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“Dattātreya’s Dwelling Place”

Socio-religious Dynamics at a Contemporary Urban Temple under a Holy Tree

ABSTRACT: The Śrī Gurudeva Datta Mandir is a modern Hindu temple constructed around the *udumbara* tree (*ficus racemosa*) believed to be the mythical dwelling place of the antinomian god Dattātreya. Originally located in a public park, the temple is now an independently registered trust and is widely recognized as one of the most prominent and celebrated Hindu places of worship in the affluent residential area of Deccan Gymkhana in Pune, India. In this article, we examine how the natural and built environment, along with religious practices, are constantly reconfigured and renegotiated by various actors catering to the contemporary sensitivities of the urban Hindu middle classes. We argue that to understand urban religious spaces like the Śrī Gurudeva Datta Mandir, it is essential to consider how cultural, religious, and political sensitivities converge to give material form to these spaces. Through an analysis of the temple, the deity of Dattātreya, and the *udumbara* tree, we explore the complex interplay of these forces and their role in shaping contemporary Hindu religious practices and beliefs in urban India.

KEYWORDS: *udumbara*, Dattātreyā, sacred tree, temple, sacred place-making, modern Hinduism, Maharashtra

*audumbara vṛkṣā taḷīm
ase tāpasī mahābaḷī
avatāra puruṣa caṇdramauḷī
tujhī vāñchā puravīla*

Under the tree of *udumbara*,
there lives an omnipotent mendicant,
who is an incarnation of Śiva.
He will fulfill your desire.
Gurucaritra 17.51

In this contribution, we propose to investigate the process of institutionalization of a personal wayside shrine and the relationship of nature and “sacred”¹ place-making through a case study from contemporary urban India. This paper is part of a larger research project on popular urban religiosity and, in particular, on the roadside shrines in Pune, Maharashtra.

The main aim of this contribution is to present the process by which a tree within a public recreation park became the sacred axis of a larger temple complex called the Śrī Gurudev Datta Mandir, located in an upper-scale neighborhood in the city of Pune. We hope to illumine the processes of “Sanskritization” by which not only the deity is “sanitized” and “tamed,” but also the process by which “structural

¹ The term “sacred” is a concept central to religious studies, denoting elements deemed holy, revered, or transcendent within religious and spiritual contexts. However, it is essential to recognize that its usage is a subject of scholarly debate and cultural relativity. In this article, the term “sacred” is employed to describe the significance and reverence associated with the process of place-making in the context of a personal wayside shrine in contemporary urban India. The use of quotation marks around “sacred” acknowledges its contested nature, signaling to readers that the term requires sensitivity and critical awareness of its complexities and diverse interpretations within the discipline of religious studies.

violence” (Galtung 1969) is inflicted on a tree to turn it into a shrine.² These processes are a clear example of the entangled relationships between humans and non-humans in urban India.

This paper draws its inspiration partly from David Haberman’s book *People Trees* (2013) in which the author studies sacred trees, with special focus on the *pīpal* tree, in the urban context of north India, particularly around the city of Benares. His illuminating analysis of the personhood of trees includes the relationship that humans have with trees and the trees’ specific traits as sacred beings. However, his study leaves out one of the most worshiped trees in Western India and particularly Maharashtra, namely the *udumbara* associated in this region predominantly with the deity Dattātreya. Slightly departing from the approach of Haberman, the focus of this paper is, however, not only on the tree itself and its relation to people, religious practices and beliefs, but also on the appropriation of such a tree for the creation of an institutionalized sacred space and the reading of such an entity as imbued with Brahmanical traits.

The argument that is presented here is further inspired by the so-called “spatial-turn” in social sciences focusing on the practices of place-making and the tensions between space as a predefined territorial entity, and as the sphere of the circulation of power relations and contingently articulated socio-religious identities. Based on the political theory of Laclau and Mouffe, Jürgen Schaflechner (2018) called this process of institutionalization, and the attempt to formalize discourses around an “empty signifier,” the “solidification of tradition.” The solidification of tradition is a concept we find very useful

² The earlier title of this paper was “‘The Dharma-Police.’ The Institutionalization of a Personal Shrine in a Public Recreation Park.” Borayin Larios presented the first version of this paper at the 23rd ECSAS (European Conference of South Asian Studies) that took place at the University of Zürich, Switzerland, on 23–26 July 2014. Hemant Rajopadhye contributed to the paper’s later developments throughout the years and was brought in as an author in 2021. We would like to thank the I-SHARE project funded by the French Agency for Research (ANR) for financially supporting our fieldwork in 2022. We would also like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their constructive feedback.

to account for the processes that attempt to “produce norms and a fairly uncontested history.”

A solidifying tradition, thus, has not (yet) convinced most of its critics, its contingent foundations are still very much visible, while a sedimented tradition has already succeeded in creating a reasonably undisputed terrain. (Schaflechner 2018: 36)

While Schaflechner is interested in the sedimentation of “universal truths” and “absolute” histories and their articulation within particular discourses, we are interested in the *material* and *spatial* sedimentation of these discourses through the production of structures and place-making practices in which a sacred place is materialized. In other words, how exactly is the *solidification of tradition* visually manifested, and in which ways the empty signifiers are filled with meaning, not necessarily only in their textual form, through new narratives and religious truths, but rather in the way they are materially inscribed, transformed and embodied through various practices. We view the environment and social interaction not as separate entities but we follow Rademacher who also eschews traditional urban ecological approaches that treat “cities as antithetical to natural spaces and processes” (Rademacher 2011: 27) and who, instead, argues for an approach that considers “ecology in terms of social practice” and natural elements such as rivers, or in this case, a particular tree, as a way “to study how urban nature and urban social life are mutually produced, reinforced, and, ultimately, changed” (ibid.: 13).

Dattātreya

However, before delving further into the subject of the temple itself, a few words about Dattātreya are necessary. According to Antonio Rigopoulos, “Dattātreya is the second-most popular deity in Maharashtra after Gaṇeśa” (Rigopoulos 1998: 135). He is a paradigmatic figure—guru, *yogin* and *avatāra*—often regarded as the incarnation

of the Hindu *trimūrti* of Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva. Datta, as he is also called, is worshiped by numerous devotees belonging to various religious traditions of Maharashtra and neighboring states including the Nāth, Vārkaṛī and Samārtha, Mahānubhāv, Vaiṣṇava, Śaiva, Śākta devotionalism. The deity possesses an ambiguous character that makes him easily appropriated, even by seemingly divergent traditions. In this context, we can speak of two main strands: firstly, the orthodox tradition, which portrays a sanitized, tamed, Brahmanical character; and secondly, a heterodox tradition that builds on the tāntric, yogic, and healing elements in his persona. While the Brahmanical character of Dattātreya is prevalent among certain circles, there is no doubt as to his image as a “sky clad” (*digambara*) *yogin* who has transcended all duality and common worldly concerns and thus acts without consideration for standard social etiquette. Such antinomian *yogins* are called *avadhūtas* in Maharashtra and beyond. Datta’s ambiguous and contradictory behavior is often referred to in the Sanskrit and Marathi literature as *unmatta* (insane, intoxicated).

Thus, the Dattātreya-*saṃpradāyas* have historically been more permeable than those of other religious traditions in Maharashtra since the “integrative” elements in the figure of Dattātreya appeal to a varied range of devotees, from the orthodox Brahmins to the radical *tāntrikas*; he is even popular as a deity favored, among others, by thieves and prostitutes. Rigopoulos goes so far as to argue that “there appears to be no religious milieu, at least in Maharashtra, in which Dattātreya is not in some way or other involved” (Rigopoulos 1998: xii).

The Śrī Gurudev Datta Mandir was established in a public recreational park³ in a rather affluent residential area of urban Pune in the mid-1970s. The temple was built in honor of a devotee’s vision of Lord Dattātreya: according to one oral history, in the year 1968,⁴ the

³ Kamala Nehru Park (KNP) in Deccan Gymkhana, Pune.

⁴ Other versions give 1975 as the year the vision took place; some even deny that it was the gardener, but rather another devotee who owns one of the food stalls in front of the KNP. The variations of contesting narratives that circulate today are a testimony to the fact that solidification into a coherent tradition is still in flux.

park's gardener had a vision of Dattātreya. The vision occurred in a dream wherein the gardener was instructed by the God to look for his pair of brass sandals (*pādukās*) under an *udumbara* tree (*ficus racemosa*) in the park's garden. According to the story, one of the park's gardeners found Datta's holy footwear under the tree and since then, daily worship has taken place on the spot.⁵ Within just a few years, a sizable temple complex, which nowadays has a large number of daily visitors, came to be erected with the *sanctum sanctorum* straddling the tree.

The urbanization and gentrification processes of the city of Pune, and in particular, of affluent neighborhoods such as the Deccan Gymkhana where upper and middle-classes have settled down (especially after the 1961 floods which devastated the old city center where most upper-caste population lived) often played a significant role in popularizing the worship of Dattātreya as an urban phenomenon. In urban centers, and Pune in particular, the worship of Dattātreya evolved under the influence of patterns of Sanskritization driven by orthodox Brahmanical lineages that often appropriated non-Brahmanical charismatic figures such as Sāi Bābā of Shirdi, while at the same time influencing other groups through their socio-economic aspirations.⁶ In other words, Hindu religious consumption in upper-caste dominated neighborhoods often intersected with neoliberal sensibilities, aesthetics and power dynamics.

The tree

"A tree, [...], is never simply a tree; it is not comprehended in some unmediated fashion, but rather is perceived in accord with the socialization process through which a person has been trained" (Ha-

⁵ This particular retelling is also reproduced in a popular website dedicated to Dattātreya worship: <http://www.dattamaharaj.com/कमला> (accessed on 6.06.2023).

⁶ Rajopadhye (forthcoming). For more on the links between Dattātreya and the Maharashtrian saints, see Rigopoulos 1998 and the contributions in the recent volume edited by Srinivas, Jeychandran, and Roberts in 2022.

berman 2013: 10). Accepting the assumption that nature is culturally constructed (and this includes Western human-nature dichotomy), we have to step back for a second and remind ourselves that in the Indian context the sharp divide between the human and the non-human cannot be taken for granted and that the human relationship with the nonhuman world might be different from that of the Global North. Studying this relationship through the system of Vedic ritual Brain K. Smith argued that a

“[h]ierarchical resemblance” (*sāmānya*) underlies Hindu thought and that ritual action was presented in Vedic texts not as symbolic or dramatic playacting, magical hocus-pocus, or ‘pure,’ transcendent, or meaningless activity. Rather the sacrifice was displayed as a constructive activity, creating the human being (ontology), the afterlife (soteriology), and the cosmos as a whole (cosmology). (Smith 1989: 46)⁷

The mechanism of *sāmānya*, we argue, is still relevant today, precisely because there are many layers of such correspondences that continue to be at play even if not all devotees/co-religionists are aware of them.

If we consider natural elements such as a particular tree (the *udumbara*), then it is not just an isolated tree; it is much more than that, for in the Lacanian sense it embodies a signifying chain. Another way to think about this particular tree, is to do so in a way which Anne Feldhaus (2016) uses for *places*: as “connected” to each other. Moreover, they (places, trees) are connected *to* and *through* people, their thoughts and their actions. Sometimes, people are indeed aware of some of these connections, and how different narratives are tied to concepts of place and belonging; at other times, people are not nec-

⁷ We are certainly not arguing that Indian equals Hindu as an essential cultural category, we merely want to point out that there are traces that go back to Vedic times which may have well influenced certain cosmological conceptions and approaches to nature that continue to be transmitted in practice in contemporary Maharashtra. Muslim, Christian, Buddhist, Jain, indigenous and other traditions of the subcontinent have certainly also contributed to the way people understand and relate to nature.

essarily aware of these narratives, histories and discourses that converge in a place, an animal or a tree, yet the same remain in many ways powerful as sort of nodal points of semantic convergence.

The *udumbara* has a long pedigree as a sacred tree, at least since Vedic times, as its usage is attested to in the Vedic ritual (Gerety 2016). Nowadays, it is primarily considered as the “dwelling place of Lord Dattātreyā,” particularly in the Western region of India and most prominently in Maharashtra. Wherever such a tree is found, the place may potentially become a sacred site where Datta’s presence is palpable to those who are receptive.

The Sanskrit name *udumbara* is of uncertain etymology (Mayrhofer 1992: 217) and the derivative term *audumbara* (“made of *udumbara* wood”) is found already in early Vedic texts to describe an amulet made of wood of this tree which is said to bring prosperity and nourishment (*Atharvaveda* 19.31). A “post made of *udumbara*” (*audumbarī sthūṇā*; cf. *Baudhāyana Śrautasūtra* 6.26), is called in most sources simply *audumbarī* and is used during a Sāmavedic rite of the same name. The *audumbarī* rite is a part of the *agniṣṭoma*, the paradigmatic Soma sacrifice (Gerety 2016). Here the chanters of the Sāmavedic songs (*stotra*) sit in the ritual enclosure called *sadas* (“sitting place”) which is the main venue for *soma*-drinking and chanting and in the middle of which the post made of *udumbara* wood is erected.

Moreover, in the Vedic literature, the *udumbara* tree is closely associated with the creator Prajāpati and *ūrj* (strength, sap, energy, life-force). Another name of this tree is *brahmavṛkṣa* or the “tree of *brahman*.” The *udumbara* tree is said to be always moist with an abundant milky sap. In Vedic mythology it is the *udumbara* tree that contains the essence, the sap (*ūrj*) of all trees. This vital sap is often connected to the “thickened milk” (*kṣīrī*) and related to *soma* which is frequently identified as “the essence in the waters, sap in trees, and seed in man and animals” (Coomaraswamy 1994: 21). In addition to the *audumbarī* rite, the wood of the *udumbara* tree was and continues to be ritually used in Vedic sacrifices to make various vessels and other sacrificial tools, as well as the *yūpa* or sacrificial post to which

the animal is tied (*paśubandha*) during the optional animal sacrifice.⁸ The *udumbara* fruits are red like blood and are associated in the Brāhmaṇa literature with life-force, creation and nourishment. In addition to these and other Vedic interpretations, a popular saying states that “beneath every *udumbara* tree runs a hidden stream” (Benthall [1946: 420] as quoted in Minkowski 1989).⁹ These associations and resemblances reappear in the later literature, in the Purāṇas, the epics and other texts, in the form of the wish-fulfilling tree (*kalpavṛkṣa*) with which not only the *udumbara* but other trees are associated.

The *kalpavṛkṣa* is identified in the Purāṇas as one of the divine gifts that came out of the churning of the ocean of milk by the *devas* and *asuras* to secure the ambrosia of immortality. This tree is said to have the power of giving anything that one wishes to receive (Haberman 2013: 52). A common association of the *udumbara* tree that has a direct link to Dattātreya is that its roots are considered Brahmā, the bark Viṣṇu and the branches Śiva (Krishna and Amirthalingam 2014: 143), thereby relating it to the typical *trimūrti* character of Dattātreya.

Within current popular Marathi Brahmanical narratives that may be traced back several centuries, the *udumbara* (commonly known as *audumbara*) is frequently associated with distinct Brahmanical attributes. One of the notable Marathi websites, broadly affiliated with the Datta-*saṃpradāya* and specifically connected to Śrī Avadhūta Nāgeśa Uṇḍe, confidently asserts, while elucidating the sacred powers of the tree, that “performing austerities under the *udumbara* tree bestows merits that are 100 times greater, and if one bathes with

⁸ Ordinarily in Vedic sacrifices the *yūpa* is made of *palāśa* wood and in the *agniśtoma* of *khadira* wood.

⁹ Anne Feldhaus in her book on *Water and Womanhood: Religious Meanings of Rivers in Maharashtra* describes how trees and specially their roots are sometimes believed to be the sources of rivers (Feldhaus 1995: 112). The source of the Godāvarī is believed to drip from the roots of the *udumbara* tree. There is also the narrative of “god’s fish” at Audumbar (one of the major sacred sites dedicated to Dattātreya) where the Kṛṣṇā river flows (ibid.: 94–96).

water kept in the shade of this sacred tree, it confers merits equivalent to bathing in the holy *Bhāgirathī* (the sacred Ganges), along with numerous other forms of virtuous rewards and materialistic pleasures.”¹⁰ The website also highlights the belief that bathing in this way during specific *tithīs* (auspicious times) yields merits equivalent to donating a thousand *kapilā* (copper red-colored) cows to a knowledgeable Brahmin on the banks of sacred rivers. Another passage from the same website states that offering food to a single Brahmin under the sacred *udumbara* tree holds the same degree of merit as feeding a multitude of Brahmins. These narratives replicate the *sāmānya* mechanism mentioned above and thereby position the tree within a hierarchical framework of Brahminical imagination, where learned Brahmins are regarded as the ultimate embodiment of purity and virtue. This process does not occur overnight and there are always counter-narratives, resistance and contestation in the process of solidification, yet just as Dattātreya becomes assimilated into Brahmanic texts like the *Gurucaritra*, the *udumbara* tree itself also regains its “Vedic” identity—either as a potent ritual substitute or as a catalyst of religious merit. The fact that many prominent Dattātreya shrines in Maharashtra, both in early modern and modern times, are constructed around or beneath the “Vedic” *udumbara* tree, provides a compelling argument for the Brahmanization of both Dattātreya and the tree itself.

Of course, most people who visit the temple today, may not have any knowledge whatsoever about the ritual use of the *udumbara* in the Vedic tradition or even less about the connections made by Brahmin exegetes millennia ago. They may also be completely unaware of the important role this tree may have for Buddhists (Nugteren 2005: 178) or how its fruits, bark, leaves and juice are used in local medicine and Āyurveda. They may not even have a clue as to why precisely this and not any other tree is sacred to Lord Dattātreya but what they will certainly know is that *this* is the tree where Dattātreya abides and thus the place where one is to worship him. In

¹⁰ <http://www.dattamaharaj.com/औदुम्बरवृक्ष> (accessed on 6.06.2023).

fact, in the city of Pune alone there are countless shrines associated with Dattātreya, which are invariably attached to the *udumbara* tree. Popular knowledge dictates which specific trees are associated with particular deities. In this sense, we follow Feldhaus who notes that practices and/or narratives that are not necessarily interconnected themselves become places (Feldhaus 2016: 224–225) as the potential locus of articulation of a variety of discourses. According to Rigopoulos,

[a]s lord of ascetics, (*ādi-nāth*) and embodiment of the *tri-mūrti*, Datta is worshipped as an immortal. By the same token, the *audumbar* is itself viewed as an immortal tree being the abode of all the gods and the receptacle of the highest sap of *soma/amṛta*. As Dattātreya is extolled as the giver of both *bhukti* and *mukti*, mundane enjoyments and liberation from rebirth, in the same way, the *audumbara* is worshipped as the celestial wish-yielding tree (*kalpa-taru*) (Rigopoulos: 2010: 365).

In the popular Maharashtrian tradition of the Datta-*saṃpradāya*, the tree’s divine qualities in association with the deity are mentioned in the famous *Gurucaritra* composed by Sarasvatī Gaṅgādhara in Marathi *ovī* verse around the year 1550 CE. Mugdha Yeolekar remarks that “out of the total 52 chapters of the *Gurucaritra*, the author devotes one entire chapter to describe the significance of the Audumbar” (Yeolekar 2022: 129).

The nature of the tree in both premodern¹¹ and modern India and its transformation through human agency necessarily creates a particular ‘place’ where its own histories and subjectivities are caught up in complex spatial movements of material and social practices. In the case of the Śrī Gurudev Datta Mandir of Pune we can observe par-

¹¹ Site-trees or *sthalavṛkṣas* were important elements in the making of sacred places in the famous pilgrimage temples of South India, where these *sthalavṛkṣas* were linked to the founding site-myths. According to Shulman “...the ancient forest, the dwelling of chaos that opposes the ordered life of society, is represented in the shrine by the sacred tree” (Shulman 1980: 26). What is more, a tree or a mountain are often considered the symbol of the *axis mundi* and the shrine’s connection to both the heavens and the nether world (ibid.: 44).

ticular socio-cultural and socio-political dynamics in the production of “sacred space.” In the following section, we address some of these dynamics.

The temple

One of the authors, Borayin Larios, first visited the Śrī Gurudev Datta Mandir¹² temple in 2005 when he noticed it on his way to Sanskrit class one morning. The cooling shade, the quiet atmosphere and the *tīrth*¹³ (holy water from the ritual) and the *prasāda* (blessed food, usually pieces of fresh coconut and grains of sugar) offered there made it a very agreeable place to study and refresh. During his month of Sanskrit study, he decided to go there every day either before or after class. In addition to the atmosphere, the figure of Dattātreya was particularly attractive to him, so the temple and its surroundings became the ideal spot to observe devotees and their rituals.

Co-author Rajopadhye, who was a frequent visitor to the park since he was a child, recalls that at the beginning the temple used to be just a modest altar-like platform around the tree with a plain roof of metal sheet to protect it from rain. There was a simple idol of Dattātreya and a pair of brass footwear. The small temple was part of the park and there was no separation of the public space of the park from the sacred place of the shrine. Even later, in 2005, when both the authors, Larios and Rajopadhye, visited the temple (separately), the Kamala Nehru Park could be accessed by an entrance at the back of the temple and one could enter the temple premises from the back as

¹² The Marathi name, Shree Gurudeo Datta Mandal, in Roman script, was written on the piece of paper by manager of the temple when he provided Larios with the telephone number of the temple office.

¹³ The Marathi term *tīrth* derives from the Sanskrit *tīrtha* which is commonly used to designate sacred bathing places, but also “a passage, way, road, ford, stairs for landing or for descent into a river, bathing-place, place of pilgrimage on the banks of sacred streams, piece of water etc.” (Monier-Williams 1963: 449).

well. The temple garden was in a way a part of the public park.¹⁴ Over the years, the temple acquired certain popularity in the neighborhood, especially among visitors to the park and young students who attended the colleges in the adjacent areas.

In the course of years, we have observed a number of physical changes. For one, the temple enclosure is now clearly separated from the park. In fact, if one were to visit the temple today, one would not necessarily deduce that it was once a part of the Kamala Nehru Park. Today, the temple has a separate, gated entrance topped by a tower-like structure, with the name of the temple in neon letters and a blue OM symbol. The entry to the temple is completely independent of the park’s entrance or park’s opening times and the temple is no longer accessible through the park itself. The interiors have also changed and the earlier modest *mandir* has largely grown into a fully institutionalized temple. In 1981 it was formally registered as a “Hindu¹⁵ temple trust” under the jurisdiction of the Charity Commissioner, Pune, as per the Bombay Public Trusts Act of 1950 and it currently has 12 active trustees who work on an honorary basis. Besides the honorary trustees, there are also paid employees: temple attendants (*sevaks*) and Brahmin temple priests, all of whom receive a modest salary. The temple *sevaks* may be clearly identified by the visitors for they wear a uniform and carry ID badges with their name and photograph prominently displayed. The head manager supervises the attendants and coordinates their activities. The attendants not only constantly keep the place clean, set up the lights, make sure that the surveillance cameras work properly, feed the fish in the pond, keep the shoes of the devotees against tokens, etc., but also make sure that the rules and the atmosphere of the temple are respected: no mobile, no photography, and no chatting or other improper behavior are

¹⁴ When we interviewed one of the trustees in April 2022, he claimed that the temple has never been accessible from the park and that it has always been on a different plot of land. This contradicts our own memory, but also that of other interlocutors who also remember the temple as part of the park premises.

¹⁵ Under this act (Section 2 paragraph 6): Hindu includes Jain, Buddhist and Sikh.

allowed. There are separate queues for men and women to enter the *sanctum sanctorum* (*garbhagrha*) and the hall is divided into male and female areas. Signboards in Marathi, hanging all over the temple premises, remind the visitor of these rules or make suggestions such as “instead of gossiping on family matters in the precincts of the temple, remember God’s name as much as possible and sit down and experience the holy and peaceful atmosphere.”¹⁶ In case someone ignores these rules the *sevaks* are there to remind one of them. The temple *sevaks* also assist the priest when needed and help to prepare the worship paraphernalia: flowers, oil-lamps, incense and so on. They participate in this capacity most actively during the preparations for various festivals and events¹⁷ organized by the temple around the year, in particular the Dattātreyā Jayantī (Dattātreyā’s birth anniversary) which is celebrated in the Hindu month of *mārgaśīrṣa* (December–January) and is a festival that attracts a large number of visitors.

The trustees, the priests and the *sevaks* standardize and integrate the diversity of religious thought and practice of disparate temple visitors, many originally from afar, like students who have moved to Pune from rural areas to study in the city, etc.; the visitors are often from different sociocultural backgrounds. Below we provide some examples of how these processes of standardization and integration are materially brought about and enacted. For instance, the trustees informed us that the main idol, carved of white marble, was installed at the hands of Dhuṇḍī Bābā of Rāmādarā, the head *mahanta* at the Nātha-*sampradāya* center in the vicinity of Pune. Likewise, Hīngmire Mahārāj of Morave, Khandala (Dist. Satara), a disciple of Chile Mahārāj¹⁸, used to visit the temple during the 1980s and had blessed it

¹⁶ The Marathi reads: “*maṁdirācyā parisarāt koṭhehī basun prāpaṁcika gappā maraṇyapekṣā jāstīt jāst namāsmaraṇa karāve kiṁvā vātāvarṇātīl pavitra śāntatecā anubhāv ghyāvā.*”

¹⁷ According to Mr. Karpe, one of the managers of the temple, there are 28 activities a year.

¹⁸ Chile Mahārāj was a widely popular guru, considered a Datta *avatāra* in the non-Brahmanical Datta worshiping sphere in western Maharashtra, especially in

by declaring that whoever visits the temple, his or her wishes will be fulfilled due to the powerful spiritual energy emanating from Dattātreya and the tree. The Nātha aesthetic imprint in the temple is materialized by way of a wooden panel with images of the nine famous Nāthas (*navanāthas*). The mere *darśana* of this panel, according to the trustees, fulfills the wishes of the devotees. Besides the images of the Nāthas, there are also images depicting various episodes from Dattātreya’s Brahmanical hagiography the *Gurucaritra*. Besides, other important sectarian aesthetics are at work in the temple. The additional presence of two of the most important Maharashtrian saints, Jñāneśvar and Tūkārām Mahārāj—at the upper frame of the entrance door of the *sanctum sanctorum* as well as on the outer dome (*śikhara*)—loosely mark an additional sectarian affiliation, which is that of the Vārkarīs. The incorporation of these aesthetic sensitivities, namely the Brahmanical, the Nātha and the Vārkarī, are however, dominated and mediated by the stakeholders and visitors to the area who are in their majority upper-caste, upper-middle class and tend to lean politically to the right.

Another important characteristic is the use of white marble for the main idols of Dattātreya and other auxiliary Hindu gods (Hanumān, Gaṇeśa, Lakṣmī, Viṭṭhala and Rakhumāi) as well as the walls of the *sanctum sanctorum*. Marble is a signature aesthetic feature of the Rajasthani temples and the Jain temples in particular. One

and around Kolhapur. He was also revered by many Brahmins. Mahārāj hailed from a humble agrarian non-brahmanical background but was regarded as guru by many orthodox Vedic scholars in Pune. Hiṅgmire Mahārāj was one of his prominent disciples with a significant following in the agrarian communities in rich agrarian districts such as Pune, Satara and Kolhapur. Recently (November 2022) the 75th birthday of Hiṅgmire Mahārāj was celebrated in Morave in the presence of many Vedic priests. A person called Kālīcaraṇ Mahārāj was invited to deliver a spiritual speech (*pravācana*) on the occasion. Kālīcaraṇ was arrested in December 2021 for passing controversial Islamophobic and anti-Mahatma Gandhi remarks in the *dharmaśamsads* (religious assemblies) organized by right-wing Hindu group in Haridwar and Raipur, after which he became widely popular in the regional religious circuits in Maharashtra. <https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/mumbai/hate-speech-case-kalicharan-maharaj-in-custody-of-wardha-police-7719247/> (accessed on 25.04.2023).

of the trustees informed us that a physician hailing from the Mārvārī community donated the marble idol. The trustee also emphasized that “Lord Dattātreyā always wears a clean white *dhōṭī*” and therefore temple management decided to have the idol and the temple walls made of white marble and the rest of the walls whitewashed, to have the compound reflect Dattātreyā’s inherent purity. He also added that the real estate businesspersons and builders (of Marathi and Mārvārī-Gujarati background) helped them financially to procure good quality of marble at reasonable rates.

The plot on which the temple stands today may not be as expansive as those of many other prominent Hindu shrines. However, the use of marble and taste for clean, white-colored walls lends an aesthetic richness to the temple. It is an aesthetic which hopes to align itself with the Hindu nationalist narrative that has recently re-surfaced during the controversy surrounding the renovation of the Kashi Vishwanath temple in Benares and might, in fact, be inspirationally inscribed into what some scholars call the Modern Indian Architecture Movement. The notion of Modern Indian Architecture developed by proponents such as Sris Chandra Chatterjee (1873–1966), trumpets a Hindu revivalist architecture—based on pan-Hindu aesthetics and a critique of the Indo-Saracenic building style—which displays an assemblage of modernist features and materials: concrete/cement, marble, and steel (Jain 2021). Taking further the Kashi Vishwanath temple debate, a more current narrative asserts: “Hindus deserve something that looks as good as the Vatican, and advertises our soft power.”¹⁹ It is evident that modern concepts of a grand and sophisticated ambiance, as well as architectural beauty in and around religious spaces in Maharashtra, are strongly influenced by a modernist aesthetic—tellingly exhibited earlier in the Birla Mandirs of the 1930s—that incorporates the use of marble (or pink sandstone). These materials are commonly associated with a north Indian neo-traditionalist style (such as displayed recently by the Akshard-

¹⁹ <https://www.news18.com/news/opinion/why-majestic-kashi-vishwanath-corridor-is-a-hindu-project-for-the-ages-4548455.html> (accessed on 3.06.2023).

ham temple in Delhi)²⁰ and with the Mārvārī-Gujarati Jain and Hindu temples in particular, adding to the overall visual appeal for its clientele.²¹

The deployment of several distinct sectarian symbols, the blending of the orthodox and the modernistic aesthetics, the lavish use of white marble as well as an effort to create an expressly “peaceful and orderly” temple atmosphere have been designed in a way that would appear attractive to “common people,” by which the trustees arguably mean pan-Indian Hindu devotees and preferably upper caste Maharashtrians. Another way in which the trustees hope to succeed in locating their tradition in relation to the larger Hindu community is by linking their temple with the pan-Indian pilgrimage circuits. An illustration of this last point is the painting of the famous twelve *jyotirlingas* scattered across India and depicted on the walls at the entrance of the temple thereby inserting the Śrī Gurudev Datta Mandir within a pilgrimage network and the context of a wider sacred geography.

The environment

As Rosemary Ruether points out, “there is no ready-made ecological spirituality and ethic in past traditions” (Ruether 1992: 206); ecological concerns in religious beliefs or spirituality are quite new and perhaps have evolved amongst the westernized elite Hindu communities in the last two or three decades. During our visits to the Śrī Gurudeva Datta Mandir, we sensed that the temple is widely appreciated, discussed and loved for its green surroundings which both the temple authorities and the visitors boast of. The Thursday special *mung dāl khicadī prasād* of Lord Dattātreya is always distributed in

²⁰ See, for instance, Singh 2010.

²¹ It is evident from the fact that the not only Hindu shrines but also several Jain temples in the Marathi and Kannada speaking areas have been renovated in recent times using these stones and losing the flavor of local versions of Jaina and Hindu architecture where local basaltic stones or white lime stones are used.

the eco-friendly bowls (*droṇa*) made from tree-leaves. The terminology *sāttvika anna* (pure food) i.e., *khicaḍī*,²² is thus further justified by the usage of the eco-friendly bowls. It is the ecological consciousness among the modern, westernized elite Hindus that makes it even more attractive. According to our local interlocutors residing in the vicinity, it is the only temple that is “clean,” “peaceful” and “orderly,” attributes that seem more important than the very act of catering to the devotees of Dattātreya, let alone strict sectarian affiliations with the Datta-*saṃpradāya*.

In addition to its ecological surroundings, the temple land benefits from an abundant water supply which contributes to the flourishing vegetation that has earned the temple its reputation. According to the trustees, they only needed to drill down 25 feet (or some 8 meters) to access water by way of a tube well, whereas Kamala Nehru Park and the surrounding areas usually require drilling down to a depth of 50 meters. These remarkable circumstances were seen by stakeholders as being the direct blessings of Datta, further enhancing the sanctity of the temple land in their eyes.

Discussions surrounding environmentally conscious neighborhoods and religious centers often intertwine with the pursuit of “peace of mind” through meditational and yogic practices embraced by cosmopolitan urban communities. Dattātreya, revered as an anti-nomian *yogī*, guru, and mystical deity, has emerged as a catalytic force, aiding the rapid popularization of this deity (basically a sectarian entity) within the modern Marathi religious sphere, as demonstrated by Rajopadhye (forthcoming). The local residents often perceive the Prabhat Road and Bhandarkar Road area, particularly its small green alleys, as reminiscent of lush green localities where many of them, or their relatives, own residential properties. Consequently, the Kamala Nehru Park Dattātreya temple embodies their vision of a

²² The same kind of *khicaḍī* is served in other major Dattātreya shrines in Pune such as Akalkoṭ Svāmin Maṭha in Budhavar Peth, Saṅkar Mahārāj Samādhī Maṭha, Jaṅgalī Mahārāj Mandir, Guḷavaṇī Mahārāj Maṭha and in some small Datta temples (though not on every Thursday at some of these shrines) on the chowks (junctions) of various streets in Pune.

prestigious religious site that combines elements of modernity, affluence, and cleanliness, while evoking the tranquility and spiritual solitude reminiscent of traditional hermitages and the inspiring beauty of the untouched nature. In this context, the concept of “oasis regimes” (Strauss 1999; Strauss and Mandelbaum 2013) provides a useful framework to understand how these spaces are intentionally constructed and envisioned as havens that offer respite from the bustling urban environment and aim at creating a serene atmosphere conducive to spiritual contemplation.

However, some of the environmental activists residing in the same localities have brought to our attention the fact that the temple campus and its surroundings feature trees and bushes, such as *swietenia mahagoni* or bougainvillea, that are not native to Maharashtra though abundantly found there. These activists argue that the presence of such vegetation is primarily aimed at beautifying the temple and catering to the preferences of the elite, upper-middle-class devotees. Local sources also emphasize that the use of such plants along the marble walls has become a highly visible and somewhat obsessive trend in the design and renovation of many Hindu temples in Pune and elsewhere in Maharashtra. Over the past few decades, the aesthetic aspirations of the upper-class Maharashtrians have increasingly blended a modernist sense of botanical beauty with the Mārvāṛī-Jain tradition of incorporating marble, resulting in a distinctive architectural style. This aesthetic trend, one could argue, marginalizes the religious importance of the *udumbara* tree and other traditional symbols such as the *pādukās*.

The temple authorities reluctantly shared with us the history of the freshwater stream that used to run alongside the temple premises. Initially, the stream was not a part of the temple grounds, leading to significant opposition from local residents when attempts were made by the temple to acquire it. However, as the temple gained prominence, the trustees successfully obtained the necessary No Objection Certificates (NOC) to acquire the water stream, allowing them to expand the temple premises.

In a moment of confidentiality, one of the temple administrators revealed to us that a senior politician, belonging to a family with a feudal warlord background, played a major role in helping the trust to obtain the NOC for acquiring land with a natural water stream. The same person, requesting anonymity, also disclosed that during the 1960–1970s, many similar freshwater streams were taken over by owners of newly constructed bungalows as the upper-middle class began purchasing and developing land in the Prabhat Road area. The involvement of wealthy sponsors, influential political figures, and affluent individuals, often from non-Maharashtrian religious backgrounds, demonstrates the complex interplay between religious sensibilities, urban development patterns, and land acquisition in the area of Deccan Gymkhana, Erandvana.

Conclusion

In this article, we have argued that the example of the Śrī Gurudev Datta Mandir can be used to illustrate specific dynamics between the environment and the creation of sacred space within a recreation park/area in a modern Indian city. We can observe here how public space is being rearticulated, moving between the religious and the secular in many complex ways. This particular example may be viewed as the taming of nature by building a temple enclosure around a tree, and at the same time, of the multiple ways in which the wild *avadhūta* himself is being tamed/domesticated by the urban devotees who have built a temple materially deploying a very specific identity of Dattātreyā.

Our observations and conversations with numerous interlocutors support the following concluding remarks: in terms of location, the neighborhood in which the temple is located is an upper-caste, well-off zone where many Non-Resident Indians (NRIs) are settling back in India. Several real-estate projects advertise the proximity of the temple and the green park as a part of the attraction of the area which also boasts of several colleges, banks and new businesses. The

park has attracted several street-food stands and many people from the near-by offices and colleges come for breakfast or a quick snack to the park. A visit to the temple before work, between classes or during the lunch break is quite convenient to “refresh oneself.” Given that this locality (now the heart of the city) has no other popular or contending worship sites, means that there is no real competition for the temple. Also, the rather well-off nature of the visitors and patrons increases the cash flow and favors rapid development of the shrine. This leads to another factor i.e., the expansion of the worship options that might bring in devotees of other deities/gurus from more heterogeneous backgrounds. While Datta and the *udumbara* tree remain the main focus of worship, other popular deities from within the Hindu pantheon, particularly those specific to Maharashtra, have made their way into the *garbhagrha*. Śiva, Gaṇeśa, Lakṣmī, etc., as well as a number of famous Maharashtrian saints associated with Dattātreya have been added to provide the visitors with a wide range of objects for their devotions. With a view of seeking attention of other devotees and visitors, the temple authority also seems to have focused on enhancing the aesthetics of the place. The temple has quickly taken the aesthetical aura of a “sanctuary of peace.” It has built on the reputation of the neighborhood as a relatively quiet “green” zone. The management has also put efforts to ensure that silence is maintained. The aesthetics of temple-as-spiritual-oasis is further reinforced through the addition of a fishpond, marble floors and numerous fans for fresh ventilation. Devotees mentioned also the *tīrtha* water and the *sāttvika prasād* (fresh coconut pieces, sugar candies, etc.) as refreshment for mind and body. This peace is certainly linked to a Brahmanical version of purity (*soṇale* / *pāvitrya*) and is quite far from the *unmatta* nature of Dattātreya, but its refigured aesthetics attracts a large number of modern, upper caste, middle-class devotees. The presence of a Vedic priest is crucial to maintaining a delicate equilibrium between the affluent, West-influenced eco-Hindu sensitivities and the authority of traditional, orthodox

vaidika Hinduism. The priest's close association with one of the most dominant Dattātreya sects²³ ensures a harmonious fusion of a vibrant and inclusive eco-Hindu movement with the ritualistic and mystical aspects of urban Brahmanical Hinduism. This is accomplished, among others, by priest's active engagement with the temple's devotees and visitors, his performing of various *kāmya* (wish-fulfilling) *pūjās* such as Satya Datta/Satya Nārāyaṇa within the temple premises, and facilitating the study of the *Gurucaritra* in close proximity to the sacred *udumbara* tree.

Moreover, when we asked around whether the gardener or his family were involved in the temple, we were given rather vague answers, such as saying that anyone is welcomed to the temple or even contradicting one saying some interlocutors saying that the family of the gardener still comes to the temple, whereas others said no. What is evident is that Mālī or other low-caste devotees are not visible in the temple premises.

During designated celebrations and festivals dedicated to Datta, particularly Datta Jayantī, the temple actively engages in community activities that include feeding the poor, organizing blood donation drives, and providing various forms of community service. These initiatives not only contribute to the temple's growing reputation but also promote spiritual values that resonate with modern lifestyles of its devotees. Kusumita Pedersen asserts that major South Asian traditions embody a strongly biocentric worldview rather than an anthropocentric one (Pedersen 2000: 280). However, the emergence of shrines like the Kamala Nehru Park Datta temple highlights the growing prominence of anthropocentric religious activities within

²³ The chief officiating priest, usually addressed as *guruji* by devotees and trustees alike, is a disciple of Guḷavaṇī Mahārāj and has been playing a key role in maintaining the purity (*sovalē*) at the temple based on the regulations followed at the Vāsudeva Nivāsa, arguably the most prominent center of Brahmanical Dattātreya worship in the Marathi speaking world. During a conversation with Rajopadhye, he lamented that "most of the *yajamānas* (patrons/devotees who perform *pūjās* under his tutelage) are in fact, non-Brahmins, while the rich Brahmins residing in the neighborhood have abandoned and disowned their own *dharma*."

modern religious practices of the subcontinent. It is evident that cultural and political interests and influences are gradually transforming the traditional outlook regarding temple premises, architecture, and overall religious culture away from the conventional bio-centric worldview. In support of this perspective Yeolekar (2022) argues that the realities of modernization present systemic issues such as space constraints resulting from urbanization and the expansion of roads. These systemic issues, coupled with the forces of modernity, contribute to a sense of disconnect from deep ecological relationships.

The case of the Śrī Gurudev Datta Mandir, however, raises questions about the underlying consequences behind the seemingly noble intentions of the trustees and devotees who seek to create an “oasis of peace to encounter Lord Datta.” It is evident that their actions may have ecological and political implications that diverge from the intended narrative. The appropriation of public land and the subsequent disruption of vital water sources essential for the community's well-being directly impact the local ecosystem. Furthermore, the use of marble instead of traditional local stones, with new materials symbolizing elitism and modernity, coupled with the preference for decorative plants over native flora (referred to as “western” and “exotic”), may point to a shifting worldview within the discourse of Indic religious practices. The religious economy, architecture and land matters mentioned above exhibit the gradual shift towards a more prominent anthropocentric approach found among the affluent upper-middle class in urban Maharashtra.

The temple in focus vividly exemplifies the appropriation and institutionalization of a particular tree, where we can observe a process of ‘solidification of tradition’ in the making, where a rather informal personal shrine with seemingly no pretensions ritual or other formalities, develops into an institution governed by rules and regulations and run by a kind of *dharma*-police in the shape of professional custodians who articulate a very specific code of behavior and a standardized ritual procedure. As seen, the process is still under way as the temple materially grows and expands and canonizes its own

history and identity. In 2020, we asked the trustees whether they had any leaflets with information about the temple or a dedicated website, to which the manager answered: “Not yet. We have just started to expand, but there are plans for it.” He then immediately offered Larios an official, wallet-size photograph of the idol of Dattātreya he had in a drawer saying: “...but here, take this one to Germany.” As soon as written documents are out and an officially sanctioned version of the genesis of the temple is textualized (either in the form of a pamphlet, booklet or on an official website) the ‘tradition’ will be further solidified.²⁴ The official photograph of Dattātreya given by the officials to Larios already points in this direction.

The tale of the gardener, whose dream revealed the significance of the deity’s *pādukās*, highlights the close relationship between religiosity and the environment. However, another long-time resident of the area shared a different story that challenges the notion of ecological consciousness. He told us (in English) that many small temples in the area had been razed in the process of urban development of the locality. According to this resident—a highly educated Marathi-speaking teacher and musician who has lived, in the vicinity of the temple for more than a decade—before the devastating floods in Pune (1962, after the burst of Panshet dam) the majority of the land in this area was owned by prominent agrarian Maratha families (such as the Shiroles and others). Post the floods, rich and upper middle-class elites (majority of whom were the Brahmins) moved out of the old city center and got themselves settled around the Prabhat Road in Deccan Gymkhana. This change, which he told us to have witnessed, led to the replacement of the non-Brahmanical agrarian or pastoralist deities (i.e., folk deities such as Mhasobā, Birobā, Sātī Āsara etc.), by

²⁴ The authors have come across some leaflets from the annual program performed at the temple. However, none of the pamphlets that they have seen carried a textualized version of the foundation myth, except for the website mentioned above in footnote 5. There is also an outdated Facebook page at the following address: <https://www.facebook.com/DuttaMandir>. The latest post dates from December 18, 2015 and announces the festival in honor of Datta Jayantī.

Brahmanical deities such as Balabhīma Māruti, Dattātreya or several of his modern *avatāras*.²⁵

This year India is hosting the G20 summit which is celebrated across the country as the great achievement of the government of India.²⁶ One of the main themes of the summit is said to be finding solutions to problems related to environment, agriculture and green energy. In this context, a prominent religious leader of southwestern Maharashtra, during an informal conversation with us, said, “The Kamala Nehru Park temple has shown us the way temples across India should be run in terms of environmental consciousness.”²⁷ He also added that everyone should visit the Kamala Nehru Park

²⁵ There is a temple of Hanumān known as Balabhīma Mandir, situated approximately 300 meters from Kamala Nehru Park. This temple holds significance in relation to the Balopāsana movement focused on the physical strengthening of Hindus against Muslim invaders, as attributed by Samārtha Rāmadāsa Svamī and his lineage. The movement experienced a revival during the nationalist uprising among Puneite Brahmins, and the temple stands as a reminder of this historical context.

Surrounded by old mansions and bungalows of prominent 20th-century nationalist Brahmin leaders like N.C. Kelkar and others, the temple's location enhances its connection to the nationalist movement. Additionally, a notable attraction within the park is the Marut (HF24) Fighter-Bomber aircraft model, prominently displayed near the northern gate. This model holds significance for its role in the celebrated Battle of Longewala during the 1971 Indo-Pakistan war. The presence of this aircraft model appeals to the nationalistic and the anti-Pakistan sentiments prevalent among the upper and middle classes residing in the area. The event is often commemorated and glorified on various nationalist and right-wing platforms, including local TV shows. Another example of nationalist symbolism in the vicinity is the public park named after the Maratha king Sambhājī, located not far from Kamala Nehru Park. This park is renowned for featuring a captured Pakistani war tank (*raṇagāḍā*, in Marathi), which serves as a reminder of a battle during the same war. These instances reflect the intersection of historical events, nationalist sentiment, and the local landscape, shaping the cultural and political narratives in the area surrounding Kamala Nehru Park.

²⁶ The Hindu nationalist party BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) has won two consecutive general elections (2014, 2019) and formed national government with Narendra Modi as the Prime Minister.

²⁷ “Kamala Nehru Park chya Datta mandirane paryavaraṇāla pūrak vatavaran kasa asāva yācā ādarśa ghālun dilā āhem.” Personal communication, February 6, 2023.

Dattātreya temple and marvel at the way the trustees have recreated an eco-friendly system that makes the temple even more beautiful and green. With the G20 summit as the backdrop, the leader elaborated further, “such eco-friendly temples remind us of the environmental consciousness that has prevailed in India for many millennia. Hindu society should build new temples/renovate the existing temples considering the KNP temple as a standard eco-friendly model.”²⁸

The Śrī Gurudev Datta Mandir points to the inherent relationship of the nature and the divine within Hinduism as exemplified by the sacred *udumbara* tree and its relationship to Dattātreya. In the current study we analyzed the *udumbara* tree without reducing it to a mere vehicle of meaning, on the one hand, or an ultimate determinant, on the other. Here we can agree with the new materialists such as Latour or Connelly by giving “objects” back their agency, an agency that is essential to the understanding of a particular social network, and in this case, to the understanding of the soteriological and ontological views of the devotees who visit this temple with regularity, but also of the stakeholders and trustees who imprint the temple (and the tree) with their own imagination. Second, while Latour invites us to move beyond the dichotomy between subject and object and thus to make the question of materiality relevant again, the Indian traditions invite us to consider trees not as mere inanimate “objects,” but as beings with a particular ontological nature. Trees in the Hindu context are not simply “objects with agency”; they may be considered actual beings that actively affect human experience in a tangible form. This ontological classification is crucial not only to the understanding of nature in Hinduism, but to the complex relationship between nature and human beings. In the case of the *udumbara* at the Śrī Gurudev Datta Mandir, the tree is at the very heart of the religious imagination and the very *raison d’être* of the temple. Yet, its agency is also in-

²⁸ “*aśī mandire āpalyā sanskr̥tīḥ hajaro varṣe japalyā geleyā paryāvaraṇa viṣayak jāñivāñcī nidarśak āhe. Apaṇ Hindunni yā mandiracā ādarśa samor thevat aśī mandire bāndhāyala havi/navyāne sudhāraṇā karāyālā havi.*” Personal communication, February 6, 2023.

tertwined with intricate religious and political dynamics that shape its role within these contexts.

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