A. Gopinath Rao consider iconography that presents Brahma-Vishnu-Shiva together as Hari-Hara-Pitamaha to be synonymous with or equivalent to Dattatreya[11].

The historic Indian literature has interpreted the representation of Guru Dattatreya symbolically. His three hands are symbols of Gunas (qualities in samkhya). The 3 Gunas are sattva, Rajas, & Tamas. The 6 hands have ethical symbolism namely Yama, Niyama, Sama, Dama, Daya and Shanty.

The Kamadhenu cow is symbolic of the Panchabutas. The four dogs are the inner forces of human being: Iccha, Vasana, Asha and Trishna. From these interpretations on Dattatreya it can be conceived that he is the real Yogic Guru (teacher) who has perfected all these inner forces rather than is ruled by them , and hence he is aptly called Guru Dattatreya.

Foot Notes:

1) James G.lochtefeld , illustrated encyclopedia of Hinduism;The rosen publishing group 2002, P.176.

2) Maxin bernsten;The experiment of Hinduism:Essays on religion in Maharashtra state university of newyork press. P. 95-96.

3) Ibid.

4) Ibid.

5) Ibid.

6) Gopal Madan and K.S gowtham,ED.:India through the ages,publication division,ministry of information and broadcasting,govt.india 1990, P 73.

7) Mandeep 2013: who is lord datthareya.

8) Mahendranath,Shrigurudeva,the pathless pata to immortality : the wisdom of Bhagawan Dattatreya; The scrolls of mahendranath, international nath order, 2002.

9) Martin Hig,Shri Dattetrya 24grows learning from the world hindu,tradition candian jornal of environmental education,vol 12, p. 131 to 135.

10) T. A. Gopinathrao 1993 elements of Hindu Econography,Mothilal Banarasi, p. 252-255.

11) James C Harle,1994,The art and architecture of the Indian sub-continent, yale university, p. 236.

Reference:

1. James & Lochtefeld; The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Hinduism; The Rosen Publishing grougp p. 176 2002
2. T. A Gopinath Rao; Elements of Hindu Iconography; Motilal Banarassidas 1993, p. 251. Text:
3. Dattatreya Upanishd
4. Avadhuta Upanishad
5. Epics: Ramayan, Mahabharat
6. Pancharatra texts: sattvata sinchita Ahirbudhnya samhita (5th chap)
7. The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Hinduism page no. 176

