

Oral Testimonies on Sai Baba

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

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10 **Shirdi-Sakuri-Shirdi** Thursday, October 24, 1985

Excerpts From My Diary

9 a.m., in the Leṇḍī gardens. Got up at 7:40 a.m. I was finally able to talk to Homi Baba, though very briefly. To me he seems quite a secondary figure. Anyway, his voice adds itself to all the other voices. I took a picture of him when he shows his chest in public. At 10 a.m. will try to go visit Bappa Baba again at his home.

4:40 p.m., at my hotel room. Interviewed Bappa Baba for the second time. We had a nice conversation which lasted for about half an hour: thus he could elaborate on the issues that were touched during our first meeting. I was very grateful for this opportunity.

After seeing Bappa Baba, I and Swami Shekhar Rao went once more to the Śrī Upāsni Kanyākumārī Sthān in Sakuri but Shri S.N. Tipnis was a real disappointment and he dismissed me as quickly as possible. It was very unpleasant. But I had Sati Godavari Mataji's *darshan* and she explicitly granted her blessings to me and my research work. I treasure this as the most important thing and don't need anything else. This was surely my last visit to Sakuri. Never mind if I couldn't have an interview with Mataji. We came back to Shirdi right away and around 1 p.m. I had lunch at my hotel. I then took a shower and a nap.

10:30 p.m., at my hotel room. Went to the Sansthān and bought twenty old issues of the monthly magazine *Sai Leela* spanning between 1975 and 1983, plus various photos. I also made a yearly subscription to *Sai Leela* for just sixty rupees which is excellent. Baldev Girme kindly translated from Marāṭhī into English the contents of an article of Swami Ram Baba which appeared in the *Sai*

Leela issue of April 1984. I recorded his translation and indeed it is quite interesting. Baldev Girme has the highest regard for Swami Ram Baba. He pointed out to me that in the book *Autobiography of a Yogi* by Paramahansa Yogananda there is a picture of Yogananda with Shri Yukteshwar surrounded by various other people, among whom is a young Swami Ram Baba.¹ He also said that during a meeting he had with Swami Ram Baba, the latter advised him to read a book by G.K. Pradhan titled *Toward the Silver Crests of Himalayas*. Baldev Girme recommended me to read it too, since he views it as especially important.

I then had the privilege of having dinner at Uddhao Madhavrao Deshpande's house. It was wonderful to spend the evening in the company of Uddhao and his wife. They invited me to have lunch at their house tomorrow as well! I will take this special opportunity to interview Uddhao a little more. This evening I also went to the sacred *nīm* tree of the Gurusthān to offer some *udī*. All offerings are burnt into the fire. I am so very grateful since everything is going in the best possible way. It's all for today.

¹ The photo was taken in December 1935 in the large courtyard of the *ashram* of Shri Yukteshwar in Serampore, on the occasion of the last solstice festival. However, it is not clear to me who is Swami Ram Baba among the numerous people present; see Yogananda, *Autobiography of a Yogi*, 33.

Interviews of the day



In Shirdi, Homi Baba's *ashram*, 8:15 a.m.

Brief conversation with Homi Baba.

Homi Baba says:

I won second prize in an All-India Competition as a bodybuilder. I was directed to become a *faqīr* thanks to Baba's grace. This happened in 1950, when he blessed me. Then and only then did I come in contact with Baba. Baba did this grace to me. Everybody told me I should go to Shirdi, but I didn't even know where Shirdi was in those days. In the end, I reached this place. I saw Sai Baba's image inside the temple and then I realized that I had found my Sadguru, I intuited this clearly. Baba told me: "You want me or money?". Then I said: "No, I don't need money. I want Baba". I added: "You can take even every drop of my blood, but I want Baba only. Nothing else". From that moment, Baba's grace was on me. Baba asked me to grow a beard and to wear the same dress which he wore. Baba was not alive, he told me these things in vision. Baba, since 1950, has been guiding me regularly. I have received periodical messages from him. In these messages, Baba asked me to keep a beard and to wear a dress like the one he used to wear.

Q You are a Parsi, aren't you?

A Yes, yes. I am a Parsi. I had *darshan* of Baba for the first time when I went to his *samādhi*. Then, Baba asked me to fix a *cilīm* for him. Afterward, I got his blessings.

Homi Baba says:

I have paid money to buy this piece of land you see.² It wasn't for free [he laughs].

Q You have this *ashram* since 1974?

A Yes.

T Homi Baba says that in 1950 he had a dream while in Bombay, in which Sai Baba appeared to him in a vision. Baba told him to come to Shirdi. He came in 1974. He also had other visions and dreams of Sai Baba. Once he went to the temple, to the *samādhi*, he saw Baba's picture, and actually he saw Sai Baba inside the temple.

Q So Homi Baba came here in 1974, built this small *ashram*, and has been living here ever since?

T Yes, correct.

I Thank you all.

[The interpreter later told me that Homi Baba comes from a very rich family and that he was a landlord prior to his conversion to religious life]

² The land of his small *ashram* in Shirdi.



Figure 79 Homi Baba giving *darshan*. It is claimed that the hair on his chest shows the image of Sai Baba

In Shirdi, Bappa Baba's house, 10:15 a.m.



Second conversation with Bappa Baba, son of Lakshman Ratna Parke who was the village priest and astrologer and the maternal uncle of Madhavrao Deshpande alias Shyama.

- Q What would you like to add about Sai Baba?
- A Baba came to Shirdi in the same way Kabīr,³ Namdev Maharaj⁴ or Jnaneshvar Maharaj⁵ came in the world. They all came on earth without anyone knowing from where they came from. So, with Baba, it was the same. Nobody knows anything about his native place nor about who his parents were.
- Q What do you remember of Sai Baba?
- A One Gopalrao Gund, from Satara, once came to Baba for blessings in order to have issue, since he could not have children. Baba gave that man only the ash of the *dhūnī*, which is called *udī*, and he told him to take it with water. Thanks to this blessing of Baba, a child was born to Mister Gund and his wife soon after.
- Q What do you think of Baba's teaching?
- A There was no teaching. After having had a son, Mister Gund came back to Shirdi and had some repairs done to the *masjid* since it was in bad condition. As a sign of gratitude to Baba, he repaired the *masjid*.⁶
- Q Is it true that Baba would often get angry at people?
- A If some devotee made mistakes, then Baba would get angry at him and would tell him something. Sometimes Baba would get mad at the villagers or at devotees when they made mistakes. Sometimes there was beating also, if he got very angry. Baba, however, did this also as a kind of joke.
- Q How would you describe Baba's temperament?
- A Sometimes angry, sometimes loving. When a devotee or any other person was in a good mood, then only would Baba allow him to enter the *masjid*. If they were in a bad mood, then he did not allow them to enter, he did not like them to come in.
- T This is an important point about Baba.
- Q Is it true that Baba would always sit keeping his typical posture with his leg crossed?
- A Baba knew each and everything of all people. Baba would sometimes sit on the stone, and then he would keep that posture.
- Q Did he keep that posture only when sitting on that stone?
- T Not always, not always. Sometimes.

³ The fifteenth century Muslim weaver of Benares, one of the greatest poet-saints of the northern Sant tradition.

⁴ A contemporary of Jnaneshvar, Namdev (1270-1350) was a Marāṭhī poet-saint held to be the originator of many of the practices of the Vārkarī tradition that worships Viṭṭhala/Viṭhobā of Pandharpur as its supreme god.

⁵ Jnaneshvar or Jnandev (1275-1296) was the founder of the *bhakti* movement in Maharashtra and one of the greatest Marāṭhī poet-saints. His *magnum opus* is the *Jñāneśvarī*, a commentary on the *Bhagavadgītā* containing about nine thousand verses in the *ovī* meter.

⁶ In fact, it is reported that in the mid-1890s Gopalrao Gund had some building materials delivered to the mosque with the intention that they should be used to repair it, but Sai Baba had them redirected to a couple of local temples that were in need of restoration; see Williams, *Experiencing Sai Baba's Shirdi: A Guide*, 32.

Bappa adds:

Baba knew everything of everybody, of all people. Without even seeing or meeting the persons. There were some who came to Baba all the time and who were the most devoted like Ganesh Shrikrishna Khaparde, Kaka Saheb Dixit, Moreshvar Pradhan, Govind Raghunath Dabholkar alias Hemadpant, etcetera. They were very close to him and Baba loved them dearly.

Q Did Baba talk much?

T Yes, with these people especially.

Q Did Baba ever give you anything?

A In Baba's times I was only seventeen or eighteen years old and therefore I didn't see much of Baba. But what I am saying is the truth. Baba would occupy me with *sevā*, that is, in service activities. He had me cleaning, sweeping, etcetera.

Q Did you do this inside the *masjid*?

A Yes, yes. In the *masjid*. Sometimes Das Ganu Maharaj came to see Baba. Once he told Baba he wanted to go to Benares to bathe in the Ganga. Then Baba told him: "Remain here, you will have the Ganga river just for you". Then, while Das Ganu was resting at Baba's feet, from Baba's feet, that is from his toes, water started to come out: the water of the Ganga.

T This episode is narrated in books also.⁷

Q Has the life here in Shirdi changed from the times of Baba, from the time of his *samādhi*?

A After Baba's *samādhi*, his body was placed in the Samādhi Temple, and it was buried there at least five to six feet down in the ground. Camphor and other essences were placed with it. This I have seen with my own eyes.

Q Did you see the ground being dug and all the rest?

A Yes. I saw the hole of the *samādhi* where Baba's body was placed. After that they put some camphor and flavoring things so as to scent the *samādhi*.

Q Was Baba's body dressed up for burial or was it naked?

A He was dressed up in white cloth. He was not naked. Flowers, garlands, incenses, flavoring things, etcetera were placed on him. Then the tomb, the *samādhi*, was closed. I have seen this myself. After thirteen days from Baba's *samādhi*, a *prasād* was distributed to all devotees and people present. This *annadān*⁸ is called *mahāprasād*.⁹

Bappa recounts:

Before Sai Baba's *samādhi*, four days before, Das Ganu Maharaj found himself at Pandharpur. Here he had a dream, just like a vision, in which he heard Baba calling him back to Shirdi saying: "Come quick, come quick. Do not waste time now in Pandharpur, but come to Shirdi to see me". Baba also told him: "Come quick to Shirdi and place a garland, flow-

⁷ See Dabholkar, *Shri Sai Satcharita: The Life and Teachings of Shirdi Sai Baba*, 63 (ch. 4, vv. 102-5).

⁸ Lit. 'giving of food'.

⁹ Lit. 'great grace'.

ers, on my body". After having had this dream, however, Das Ganu Maharaj did not reach Shirdi in time, that is, before Baba's death. After a few days Das Ganu arrived in Shirdi but Baba had already taken *samādhi*. This was the way it went. Only then did Das Ganu Maharaj understand the meaning of the dream, of what he had seen in the dream, of why Sai Baba had told him: "Come quick, come quick to Shirdi and place a garland on my body".¹⁰

T Das Ganu Maharaj was one of Baba's friends, not just a devotee. He was among Baba's closest friends. That's why Baba called Das Ganu to come and see him.

Q Did Baba sing *bhajans*?

A At times Baba used to sing *bhajans* but alone, not with others. Baba always sang something, but only when he was alone, not with other people around.

Q Did the devotees sing?

A Yes. The devotees sang *bhajans* together. Baba sat in their midst but he did not sing with them, he simply listened. When he wanted to sing, he sang alone.

Q Did Baba shave his beard?

A Baba would trim his beard, by cutting it short up to one inch. Instead his head was completely shaven. Once in six months a barber came and shaved Baba.

¹⁰ On this episode, see Dabholkar, *Shri Sai Satcharita: The Life and Teachings of Shirdi Sai Baba*, 696 (ch. 42, vv. 69-75).

In Shirdi, near the *cāvaḍī*, 5:30 p.m.



Summary of a short speech by Swami Ram Baba, which appeared in the monthly newsletter *Sai Leela* of April 1984. Shri Baldev Girme translated it for me from Marāṭhī into English, as well as its accompanying article.

Swami Ram Baba says:

There is an episode which is mentioned in the *Shri Sai Satcharita*, in the twenty-third *adhyāya*.¹¹ There was a Swami who possessed knowledge of all the Shastras but didn't have a steady mind, nor was he able to absorb himself in meditation.¹² Thus, his *guru* advised him to go to Shirdi. "For what concerns meditation, only Shri Sai Baba can guide you", so he told him.

When I visited Shirdi, Sai Baba was eating *bhākrī*¹³ and onion. According to what the saints say, a saint doesn't eat *bhākrī* and onion.¹⁴ So, when I saw Baba eating *bhākrī* and onion, I thought to myself: "What can this saint teach me, if he himself eats *bhākrī* and onion?". This episode took place on February 22, 1914. When I visited the *maṣjid* to have Baba's *darshan*, Sai Baba, just slightly looking at me, said: "You, dog, get out of here". He told me so because of what I had thought about him when I saw him eating.

I was born on February 22, 1860.

Shri Baldev Girme next translated and commented upon the article which accompanies Swami Ram Baba's speech:

Mister Shri Samant, who is the author of this article, met Swami Ram Baba on August 13, 1982. According to what he says about this meeting, Swami Ram Baba, at first sight, immediately reminds one of Rabindranath Tagore.¹⁵ And when Swami Ram Baba starts talking, then one is reminded of Swami Vivekananda. He speaks with authority on whatever subject. His discourses are concerned primarily with commentaries on the *Shri Sai Satcharita*, or the figures of great saints. He speaks with authority in English, which he speaks fluently. When he starts talking, he takes into consideration the audience of the people who are there to hear him. Mister Shri Samant says that Swami Ram Baba has 'x-rays eyes'. When he talks he doesn't like to be interrupted. When he talks, devotees hear Swami Ram Baba opening his speeches, tackling problems and questions which they have on their minds, without these latter ones having ever opened their mouths.

Swami Ram Baba is contrary to the showing off of miracles, of *camatkārs*. According to him, those who have acquired some powers or *siddhis* like to show off, but this is profoundly wrong. Swami Ram Baba doesn't like

¹¹ Chapter.

¹² This was Swami Ram Baba himself, who was a student of *yoga* at the time.

¹³ Flat unleavened bread made of sorghum, millet or maze flour. The staple food of rural Maharashtra.

¹⁴ In Brahmanical legal texts, onion is one of the few prohibited vegetables (together with mushroom, garlic, some kinds of leek, and secretions from tree barks).

¹⁵ A highly influential Bengali poet and novelist, Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) was the first Indian to be awarded the Nobel prize for literature.

the ostentation of the *siddhis*. For him, a true saint is one who has done all the *pradakṣiṇās*¹⁶ of the sacred rivers. For example, the Ganga, the Narmada, the Godavari.

According to Swami Ram Baba, Shri Sai Baba never gave any *mantra* to anyone. But nowadays there are Babas and saints who seek to give *mantras*. Swami Ram Baba doesn't like this, since he doesn't believe in them. Swami Ram Baba says that after having done *pradakṣiṇā* of the sacred rivers, the *sādhaka* obtains the *mantra* by himself, spontaneously.

Swami Ram Baba narrates some of his personal experiences. In doing this, he avoids making use of the pronoun 'I'. Thus, he narrates in an impersonal fashion: "Ram used to do this...", "Ram will go to Bombay tomorrow...", "Ram will see you tomorrow...", etcetera. Swami Ram Baba rarely speaks about himself. He says that Īśvara is one, that God is one and that He is omnipresent. To people he says: "*Sākṣāt Īśvara mhaṇaje Sāi*", 'God in visible form is Sai'.

Whatever be the example Swami Ram Baba gives, he always draws it from the *Shri Sai Satcharita*. Swami Ram Baba considers the *Shri Sai Satcharita* to be the greatest *granth*¹⁷ of our times. The *Shri Sai Satcharita*, says he, contains the stories of Sai Baba's life. These stories are not imaginary; they are all real. Thus, they are not to be taken symbolically. Each time Swami Ram Baba speaks about the *Shri Sai Satcharita*, one can perceive the love and the *śraddhā*, that is, the faith he has for Shri Sai Baba. Swami Ram Baba says there are many *granth*s and books written on Sai Baba, but that many of them contain many 'dramatic scenes'. He also says that the price of these books is so high that the poor can hardly afford them. Swami Ram Baba says that, in this whole world, the only God is Sai and that the only sacred book is the *Shri Sai Satcharita*.

Swami Ram Baba is very frank in his speeches, and he is honest, since he always speaks the truth. The devotee, sometimes, may not like this, since truth is often bitter. With regard to always telling the truth, he does not take into account the personal feelings of devotees.

The creation of this great *granth*, the *Shri Sai Satcharita*, is due to the grace and blessings of Sai Baba. According to Swami Ram Baba the *Shri Sai Satcharita* is like *amṛta*¹⁸ for the devotee.

Swami Ram Baba says that God resides in all, in each person. But it is the devotee who must become aware of his presence, the presence of his interior indweller.

Swami Ram Baba does not subscribe to the idea that Sai Baba has gone away. He believes that Sai Baba moves all around us, with us, every day. And this is something devotees themselves experience.

Sai Baba's statue is placed just in front of his *samādhi* and Swami Ram Baba does not agree with the idea that the devotee should step on the *samādhi* in order to get Baba's *darshan*. He says that when the devotees' feet touch the *samādhi*, then the vibrations which are generated from this contact can at times become profane.

16 Circumambulations.

17 Sacred text.

18 Nectar.

After His Holiness Swami Ram Baba met with Sai Baba, his whole ego and negativities disappeared in the dust. Swami Ram Baba says he does not desire any *siddhis*.

On February 22, 1984, Swami Ram Baba turned one hundred and twenty-five years old.

Thus I conclude the translation of this article. Jay Sai Ram.¹⁹

¹⁹ Lit. 'victory to Sai who is Rām'. The name Rām is interpreted as the divine principle dwelling in each and every heart as pure delight.