

Oral Testimonies on Sai Baba

As Gathered During a Field Research in Shirdi and Other Locales
in October-November 1985

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Preface

The interviews comprised in this volume are the outcome of a field research to Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh which I conducted in October-November 1985 for the preparation of my BA thesis on the life and teachings of the Indian saint Sai Baba of Shirdi (d. 1918), which I discussed in June 1987 at the Ca' Foscari University of Venice (title: *Un maestro dell'India moderna: il Sāi Bābā di Śīrḍī. L'uomo, l'ambiente, gli insegnamenti*). All interviews were taped, transcribed into Italian, and included in the thesis as an Appendix to it.

The reason that has prompted me to publish these materials after thirty-five years is that several of these conversations record the words and stories of the last old men who knew the saint during his lifetime. They are by all standards precious primary sources for the study of Sai Baba's life and teachings, and I hope they may be of interest to both scholars and devotees. In order to offer a comprehensive picture of my 1985 research, I have decided to publish the entire collection of interviews together with their original audio recordings, so that the voices of the protagonists be heard. While in Shirdi and surrounding areas, I was accompanied by a local interpreter who led me from house to house and who translated the words of my respondents from Marāṭhī into English.

The interviews of each day are preceded by excerpts taken from my personal diary - which I originally wrote in Italian - to which a few explanatory footnotes have been added so as to clarify my itinerary. I have also included the photos I took during my trip, along with some pictures of Sai Baba that I was able to gather in Shirdi and photos of relevant source materials. Altogether, these data may help to contextualize Shirdi as a pilgrimage place in the mid 1980s, offering insights into my own thoughts and plans, my subjective understanding of the people and places I visited and my role as a researcher.

Before going to Shirdi, I had immersed myself in the study of Sai Baba's figure for more than two years under the supervision of my teachers,

Professors Franco Michelini Tocci and Mario Piantelli, carefully studying all the books and articles I could find on the saint - both primary and secondary sources, mostly in English - as well as on the history and religious culture of Maharashtra up to modern times. In particular, I analyzed with utmost care a book edited by B.V. Narasimhaswami culling Sai Baba's utterances titled *Sri Sai Baba's Charters and Sayings*. With a Foreword by M.B. Rege (Madras: All India Sai Samaj, 1942⁴), which I also translated into Italian. I was twenty-three years old at the time and, though I had a basic knowledge of Hindī, I didn't know Marāṭhī. The help of Dr. Mahesh Jaiswal - Hindī lecturer at Ca' Foscari University who was also familiar with Marāṭhī - was invaluable in order to clarify numerous points both prior and after my trip. A dear friend, Dr. Jaiswal encouraged me from the very beginning of this project.

Though I had already been twice to India, this was my very first field research. With the aid of my Professors, I had carefully prepared a list of questions - arranged in order of priority - to ask the old villagers, hoping I could still find someone who had known Sai Baba in his/her youth and could share his/her precious memories about him. However, once I arrived in Shirdi and began my daily conversations with the local people - always obtaining their prior informed consent - I realized that the best way to go was to let them speak of whatever they thought to be important, without asking any preordained set of questions. Thus, I preferred to ask open-ended questions, so as to let them say whatever they wished to relate about their own experiences and reminiscences of Sai Baba: I wished to listen to their own insider perspective and enter into their world.

I opted for unstructured or semi-structured interviews, these being more like conversations than formal interviews, even allowing the topic of the talk to abruptly change in the direction the respondent wished to take it. Besides interviewing the old men who had direct experiences with the saint, I took pains to record the memories of various other people in and around Shirdi. By interviewing widely, I wished to document the complexity of the issues involved as well as to uncover points of agreement and disagreement among the interviewees.

I must point out that I had received no prior training as an anthropologist or oral historian, though I was familiar with a few theoretical works written by some leading anthropologists that my Professors had advised me to rely upon. During the talks my inexperience as an interviewer emerged, and more than once I made the mistake of asking leading questions, i.e. questions that subtly prompted the respondents to answer in a particular way. This is something that should generally be avoided since the interviewees are encouraged to say what they think the interviewer would like them to say.

I sometimes craved for answers to specific questions from my respondents. A case in point was my insistence on Sai Baba's *upadeśa* or teachings, which was something I very much wanted to know about from the old villagers so as to confirm or refute the information I had come across in both primary and secondary sources. The people of Shirdi, however, had little or no interest in discussing the topic of the saint's teachings, primarily because their relation with him was not of an intellectual kind but a very down-to-earth one, with no reference to philosophic or theological issues but to their daily needs and practical concerns.

And yet, even when I pressed my respondents by asking them presuming questions, I was often rewarded with unexpected, most interesting replies.

Moreover, there were circumstances when such 'forceful' questions were quite necessary to make the interviewees comfortable enough to answer honestly, without him/her trying to avoid them altogether, such as when I asked if Sai Baba had had any heir or successor or if he was either a Hindu or a Muslim. In such cases, I still think that leading or presuming questions were the only way to go.

In order to capture the straightforwardness of the original conversations I have deliberately avoided burdening them with a critical apparatus. At the same time, in order to make the English transcriptions of the interviews more readable I have not hesitated to make linguistic and grammatical adjustments such as rendering incomplete phrases with complete sentences, always being careful to remain faithful to their intended meaning.

The biodata of the people I interviewed - some of whom are well-known to Sai Baba devotees - have been reduced to the bare essentials and likewise the footnotes, the main purpose of which is to explain the meaning of certain Sanskrit and Marāṭhī words and to offer bibliographical references to some of the most significant accounts given by my informants. With few exceptions, in order to preserve the immediacy of the conversations I chose not to load them with details on the various individuals who are mentioned in the talks. I also chose to avoid the use of diacritical marks in the case of personal names and names of places. Whenever I obtained my informants' permission, I took their photos, usually at the end of the conversations.

List of Abbreviations

- Q Question
- A Answer
- T Translator. Comments by the interpreter, i.e. Swami Shekhar Rao or others
- I I myself, my occasional comments