
11 **Shirdi**

Friday, October 25, 1985

Excerpts From My Diary

8:30 a.m., at my hotel room. Got up at 8:10. In the morning, I and Swami Shekhar Rao will try to have a few more conversations with local people and then I'll go to Uddhao's house for lunch. I plan to buy a few other things here in Shirdi. I also plan to go back to the Sansthān so as to get some last information (on Basheer Baba, etcetera) and also say goodbye to them. I also would like to take some last photos and hope to be granted the grace of getting some *udī* from the *dhūnī* to take away with me. Today is practically my last day here in Shirdi.

1:15 p.m. Had an excellent morning, truly blessed. We were able to interview Shri Uttamrao Patil, sixty years old, who is the son of Tatyā Kote Patil. It was a good talk. We then interviewed Martanda Baba for the second time: it was a wonderful and quite long conversation and I came to learn many interesting things. At his house we also briefly talked with a woman devotee, Shrimati Devaki Davan. We then interviewed Uddhao for the third time and had lunch at his house.

I bought some other books as well as some music cassettes of local *bhajans* and *ārtīs*. I started the recording of my seventh mini-cassette which means that so far I have accumulated around eleven hours of interviews, which is a result beyond all my expectations. I really didn't imagine that my research could be so successful.

This afternoon I'll try to buy a few more things, take a few more photos, get some *udī*, and talk to the people of the Sansthān. I leave Shirdi with a remarkable wealth of knowledge. I also made new friends. These contacts will surely be useful in the future. I think I have done my best during the days of my stay here, maximizing the available time. Honestly, I don't think

I could have done more. Tomorrow at 1 p.m. I'll leave for Bombay by bus, directly from my hotel.

6:15 p.m. Swami Shekhar Rao brought to me some gifts. It was very moving. Moreover, this morning Shri Uttamrao Patil showed me the bag, resembling a stocking, that Sai Baba gifted to his father Tatyā Kote Patil. And he was so kind as to give me a small piece of it, to treasure as a precious relic: what a gift of grace! I also took a photo of a rare picture of Sai Baba together with Tatyā Kote Patil, Mhalsapati, and Abdul Baba in front of the *masjid*. Bought few things at the local shops and, what is most important, asked for and obtained a good quantity of *udī* taken from the sacred fire of the *dhūnī* at the *masjid*.

Will give a good cash remuneration to Swami Shekhar Rao who has been like my 'shadow' during my stay here, being always with me and guiding me throughout Shirdi and surrounding areas. His help was essential and without him I wouldn't have accomplished anything. I want to reward him as he deserves.

Tomorrow will get up at 4:30 a.m. in order to participate in the morning *ārtī*, the *kākaḍ ārtī*. Everything goes well; today was really a blessed day. Tomorrow I must go back to the Sansthān so as to thank everyone and say goodbye.

Interviews of the day



In Shirdi, Shri Uttamrao Patil's house, 9:15 a.m.

Conversation with Shri Uttamrao Patil, sixty years old, son of Tatyā Kote Patil¹ who was a very close devotee of Sai Baba.

Q What do you remember about your father? What did he do?

A For as long as my father lived, every day he went to the *masjid* and stayed with Baba. All day he remained with Baba. He only came home to sleep at night.

Shri Uttamrao remembers:

My father, Tatyā Kote Patil, couldn't have children. So he went to Baba, asking for his blessings, in order to have offspring. He had had three wives, three marriages. After Baba's blessings, from his third wife he had three sons and three daughters. My father died in 1945. Before the economic administration passed to the Sansthān, it was my father who had control of the situation, of the temple. Baba used to give my father thirty-five rupees every day. If anything happened in Shirdi, at the mosque or the temple, then with that money Tatyā Kote took care of the expenses and programs.

I When something special happened in Shirdi you say... Then he was really a very important person. He was very close to Sai Baba...

A Yes. And even though he received up to thirty-five rupees from Baba daily,² sometimes my father also spent his own money for particular purposes and performances.

Q Is it true that your father was responsible for the building of most of the temples here in Shirdi? Is it true what I've heard?

A My father, Tatyā Kote Patil, built this Lakṣmī Mandir, then the Marūṭī Mandir and also another one. He built three temples. The Marūṭī temple, dedicated to Hanumān...

Q Therefore, he was a very important person here in Shirdi?

A Yes, he was an important landowner here.

Q Seeing that you were born thanks to Baba's blessings, can you tell me anything your father told you about Baba? About his way of life, his teaching, etcetera?

A In Baba's time, my father was always near him. When Baba went begging his food in the morning, my father accompanied him. At noon *ārtī* he was also with Baba. After noon *ārtī* he came home, after giving *prasād* to the devotees. Then he gave *prasād* to the family. No one ever knew anything about Baba; where he came from, where his parents were from, which caste he belonged to, etcetera.

Q You mean that no one knows about Sai Baba's origins?

¹ He was the son of Bayajabai and Ganpati Kote Patil. Daily, Sai Baba used to go to their house and beg for alms. On Tatyā Kote Patil, see Williams, *Experiencing Sai Baba's Shirdi: A Guide*, 105-8; Shepherd, *Sai Baba of Shirdi: A Biographical Investigation*, 145-6.

² It should be noted that in those years a government employee's average salary was about this amount per month. As a result, Tatyā Kote Patil became a wealthy landowner; see Williams, *Experiencing Sai Baba's Shirdi: A Guide*, 107.



Figure 80 Sai Baba (right) seated in front of the *masjid*. Next to Sai Baba is Abdul Baba. Taty Kote Patil holds a book in his hands. To the left is Nanavali

T Yes. So he says.

Q Did Sai Baba ever say anything special to your father, since he was so close to him?

A Baba simply blessed my father, telling him not to worry about the future, and that he would have a happy life.

Q Therefore there was no particular teaching given by Sai Baba to your father?

A No.

Q What was Baba's attitude, his way of behaving? Did your father ever talk to you about it?

A Sometimes my father used to tell me: "Baba blessed us so much", and also: "I was always with Baba", and: "Only after Baba left, I felt alone". After Baba took *samādhī* then he felt alone. This is all.

Shri Uttamrao says:

All three sons my father had are still alive. Their names are Shivajirao, Baghirao, and naturally me, Uttamrao. I was the second son, the middle one. The first was Baghirao and the last Shivajirao.

Q As the fundamental thing was Baba's blessing to your father in order to have children, in what way did he bless him? Laying his hands upon him or breaking a coconut?

A Baba gave a bag to my father, a white one, as a gift.³ We still have it. [he opens a large case, takes it out, and shows it to me].

Q Was this gift connected with the blessing to have children?

A Yes.

Q Therefore, Baba blessed your father by giving him this bag as a gift, for the scope of obtaining offspring?

³ On Sai Baba's bag or 'pocket', see Chitluri, *Baba's Rīnanubandh: Leelas During His Sojourn in Shirdi*, 165-7.

- A Yes, it was like that.
- Q But what was the connection, the relationship between the gift of this bag and having children?
- A After Baba gave this white bag to my father, then he had sons and daughters born to him. It all happened after Baba gave him this gift.
- Q Maybe the bag represents maternity symbolically?
- A All I can say is that only after Baba gave this bag to him, my father had children. It was only then that his wife got pregnant.
- Q And Baba didn't say a word, simply gave this white bag to him?
- A Yes, yes. He only gave the white bag to my father, telling him that everything would be fine, would end well. He told him not to worry about children or anything else.
- Q In what year did this happen?
- A I don't remember now. I only know that Baba gave this bag to my father, and my father told us to take great care of it.⁴
- Q What happened after your father's death?
- A After the death of my father, his first son, my brother Baghirao Patil, took care of the Buti *vādā*, that is, of the temple, the Samādhī Mandir, and also of the *masjid*, from 1945 to 1965. After that, a trust was formed, an economic administration was organized to take care of things.
- Q So before your father had done all this?
- A Yes, certainly. When he was living, he was the first member of the temple, which was under his tutelage. Then, after his death, his son continued in the same function.
- Q And subsequently the Sansthān took over?
- A Yes.
- Q In what year was the Sansthān formed?
- A The local government formed it in 1965.
- Q So it is only twenty years that the Sansthān is at work, and the government is directing it?
- A Yes, that's so. For twenty years.
- Q How has life in Shirdi changed in all these years?
- A After the government started conducting things here, many things changed. So many things changed, in respect to how they functioned in the old days. The government has changed many things.
- Q Do you think that things changed for the best, or do you think they were better before?
- A It was better before, in those days.
- Q You mean that things were better in your father's time, when he took care of things?
- A No, no, the government is doing a good job. They have innovated and changed many things, they have made progress and improvements in the temple, in the *masjid*, in the *bhojānghar*..
- Q Therefore, you are satisfied with how the Sansthān is running things here in Shirdi?
- A Yes, I am very satisfied, happy. The government is doing a fine job.
- I Thank you.

⁴ Shri Uttamrao Patil later told us that his father received this bag from Sai Baba in the year 1912. He cut a small piece of it and kindly gave it to me, to treasure as a precious relic.



Figure 81
My guide and interpreter Swami Shekhar Rao displays the bag that Sai Baba gifted to Taty Kote Patil, treasured by his son Shri Uttamrao Patil



Figure 82
A small piece of the bag that Sai Baba gifted to Taty Kote Patil. Generously, Shri Uttamrao Patil offered it to me as a precious relic

In Shirdi, Martanda Mhalsapati's house, 10:30 a.m.



Second conversation with Martanda Mhalsapati, known as Martanda Baba, son of Mhalsapati Chimnaji Nagare who was the hereditary priest of the local Khaṇḍobā temple and Sai Baba's first devotee.

Martanda says:

Sai Baba was an *avatāra*... like Rām, Kṛṣṇa, or Jesus Christ. He lived as an *avatāra*, thinking and behaving like an *avatāra*. When Baba came to Khaṇḍobāji's temple, my father Mhalsapati was the *pūjārī* there. It was he who said to Baba: "Āo Sāi", which means: 'Welcome Sai'. My father gave the name to Baba.

Q What does the term "Sāi" mean exactly?

A The term "Sāi" is used to designate great saints. In the same way that, in India, the term Mahārāj designates great men. "Sāi" has many meanings.

Q Could you relate us an incident, a story of Baba's life or of your father's life?

A My father, before having me, could not have any children. So it happened that, after Baba's blessings, my father Mhalsapati had a son... I am that son. When I was about thirty or thirty-five, Baba was still alive. When Baba took *samādhi*, I was thirty-five. I served Baba in many ways. I used to help him collect betel leaves, massage his body, especially his legs, etcetera. Baba himself arranged my wedding. Even now we send *naivedya* before the noon *ārtī* to the temple, to Baba... From our house, daily, since those days. Only after noon *ārtī* we take our food, after having offered *naivedya* to Baba.

Q I've read in books that Sai Baba once called your father Mhalsapati and told him that his wife had a tumor in her neck. Your father didn't know anything about it and then Sai Baba cured her. This was certainly one of the greatest graces your family received from Baba. Do you remember anything about it?⁵

A Once, in 1914, my mother got an infection in her thigh which produced buboes. She went to the house of her brother, Namdev Shingote, to get some rest... Then Baba, at the same time my mother had developed this illness, told the following to Mhalsapati: "I have buboes on my body. They cause me a lot of pain". And Baba indeed had those same buboes on his body.

Q Do you mean to say that Baba had taken on himself the buboes which pained your mother?

T Yes, yes.

Q Did Mhalsapati actually see those buboes on Baba's body?

T Yes, yes. Mhalsapati saw them.

Martanda Baba says:

Then, the day after, Baba's buboes broke and the illness was cured. In this way my mother was cured.⁶

⁵ On this incident, see Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba*, 2: 16.

⁶ For a similar miraculous cure, when Sai Baba took upon himself the buboes of G. S. Khaparde's son Balwant who had bubonic plague, see Dabholkar, *Shri Sai Satcharita: The Life and Teachings of Shirdi Sai Baba*, 113-14 (ch. 7, vv. 100-10).

- Q Was this then a great miracle of Sai Baba?
 T Yes. A great miracle.
 I I know your father usually slept together with Baba at the Dvārakāmāi. He was the only person to whom this was allowed...
 T [interrupting] Not only him. Tatyā Kote Patil also slept near Baba at the *masjid*. Both of them.⁷
 Q Could you tell me something about the plank on which Baba used to sleep?
 A After Baba took *samādhi*, my father Mhalsapatiji used to go to the *masjid* daily, even at night, to put a cloth on Baba's *samādhi*. This is called 'pressing the body'.
 T [explains] The body laid in the tomb. His father used to put a cloth on the *samādhi* and then he 'massaged' Baba, as if he was still in the flesh. This he continued doing for four years, up until 1922. That year Mhalsapati expired.

Martanda Baba says:

Everybody could see the plank on which Baba used to sleep, but nobody ever succeeded in seeing how Baba could climb up to it or even descend from it, not even my father. Perhaps, he saw this only from a distance. We only knew that Baba slept on that plank, but nobody could ever see him climbing it or descending from it.⁸

- Q Since you were thirty-five when Baba took *samādhi*, do you recall any brief anecdote or story about Baba? Even just a small, simple incident.
 A Baba used to say many things; not just to me but to everybody. To all Baba would tell a story, to devotees as well as to villagers, daily.
 Q Do you remember any?
 A There is a book written by one Narasimhaswami in which he reports stories about Baba and even about my father, in great detail.⁹
 Q But do you remember any of them yourself?
 A I am more than one hundred seven years old now... I am tired and have no more energy to talk. There are other things, but I am tired right now.
 I Well, then we can certainly stop our conversation here. Thanks, thanks a lot for your time.

Martanda Baba, nevertheless, continues talking:

There is another person, an *ācārya*, Bharadwaja by name, from Andhra Pradesh. He has also written a book on Sai Baba.

- I Thanks, I know. I do have Bharadwaja's book.¹⁰ However, I still lack one of Narasimhaswami's books, though I hope to be able to trace it one way or the other.¹¹

⁷ See Dabholkar, *Shri Sai Satcharita: The Life and Teachings of Shirdi Sai Baba*, 127-8 (ch. 8, vv. 116-25).

⁸ On Sai Baba's feat of sleeping on this suspended wooden plank, see Dabholkar, *Shri Sai Satcharita: The Life and Teachings of Shirdi Sai Baba*, 149-51 (ch. 10, vv. 15-21, 29-30).

⁹ See Narasimhaswami's *Life of Sai Baba*, in four volumes.

¹⁰ Its title is *Sai Baba the Master* and it was published in 1983.

¹¹ At the time, I missed vol. 3 of Narasimhaswami's *Life of Sai Baba*. I was later able to find it. On the *Life of Sai Baba*, see Shepherd, *Sai Baba of Shirdi: A Biographical Investigation*, 328-37.

Martanda Baba:

There is also another book on Baba by one Vaman Prangovind Patel, it is only in Gujarati however.¹²

I Thank you for all this information on books. We can now bring our conversation to a close.

Martanda Baba adds:

When I was twenty-two years old, Upasni Maharaj came to Shirdi from Satana. He had wandered in various places around Maharashtra. Then many people advised him to go to Shirdi and meet Sai Baba. "Then you will be alright", they told him. So Upasni Maharaj came to Shirdi and met with Baba. Baba told him to stay two or three years with Mhalsapatiji. He said: "He will arrange for you, he will take care of you. For the moment I have no connection with you, I can't do anything". So Baba told him. Then, after these two to three years had passed, Upasni Maharaj went back to Baba, after having been with Mhalsapati. Upasni told him that something was going wrong for him in Shirdi and that he wanted to leave, change place. Otherwise, he said, "People here will give me lots of trouble". Something was going on with Upasni Baba. Women were being beaten; he would beat up even his wife. Actually, he had three wives at the time. Things were not good. He would beat his women near Khanḍobā's temple.

Q Do you mean to say that he wasn't a good man?

T So says Martanda Baba. Upasni would often get angry and beat his wives.

Q Thus the villagers of Shirdi didn't like Upasni Baba. Is this the meaning of Martanda's words?

T Yes. This is the main point. Shirdi villagers did not like Upasni Maharaj at all.

Q Did Sai Baba like him, however?

T Sai Baba loved him. But Afterward he told him to not stay in Shirdi any longer. He told him to go to Sakuri, three miles away from Shirdi.

Q And you, what do you think of Upasni Baba?

T Sai Baba thought well of him and blessed him. He told him to go to Sakuri and not to worry, since all would be fine. Sai Baba said: "In the future you shall attain realization, you will be a great *guru*". So Baba told him.

Q Why do you think Shirdi villagers didn't like Upasni?

T He already answered this. Because they would see him beating his wives and often getting angry at people. For these reasons the villagers got a bad impression of him. So they told him not to remain in Shirdi but to leave the place.

Q Did also Mhalsapati want him to leave Shirdi?

A No. My father loved Upasni Maharaj. That was the reason why Sai Baba told him to go and stay with my father. He liked him.

Q Thus the villagers disliked him?

T Yes. The villagers only.

I Whereas Mhalsapati loved him...

¹² This book was translated into English by V.B. Kher in 1997; see Sai Sharan Anand (Vaman Prangovind Patel), *Shri Sai Baba*.

- T Yes, he loved him.
- Q So, after about three years Upasni Baba was forced to leave and he eventually settled in Sakuri?
- T Yes, he followed Baba's advice. He assured him he would become a great saint. Thus he left and went to Sakuri.
- Q Do you know anything about Meher Baba?
- A No, I don't know much about him. He was a Parsi I think. Often Meher Baba, who was staying in Ahmednagar, would come to Shirdi to meet with Sai Baba.
- Q What kind of man was he?
- A He was a Parsi. He didn't know Marāṭhī nor Hindī. He spoke English only. Some people would translate for him into English, just as this man is doing for you now.
- Q Do you think he was a great *guru*?
- A He was good. A good man.
- Q Did you regard him as a teacher or as an enlightened person? Wasn't he under the guidance of Sai Baba and Upasni Maharaj?
- A The last time he came to Shirdi, Sai Baba blessed Meher Baba, he gave him *āśīrvād*. After receiving Baba's blessings, Meher Baba became a saint.

Martanda Baba adds:

Even Gajanan Maharaj came to Shirdi from Shegaon. He didn't come often, however. He came to meet with Baba and would talk with him for a while. Then he would go back to his village, to Shegaon.

- Q Thus there exists a connection, a link between Gajanan Maharaj and Shirdi Baba?
- T Yes, Martanda Baba says so.
- Q Did Gajanan come to Shirdi more than once?
- A Two or three times, perhaps more.

In Shirdi, Martanda Mhalsapati's house, 11:45 a.m.



Brief conversation with Shrimati Devaki Davan. She comes to Shirdi every year since 1953.

Shrimati Devaki Davan recounts:

In 1953 I was in Bombay. I wasn't feeling well and I had fever. I was suffering from a bad disease. Then I decided to come to Shirdi and I remained here for about a week. Here I was cured thanks to Baba's grace. This is what happened to me.

- Q Did you take some *udī* or were you cured immediately?
- A I took *darshan* of Baba and then *udī* also. [Shrimati Devaki Davan offered her testimony at Martanda Baba's house. As many devotees do, she always comes to pay homage to old Martanda].

In Shirdi, Uddhavrao Madhavrao Deshpande's house, 12:15 p.m.



Third conversation with Uddhavrao (Uddhao) Madhavrao Deshpande, seventy-nine years old, son of the deceased Madhavrao Deshpande alias Shyama who was among the closest devotees of Sai Baba, often acting as his intermediary.

Uddhao says:

Martanda Baba is now ninety-two years old, not one hundred and six or seven. He is wrong...

One day, when his father Mhalsapati was taking his lunch meal, a dog came to his house, waiting and crying. But Mhalsapati didn't feed the dog; instead he beat it with a stick, wounding it on its head and mouth. The same day, in the evening, devotees went to the *masjid* to meet Baba and saw he was wounded. They asked him what had happened. Mhalsapati was present and Baba told him: "I came to your house today to beg and you beat me like this". Mhalsapati protested: "But when did you come? I didn't see you". Then Baba said: "Didn't that dog come to your door?". Thus Mhalsapati understood the lesson.

Q Did Baba really have a wound on his head like the dog?

A Yes, on his forehead. Then people understood that Baba is omnipresent.¹³

Q Do you mean that they understood Baba's oneness with all beings and all things?

T Yes, yes. After this Mhalsapati believed in Baba more and more, and began to pray a lot.

Q Then this was a crucial moment for Mhalsapati's faith?

T Yes, it was so. So says Uddhao Baba.

Uddhao narrates:

As I was planning to get married, I went to Shrirampur to meet my bride.

T [speaking to me] Do you understand? Here, first the bridegroom visits the girl and then, if they agree, the wedding takes place.

Continues Uddhao:

But I had a dream at that time in which Baba appeared and told me not to marry that girl in Shrirampur. He told me to marry a girl from Nasik instead. So, I ended up changing my mind, and I did marry a girl from Nasik: my wife is that girl.

Q Thus, Baba in a dream directed you to marry another girl instead of the one you had chosen?

T Yes, Uddhao Baba says so.

Uddhao remembers:

My father Shyama expired here, in this house, in 1940. Now it is an old

¹³ As Sai Baba once stated: "Sometimes I am a dog and sometimes a pig; sometimes I am a cow, sometimes a cat, and sometimes an ant, a fly, an aquatic creature - in such various forms do I move about in this world. Know, that I like only him who sees me in all the living beings. So give up the sense of differentiation. This is the way to worship me"; Dabholkar, *Shri Sai Satcharita: The Life and Teachings of Shirdi Sai Baba*, 143 (ch. 9, vv. 129-30).

house but we are still living in it. Before dying, my father told me to bring him some betel nut. He ate the betel nut and then he suffered a sort of paralysis. He died at 11 a.m. Shortly before dying, my father told me not to take a single *paisā* from the temple or the Sansthān, but to offer my services for free, doing everything without any recompense, just doing honorary service.

- Q Were these the very last words Shyama told his son?
 T Yes, his last words.

Uddhao continues:

My father, once he died, did not have *samādhi*. He had the traditional Hindu funeral rites.

- Q Why wasn't Shyama given *samādhi*?
 T They gave him *piṇḍadān*.¹⁴ Either one is given *samādhi* or else the customary funerary rites are celebrated.
 Q Do these rites end with the cremation of the body?
 T Yes, cremation.¹⁵

Uddhao adds:

They made these ceremonies with *candana* and fire. *Candana* is sandal wood. There were ten thousand people present at Shyamaji's death ceremony.¹⁶

- T Shyama Deshpande belonged to the Brahmin community. In order to have *samādhi*, one must be in the condition of a *brahmacārin*, he must be celibate.¹⁷ Shyama, being married with children, was cremated.

Uddhao narrates:

Baba visited this house several times. He visited it even two or three times a day when my father was ill. Thus, Baba was even physically present in this house where we now find ourselves.¹⁸

When I met Baba and he stood in front of me, I had the clear perception of being in the presence of God. I thought to myself: "God is standing in front of me". This was my feeling.

- Q Was this an idea or a concrete experience?
 A It was a precise feeling which I had when facing him. It was like this... Inside of me I said: "God Himself is standing in front of me at this very moment". This was my reaction whenever I saw or approached Baba. It was a real experience.

¹⁴ The final death ritual of the offering of balls of rice (*piṇḍa*) to one's ancestors (*pitr*).

¹⁵ Actually, the cremation rites are only the first part of *antyeṣṭi*, the death sacrament. For ten days after the burning of the corpse on the funeral pyre, water mixed with sesame is offered together with the leaves of certain trees. On the tenth day, the eldest son who officiated at the cremation goes to the cremation ground and offers the *piṇḍa*.

¹⁶ Thus, according to Uddhao, more people would have been present at Shyama Deshpande's death ceremony in 1940 than at Sai Baba's *samādhi* celebrations in 1918 (seven thousand people, as per his first interview).

¹⁷ Actually, only saints and *saṃnyāsins* are given *samādhi*, i.e. are buried.

¹⁸ On this house, see Williams, *Experiencing Sai Baba's Shirdi: A Guide*, 118-19.