

Dattātreyā

The Immortal Guru, Yogin, and Avatara

A STUDY OF THE TRANSFORMATIVE AND INCLUSIVE CHARACTER
OF A MULTI-FACETED HINDU DEITY



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Lord Dattatreya



Lord Datt Jayanti is celebrated on full moon day of Magshirsh month of Hindu Calendar. Our beloved Sai Baba is an incarnation of Lord Dattatreya according to Sai Satcharitra. My salutations to Dattatreya Who in the beginning is Brahma the Creator, Who in the middle is Vishnu the Preservor and Who in the end is Shiva the Destroyer.

Lord Sai Dattatreya was born to Atri and Anusuya, a sage couple of the Vedic age. Atri maharishi is one of the ten sons of Creator Brahma and first of the Saptha Rishis, created by just the will of the Almighty and therefore designated as a Maanasa-putras. There were ten of these. Atri's wife is Anasuya or Anusiya devi, a daughter of Kardama Prajapati and an embodiment of chastity.



Seer Atri was one of such seers who had 'seen' and experienced the Brahma Gyaan, the eternal wisdom and Anusuya became famous for her devotion to her husband. She was the embodiment of chastity.

One story tells that once a Brahmin named Kaushik was staying in a town called Pratishtan. He used to go to a whore in spite of being a Brahmin and having a devoted wife Sumati. Later, he suffered from leprosy and was thrown out by the whore. Then, he came back to his wife, who accepted him still. However, he still did not care for his wife and was thinking about the whore all the time. One day, he asked his wife to intercede on his behalf with the courtesan and take him there to fulfill his desire. Being a pativrata, she went to the courtesan and conveyed her husband's desire and requested the courtesan to accept his request. Knowing that Sumati is a great pativrata and refusing her request would not be in her interest (the courtesans were well read and were God fearing in those days, though compelled to lead a profession that may not be to their liking), she agreed to satisfy his desire for one night.

Since he had no legs to walk, Sumati carried him in a basket on her shoulders and set out from her house after it became dark. Since it was a nil moon night, and she was going through a route away from the city lights, it was pitch dark and she could not see or hear the great sage Mandavya, who was impaled but was silent in meditation. The leg of Sumati's husband brushed the body of the sage causing him a lot of pain and the sage cursed that the person will die at sunrise. The husband and Sumati were greatly affected by this and returned home without completing the purpose of the ill-fated journey! A deeper meaning given to me by grace of Datta is that when the sun of jnana arises in the mind, all desires will die!

Sumati, being a great pativrata willed that the sun should not rise in the eastern sky so that the curse of sage Mandavya will not come to fruition. Needless to say, all the worlds were thrown into a big turmoil and the Gods went to Lord Brahma. He asked them to approach Anasuya and they rushed to her. So, they all came to Sumati, who was sitting with the head of her husband in her lap. When Sumati saw them, she was surprised and paid her respects to Anasuya and others. Anasuya requested Sumati to lift her injunction against sunrise and help the world and assured Sumati that she will bring her husband back to life with her pativrata powers. Sumati agreed and allowed Sun to rise in the eastern sky. Anasuya also brought back life to the husband of Sumati.

The Gods were delighted and said to Anusuya, "The Gods will be please to grant you a boon, O ascetic lady! Therefore choose a boon!". Anusuya spoke, "If Gods headed by Brahma, being favourable, will grant me a boon, and if I am worthy of a boon, then let Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva become sons to me, and let me in company with my husband attain religious devotion, to the end that I may be delivered from affliction.

Another story tells that such was the spiritual power of Anusuya, which induced jealousy and envy in others. Once, sage Narada poisoned the mind of the three Goddess Saraswati, Laxmi and Parvati by telling them that Anusuya was much greater than them. Incensed by this, they requested their husbands to go and violate Anusuya's Pativrata Vrata. However, the three Gods Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva decided to prove their jealous and envious wives, how wrong they were.

They transformed themselves, into mendicants, approached the hermitage of sage Atri and begged for alms. At that time sage Atri was away at the river offering his daily oblations. Anusuya came out and offered food to them. They made a strange request; the food be prepared and served to them by Anusuya, in the nude. In the Indian tradition any 'Atithi' i.e. guest cannot be turned away, as he is considered to be an aspect of God. Hence, she was placed in a dilemma. She smiled to herself and reflected thus, "I am totally purified by the long association with the Holy Sage Atri. What harm can the God of lust ever do to me? So, I do fear nothing. As they sought food from my hand, I look upon them as my children and not strangers or grown up men!" Her thoughts - the thoughts of a pious and chaste person - instantly became reality; the elderly guests became babies!



Sage Atri, on his return to the hermitage, saw his wife Anusuya fondling three babies. Anusuya said, "These children are the gift of God to us, who have been childless so far". Sage Atri was overjoyed and named them Datta, which means 'given'. At this, the three Gods reverted to their real forms and disclosed the truth. They extolled the power of chastity and purity of Anusuya which vanquished the combined and colossal powers of all the three of them. Sage Atri and Anusuya prayed that they should remain as their sons. They consented and the three Gods merged into one body. This is how Lord Dattatreya incarnated.

There are many events narrated in Sai Satcharitra in various chapters which narrates that Lord Sai is an incarnation of Lord Dattatreya. In fact they are one and there is least difference between them. Here it shall be delightful to recall the story of the gentleman of God, who was a Datta devotee and came to Shirdi to fulfill his vow given to Lord Datta. Sai Baba demanded dakshina of Rs.15 from him which he promised to give to Lord Datta.

In fact, the gentleman had once gone to Goa in search of a job for himself and had taken a vow to Lord Dattatreya that if He blessed him with an employment, he would offer Him his first month's salary. Although by the grace of His Lord Dattatreya, he got an appointment with a salary of Rs.15 per month,

yet he did forget to keep his word. Sai Baba reminded him of his vow and recovered Rs.15 from him. It was, in fact, not Dakshina as one may think it to be, but a realization of an old debt and fulfilment of long forgotten vow. Sai Baba who being the Incarnation of Lord Dattatreya was the rightful claimant of that amount of money. (Chapter 36 of Sai Satcharitra).

Even more fascinating is the other story of an ardent devotee Nanasaheb Chandorkar, who also had equal devotion for Lord Dattatreya.

Once Nanasaheb Chandorkar came to Shirdi with his 'Sadu'- husband of his sister-in-law, Mr.Biniwalle. When they went to the Masjid and sat before Baba talking, the latter suddenly got angry with Nanasaheb and said - "You are so long in My company and how do you behave like this?" Nanasaheb then at first did not understand anything and humbly requested Baba to explain. Baba asked him when he came to Kopergaon and how he came to Shirdi from thence. Nanasaheb then at once realized his mistake. He usually worshipped the Shrine of Datta, on the banks of the Godavari at Kopergaon on his way to Shirdi, but this time he dissuaded his relation who was a Datta Bhakta from going to that Shrine, to avoid delay and drove straight. He confessed all this to Baba and told Him that while bathing in the Godavari, a big thorn went into his foot and gave him much trouble. Baba said that, was the slight punishment be met and warned him to be more careful in future. (chapter 38 of Sai Satcharitra).

