

Oral Testimonies on Sai Baba

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

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13 **Bombay**
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Excerpts From My Diary

11:30 a.m. Yesterday I reached Bombay around 9:45 p.m. The bus trip was long and tiresome, the road being quite bumpy. On the way we halted in Sakuri and Nasik, where among other things I saw an interesting temple, relatively modern. Once in Bombay I took a taxi and I arrived at the Agrawals' home in Marine Drive around 10 p.m. Their hospitality is, as always, wonderful (as usual, I must abandon my Western notion of time and adapt to their rhythms which are quite slow and unpredictable; sometimes I'm just stuck waiting for hours and no one shows up and nothing happens!). Had a good night sleep and this morning had a good breakfast. The weather and the temperature are fine. It will be good for me to stay here a few days and rest a while after my intense field research in Shirdi.

4 p.m. What amazes me is the Agrawals' habit of fixing lunch (and dinner) for me alone: the women of the house insist that I should sit at the table and eat first, all by myself (Western style, i.e. with plates, knife and fork, and not eating with my hands as Indians do). Only after I have been served and have finished eating, they take their lunch (and dinner) all together. In the beginning this made me feel uncomfortable: everyone seemed to be staring at me, especially the children who are most straightforward and interested in me because of my 'otherness'. Indeed, the children as well as the women of the house are very curious about me and often laugh. Now I'm more used to it though it is still an awkward feeling. They also pointed out that for them it is strange that a foreigner be so interested in their culture and religion: my interest in Sai Baba, in his life and teachings, and in Maharashtra pilgrimage sites such as Pandharpur, Jejuri, etc. is something which astounds them and at the same time makes them feel proud.

They are eager to see if I like their food and eat everything they serve. I wonder if this has something to do with caste rules of purity and pollution and the taboos of commensality. Being a foreigner, a non-Hindu, I'm obviously an outsider (*mleccha*) and therefore utterly impure. Perhaps the fact of serving me first and the rule that I should eat all by myself serves a double purpose: that of highlighting their hospitality toward a guest - who according to Hindu tradition is sacred and should be honored as God himself - and at the same time that of isolating an impure, casteless individual so that he may not contaminate their own food and vessels. I also noticed that the food they ate was different from mine and cooked at a different time (and I suspect they use different pans when they cook for themselves). But of course this is not something that I can ask them: it would be inappropriate and I would just embarrass them.

This afternoon H.J. Agrawal (who is back in Bombay), his elder brother N.J. Agrawal and I plan to go visit Swami Ram Baba at his residence in Bombay. On the other hand, I don't think I should try to go see Sri Narayan Baba again.¹ He would probably tell me things that I already know and at this point I don't consider him to be crucial for my research.

By the way, the image of Sai Baba in his typical pensive mood and cross-legged position is ubiquitous in Bombay - in shops, on cars, on walls - and the number of small shrines and temples dedicated to him is impressive.

7:30 p.m. This afternoon we went to see Swami Ram Baba but unfortunately it was not possible to talk to him. Anyway, we were able to fix an appointment for tomorrow evening at 7:30, which is excellent. On the way back I stopped at Juhu beach near Marine Drive and took a nice walk along the seashore, although it was quite dirty and crowded. This evening we will have dinner at a nearby restaurant. Tomorrow I'll definitely need to change some dollars into rupees.

N.J. Agrawal, the elder brother of H.J. Agrawal, is a fervent *bhakta* of Bhagawan Shri Sathya Sai Baba of Puttaparthi (from the time of his retirement, he lives permanently at his *ashram* of Prasanthi Nilayam, at Apt. W5 A11). He spoke to me of the 'ego' of the devotees of Shirdi Sai Baba due to the fact that most of them don't recognize or are reluctant to recognize Sai Baba's present incarnation, i.e. Bhagawan Shri Sathya Sai Baba. He thinks that the reason for their refusal to acknowledge him as Sai Baba is that if they did accept him the Shirdi Sansthān and Shirdi itself as a pilgrimage place would lose much of their significance and appeal. It was quite an interesting conversation.

¹ I had tried to meet him when I first arrived in Bombay, on October 8: I visited his center in Andheri near the railway station, which was attached to a Sai Baba temple built some twenty years before, but unfortunately he was not present (at the time, Sri Narayan Baba had centers in Khar, Chembur, Thane, Panvel and also outside of Maharashtra, i.e. in Goa and New Delhi). A picture of a Śiva *liṅga* said to have been 'materialized' by Sri Narayan Baba was displayed for everyone to see.