

Oral Testimonies on Sai Baba

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

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17 Prasanthi Nilayam Friday, November 8, 1985

Interviews of the day



In Prasanthi Nilayam, Narayan Kasturi's apartment, 5:15 p.m.

Conversation with Professor Narayan Kasturi, eighty-eight years old, secretary and biographer of Bhagawan Shri Sathya Sai Baba.

On Thursday, November 7, 1985, at the end of his morning lecture, I took the courage to go up to Professor Kasturi and present myself. I explained to him that I came from Venice, Italy, that I was doing research on the life and teachings of Shirdi Sai Baba for my BA thesis, and that I had arrived at Puttaparthi directly from Shirdi where I was able to interview various people on the subject and, most importantly, a few old villagers who had known the *faqīr* in their youth. I then expressed to him my wish to interview him as part of my study. I told him that I had read his books wherein he strove to prove the continuity and veritable identity of the two Sai Babas, and that I hoped to deepen my understanding relative to the peculiar 'three-in-one' avatāric descent of Shirdi Sai Baba, Sathya Sai Baba, and the future Prema Sai Baba.

Professor Kasturi appeared pleased at my request, and said he would be delighted to discuss these issues with me. Significantly, the first word he uttered when I said "Shirdi Sai Baba" was "Kabīrpanthī", a term that identifies the follower of the spiritual path supposedly founded by Kabīr, the popular fifteenth-century poet and mystic of Benares upholder of *nirgunabhakti*, i.e. devotion to the formless divine principle. Though there is no historical evidence of any connection between the Kabīrpanth and the Shirdi *faqīr*, scattered references in the latter's hagiographic sources identify him with Kabīr. Shirdi Sai Baba himself is reported saying that he was Kabīr in one of his previous lives, that Kabīr was his creed or religion, and also that Kabīr had been his *guru*.



Figure 86 Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba in the 1940s, mimicking Sai Baba's famous posture



Figure 87 Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba in the 1940s, mimicking Sai Baba's famous posture. To his left is a portrait of Sai Baba meant to emphasize his avatāric link to the Shirdi saint

Professor Kasturi emphasized to me that Shirdi Sai Baba had to be understood in the light of the god Dattātreyā, and he added that I should read the book *Dattātreyā: The Way and the Goal*, by Sri Jaya Chamarajendra Wadiyar Bahadur. As kind a person as he was, he immediately agreed to grant me an interview even though he had not been well during the past week, suffering from severe back pain. He invited me to come see him the next day in the afternoon after *darshan*, around 5 p.m., at his small apartment - South Block 1, no. 8 - located just behind the *ashram*'s Mandir. The conversation was in English, with no need of any interpreter. Kasturi and I were alone and there was no interruption in our dialogue.

- Q Sai Ram.¹ Good afternoon, Professor Kasturi, and thank you so much for allowing me the privilege of this conversation with you. Right from the start, I would like to ask you the following question: what do you think is the most important point one needs to consider when approaching the issue of Shirdi Sai Baba's identity and, in turn, of Sathya Sai Baba's link or oneness with him?
- A The answer is Dattātreyā. From Dattātreyā, also known as Datta, a tradition of *avadhūtas* can be traced. There is a tradition of *avadhūtas* in our country.² Shirdi Sai Baba was an *avadhūta*. *Avadhūta* means one who has destroyed all desires. *Dhū* means dust, so an *avadhūta* is

¹ Lit. 'Sai as Rām'. The principal expression of greeting among *ashramites* and Sathya Sai Baba's followers. It is both a *mantra* and an epithet bestowed upon the *guru* by devotees and constantly repeated along with the visualization of his form.

² Dattātreyā and his incarnations are commonly referred to as *avadhūtas* given their ascetic excellence.



Figure 88
Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba
in the 1980s

Figure 89
Prof. Narayan Kasturi,
Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba's
biographer, leaving Prasanthi
Nilayam's lecture hall after one
of his morning talks, November 1985

one who has reduced everything to dust.³ Concerning Dattātreyā and this movement of *avadhūtas*, it should be noted that there are many Dattātreyā temples all over the country. And Swami⁴ has asked a number of people to go and reside in particular Dattātreyā temples, saying: “You go and remain there, don’t move from there”. So here you see Swami’s connection with Dattātreyā. He often remembers and emphasizes it.

Q I am here reminded of the episode you were mentioning yesterday during your lecture, when Swami was in Ooty.⁵ Could you tell me about it in more detail?

A That’s when Swami said: “I shall show you my real form”. I myself was not present there. I know that Swami had just arrived at a local rest-house after coming down the Nilgiri Hills, and a group of students who accompanied him wanted to take his photograph. They had a Polaroid camera with them. After they had taken two or three pictures of him, Swami told them: “Wait, wait, I shall give you my real form”. Swami stood straight and when the student was about to click one lady moved forward to adjust his robe, because the robe was a little too high and she wanted to put it right over his foot, but then Swami loudly said: “No, no, don’t touch me!”. And then, in the photo of the Polaroid

³ Literally *avadhūta* means ‘shaking off/removing [worldly ties]’. Kasturi appears to have had in mind *Avadhūtagītā* 8.8, where the syllable *dhū* is indicative of ‘him whose limbs are grey with dust’ (*dhūlidhūsaragātrāṇi*).

⁴ During the conversation, Kasturi always referred to his *guru* as Swami, i.e. ‘lord’, ‘master’ (Skt. *svāmin*).

⁵ A wonderful resort in the Nilgiri Hills, 2,270 meters high, in the State of Tamil Nadu. Sathya Sai Baba used to spend part of the spring and summer here.

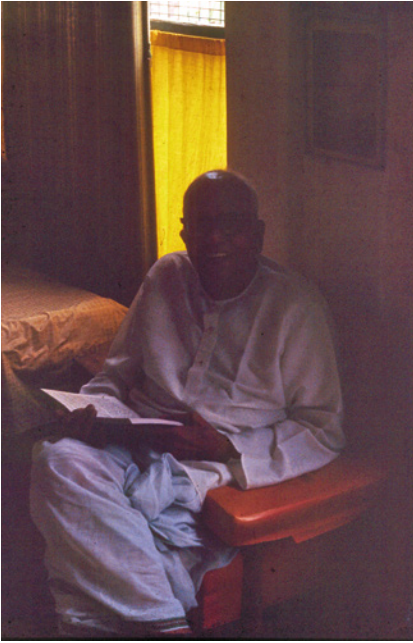


Figure 90 Prof. Narayan Kasturi in his tiny apartment in Prasanthi Nilayam, November 1985

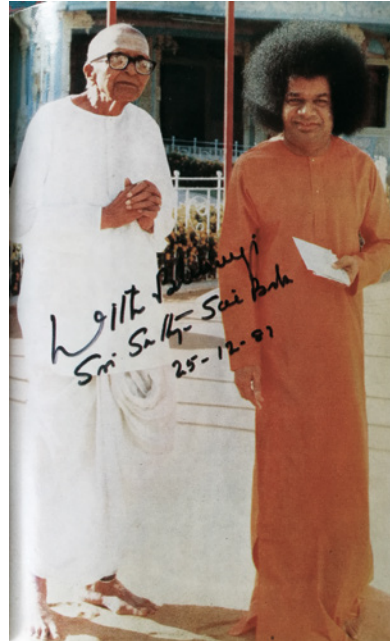


Figure 91 Prof. Narayan Kasturi with Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba in the 1980s, Prasanthi Nilayam

camera it was not Swami that came out but Dattātreyā with his three heads, with the cow behind him and the four dogs surrounding him.

Q This is the way Dattātreyā is represented in the iconography, isn't it?

A Yes, the picture came out like this. Therefore, you see how Swami is linked to the Dattātreyā tradition. And Dattātreyā is also mentioned in some of the *bhajans* that we sing here: *Om Sāi Datta*, *Om Sāi Datta*; *Datta Guru*, *Datta Guru*, *Dattātreyā Guru*; etcetera. These names are often used.

Q So what you wish to emphasise is that Sathya Sai Baba is an *avatāra* of Dattātreyā, isn't it?

A Yes, because he is all the three gods at the same time: Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva.

Q The supreme *trimūrti*?

A Yes, precisely.

Q Sathya Sai Baba has said that he belongs to the Bharadvāja *gotra* and to the Āpastamba *sūtra*. Could you explain what this actually means, what is its significance?

A Swami has indeed said that he belongs to this *sūtra* and *gotra*. This means that he was born into a family that has this *sūtra* and *gotra*. *Gotra* means that he descends by tradition from a certain seer, a certain *ṛṣi*. Every *gotra* has its own *ṛṣi*. Yet the three higher castes alone have a *gotra*, namely Brahmins, Kṣatriyas, and Vaiśyas. *Gotra* literally means cowshed; this is to say that any member of a *gotra* belongs to a particular clan. For example, I belong to the Kauṇḍinya *gotra*, the clan which originated from a *ṛṣi* called Kauṇḍinya. Therefore, also my

son will be of the Kauṇḍinya *gotra* and like that this has been going on generation after generation. It is the claim to belong to a particular *ṛṣi*'s clan. *Sūtra* is a commentary on the Scriptures written by a certain individual. So, Swami belongs to the clan of Bharadvāja and for all rituals and rites he relies upon the commentary written by Āpastamba, who was another *ṛṣi*.

Q I see, so this is the explanation...?

A Yes. Swami said he would take birth into a family which has Bharadvāja as his *ṛṣi*. You must have read about the story Swami told of Śiva and Śakti,⁶ of the dance of Śiva and Śakti.

I Yes, I have read about it in your book *Sathyam Sivam Sundaram*.

Professor Kasturi says:

In the speech Swami gave on Gurupūrṇimā day, when he publicly cured himself of a stroke, he narrated how *ṛṣi* Bharadvāja once performed a sacrifice, a *yāga*, and wanted lord Śiva to attend in it. Then Śiva and Śakti promised him that they would come. And so he has now come as Śiva-Śakti, in order to fulfil the promise. So, this explains his link to Bharadvāja and Āpastamba. Concerning Dattātreyā, please note that there are a number of people who worship him as their patron god.⁷

Q Is Dattātreyā popular throughout India?

A I sometimes speak about Swami being Dattātreyā himself. And in order to prove this identity I utilise *stotras*, hymns of praise, which concern Dattātreyā and his worship, such as those composed by Śaṅkara⁸ and other mystics and poets. There are many qualities belonging to Dattātreyā that we can find in Swami. For example, in some *stotras* it is said that he takes various forms – *bahurūpa* – that is, he appears in various forms.⁹ And Swami also appears in various forms. Sometimes, he will say: “I have been to your house and you didn’t give me anything, although I begged to you”.

I This reminds me of Shirdi Sai Baba.¹⁰

A Yes, it’s the same. I remember an episode of when I was the principal of a College about two hundred miles off from here.¹¹ When we came to Puttaparthi, Swami told my wife: “What?! I came and shouted in front of your door, crying: ‘Oh, oh’, and you said: ‘No, no! The master of the house is not at home now, so I can’t give you anything’. Then I went and shouted in front of the principal’s office – that is, my office! – but he al-

⁶ Lit. ‘energy’, ‘power’. The personification of the feminine principle, i.e. of the goddess or Devī, Śiva’s consort.

⁷ Kasturi means that Dattātreyā is the ‘chosen deity’ (*iṣṭadevatā*) of many Hindus.

⁸ Among the more than four hundred works traditionally ascribed to Śaṅkara (trad. 788-820), the founder of Advaita Vedānta, there are a few hymns in Dattātreyā’s praise such as the *Dattātreyāgurustavarāja*, the *Dattamahimākhyastotra*, and the *Dattabhujāngastotra*.

⁹ This and the following attributes of Dattātreyā are taken from the *Purāṇas*. During our conversation Kasturi held a book in his hands, possibly a *nāmastotra* anthology, and he sometimes read from it, though it was clear that he knew all these Dattātreyā features by heart. I have not been able to identify any one hymn containing all the epithets he cites.

¹⁰ The sources report cases of Shirdi Sai Baba identifying himself with anonymous beggars as well as with animals, especially dogs. These stories were mentioned to me by a few of the old villagers of Shirdi.

¹¹ The College in Davangere, in central Karnataka.

so didn't care for me". So, you see, like that Swami appears in various ways.¹² There were some people from Bombay that once came here and Swami told them: "Look! When I once came to your house begging for something you gave me an inferior type of grain, the one you keep aside to be given to beggars. You gave me that inferior type!". And when they protested and said: "No, no, we didn't do that Swami", he brought the grain out of thin air and showed it to them saying: "This is the stuff that you especially keep in a place in your house so that your children or somebody may give it to any beggar that comes near your door". So he appears in various forms, *bahurūpa*, as Dattātreyā. Then there is another line of glory, a special characteristic of Dattātreyā which you find in Swami: *tatkṣaṇāt sarvagāmin*, 'Immediately he appears in a number of places at the same time'. Appearing in a number of places at the same time is a characteristic which you will not find in the *sahasranāmastotras* of other gods, that is, in the hymns of the thousand names of other deities.

Q So this is a special feature of Dattātreyā?

A Yes. This is an attribute of Dattātreyā only. Of course, of all the gods it is said that they are *sarvavyāpin*, that is, omnipresent, as well as omnipotent, wholly blissful, and all that. But this kind of attribute, *tatkṣaṇāt sarvagāmin*, 'going to a number of places at the same time', is a unique attribute of Dattātreyā. Another characteristic which is peculiar of Dattātreyā and which we also find in Swami as well as in Shirdi Sai Baba is the following: "By your command fire comes down and storms stop". You might remember that episode in the life of Shirdi Sai Baba when flames got up very high and he, by saying, "Calm down, calm down", had them subside.¹³ And then, think of this other attribute of Dattātreyā: "Sometimes a *yogī*, sometimes a *bhogī*, sometimes a *vairāgī*", that is, *bhogī* means a person who bases his life on worldly things. At times he renounces the world as a *yogī*, at other times he binds himself to the world as a *bhogī*.¹⁴ He also appears as a *vairāgī*, that is, as a person having renounced all things. These traits may be found in Shirdi Baba. For instance, at the time of his evening procession, when he was led to the place¹⁵ where he used to sleep at alternate nights, he would wear special things and would be adorned with a crown, that is, a royal umbrella, etcetera. And also here in Puttaparthi, processions are celebrated with great pomp. So *yogī* and *bhogī*, both he is. And Swami also says that he will grant both *bhukti* and *mukti*, worldly enjoyments as well as liberation, freedom from rebirth.

I The sources report that Shirdi Sai Baba granted children to childless couples as well as worldly prosperity to many people.¹⁶

A Yes, people prayed to him in order to attain prosperity, mundane happiness. Even here, there is no barrier or separation: *bhukti* and *mukti*,

¹² Kasturi tells this story in his autobiography *Loving God: Eighty Five Years Under the Watchful Eye of the Lord*, 137-8. All his life he insisted on the oneness of Shirdi Sai Baba and Sathya Sai Baba.

¹³ See Narasimhaswami, *Sri Sai Baba's Charters and Sayings*, 145.

¹⁴ See *Avadhūtagītā* 7.9-10.

¹⁵ The *cāvaḍī*.

¹⁶ Progeny, especially male, is one of the most common graces that Indians seek from holy men.

both he will grant. And he himself has got *bhukti* and *mukti* since he is both a *yogī* and a *bhogī*... This is something really great. And then there is another attribute which is peculiar of Dattātreya and of Swami as well, namely that he is very competent in elaborating upon the meaning of the Scriptures and upon the nature of the Absolute.

- Q You mean to say that he offers commentaries to the Scriptures?
- A He gives the inner meaning of Scriptures. This is what is meant by the words *brahmapravacanavidhāne atiketuh*: ‘He is very expert in elaborating the nature and significance of the Absolute *Brahman*’. This of course is not a characteristic which is attributed to Brahmā, Viṣṇu or Śiva, since they don’t explain themselves. But this *avatāra* has come precisely in order to explain. In Shirdi also, Sai Baba used to expound the meaning of texts, as when he explained a *śloka*, a verse of the *Bhagavadgītā*.¹⁷ And by means of parables and stories, he illustrated the nature of the Supreme. And here as well, Swami does the same by explaining the highest possible knowledge, *kevalajñāna*. And actually, another important attribute of Dattātreya and of both these two, Shirdi Sai Baba and Sathya Sai Baba, is the following: *kevalavidyānidhi*, which means ‘He is the treasure-house of all facets of knowledge’.
- Q In the sense that he knows everything?
- A Yes. Architecture, music, Sanskrit and all languages, history, medicine, etcetera. He knows everything.¹⁸
- Q What about the teaching? What do you think was the most important teaching which Shirdi Sai Baba gave in his times, and which Sathya Sai Baba nowadays carries on?
- A It was the concept of unity. The unity of all creation.
- Q Was this the most important?
- A Yes. And here it is the same. Unity is divinity.
- Q Usually *avatāras* are considered to be manifestations of god Viṣṇu, like Rām and Kṛṣṇa. But Sathya Sai Baba has declared that he is also an *avatāra* of Śiva. Is this to be explained with the fact that he is a manifestation of Dattātreya?
- A Yes, yes. He is all three. That is to say, he is the source¹⁹ of all three together. Dattātreya is not only Śiva and Viṣṇu but also Brahmā: all three in one. That’s why it is important to emphasize the Dattātreya aspect of Swami. Here is another attribute of Dattātreya for you: *svakṛtanigamārthān līlānaravapus*, which means ‘He himself creates meanings for the *Vedas*’.²⁰ That is to say, he offers new meanings, new

¹⁷ Kasturi refers to Shirdi Sai Baba’s explanation of *Bhagavadgītā* 4.34 to his close devotee Nana Saheb Chandorkar; see Dabholkar, *Shri Sai Satcharita: The Life and Teachings of Shirdi Sai Baba*, 813-33 (ch. 50). On this episode, see Rigopoulos, “Silenzio, gesto, parola: i linguaggi dell’Assoluto del Sai Baba di Shirdi”, 268-83.

¹⁸ In his lifetime, Shirdi Sai Baba was also revered as a *sarvajña*, an omniscient person. The ninth and seventy-sixth of Sathya Sai Baba’s one hundred and eight names extol him as ‘He who knows everything’, *Oṃ Śrī Sarvajñāya Namaḥ*, and as ‘He whose form is knowledge’, *Oṃ Śrī Jñānasvarūpāya Namaḥ*.

¹⁹ The idea is that he is *Brahman*, the impersonal Absolute, which manifests itself in the three forms of the *trimūrti*: Brahmā the creator, Viṣṇu the preserver, and Śiva the destroyer.

²⁰ Just when Kasturi was saying these words, the evening *bhajan* session started inside the Mandir with the chanting of the *Oṃ*. The first song, as per tradition in Gaṇeśa’s praise, was *Lambodara Gaṇanātha Gajānana* (‘Pot-bellied, lord of the *gaṇas*, elephant-faced’). Up until the end of our conversation, we could hear the melodious singing of *bhajans* in the background.

interpretations of the *Vedas* for the modern man, and this is precisely what Swami does. As a matter of fact, Swami has explained the reason why he has incarnated, both in his discourses and in his songs. And the reason he has given is of course the traditional one: morality has gone down and there is the need to revive it;²¹ people have lost love and are sunk in hatred, etcetera. So, in order to save them, he incarnates himself. Indeed, good men are not able to survive in an atmosphere of wickedness and so, in order to protect them, he comes down on earth. And then there is one other reason given for his incarnation, which is not found in any other *avatāra* with the exception of Dattātreyā. And this is to reveal the true significance of the Scriptures: this is what Swami has said. And this is precisely a special qualification of Dattātreyā as well as of Shirdi Sai Baba.²² Another characteristic of Dattātreyā which you find in Swami is the following: “One may be poor, may be a wise or a fool, he may even be stone-hearted, but nonetheless all are equally dear to him”.²³ And this is true here as well as everywhere. One more attribute of Dattātreyā which you see operating in Swami is remarkable: “He is able to transform people through gems, *maṇi*, as well as through *mantras*”. This is a very important feature. That is to say, through the gift of precious gems or jewels – such as this ring I’m wearing and that Swami gave to me – as well as by giving *mantras* for recitation he is able to save people, to raise them up.²⁴ It is also said that he affects the transformation of people through superhuman powers, *aiśvaryas*, and through various blessings and boons. But *maṇi* is especially mentioned as one of Dattātreyā’s gifts.

- I I know that Shirdi Sai Baba often used to give money to his devotees.
 A Yes [laughing]. But please note that here I’m not referring to the English word ‘money’ but to the Sanskrit word *maṇi*, ‘gem’.
 Q Yes, of course. In any case, by *maṇi* you mean all sorts of valuable stones, of precious gifts, don’t you?
 A Yes, gifts like this one you can see here [he shows it to me].
 Q Is this a rosary, a *japamālā*?
 A No, no, this is not a *japamālā*. It is a garland of nine precious stones, a *navaratnamālā*.
 Q Ah, it’s really marvellous! I would like to ask you one other question. Apparently, Shirdi Sai Baba spoke of Kabīr as being his *guru* and even claimed to have been Kabīr in one of his previous births. It is reported that when he was interrogated by a magistrate who asked him what his creed or religion was, he answered “Kabīr”.²⁵ Now, Kabīr was the fa-

21 When Kasturi says ‘morality’ he has in mind the notion of *dharma* and the *avatāra* theory of *Bhagavadgītā* 4.7-8.

22 Besides his exegesis of *Bhagavadgītā* 4.34, the sources report that through his teachings Shirdi Sai Baba inspired his devotee Das Ganu to write commentaries on the *Amṛtānubhava* of Jñāndev and the *Īśā Upaniṣad*; see Dabholkar, *Shri Sai Satcharita: The Life and Teachings of Shirdi Sai Baba*, 324-33 (ch. 20, vv. 12-105).

23 The tenth name of Sathya Sai Baba’s one hundred and eight names extols him as ‘He who is dear to all’, *Oṃ Śrī Sarvajanapriyāya Namaḥ*. Likewise, the sixty-seventh and sixty-eighth names extol him as ‘The dear one’ and ‘He who is dear to his devotees’, *Oṃ Śrī Priyāya Namaḥ* and *Oṃ Śrī Bhaktapriyāya Namaḥ* respectively.

24 It should be noted, however, that Shirdi Sai Baba never uttered any *mantra* in the ears of his devotees; see Narasimhaswami, *Sri Sai Baba’s Charters and Sayings*, 43.

25 See Narasimhaswami, *Devotees’ Experiences of Sri Sai Baba*, 128-9.

mous fifteenth century poet-saint of Benares, the vanquisher of caste and religious divisions in the name of *nirgunabhakti*, a devotion devoid of attributes. Why do you think Shirdi Sai Baba said so? What is in your opinion the significance of this link?

A Kabir was also part of the Dattatreya group. For instance, you must have heard of Akkalkot Maharaj²⁶ and of Manikprabhu²⁷; these were all *avadhūtas* who had some kind of inner contact with other spiritual beings.²⁸

Q Yes, I have heard about them as well as of other *avadhūtas* such as Gajanan Maharaj from Shegaon, in the Vidarbha region of Maharashtra. With all of them Shirdi Sai Baba was supposedly in spiritual contact. Do you mean to say that they are all linked to Dattatreya?

A Yes, precisely.

Q Were you in some way connected to Meher Baba before coming to Sathya Sai Baba? I have read in your preface to the first volume of *Sathyam Sivam Sundaram* that you came in contact with him.

A Not much really. I just met him once, that's all. This happened when he was staying near Bangalore, in a big establishment. But I did not have any particular contacts with him.

Q What did you think of him?

A Well, I figured that he was dodging his mission. He kept silence for many years and the idea was that one day, when he would begin to speak, the whole world would change. But nothing ever happened. Have you ever seen this? [he hands me the pages of a magazine article]. It is an interview which Swami gave to Mister R.K. Karanjia, a Bombay journalist of the magazine *Blitz*. He was a communist. He had read about Swami and thought he would verify for himself who he really was, so he came down here to Puttaparthi. He asked: "Swamiji, we would like to know something about your triple incarnation, past, present and future; that is, from Shirdi Sai Baba to Sathya Sai Baba up to the future Prema Sai Baba, as according to your prophecy". Swami replied: "First of all, you must grasp the complete oneness of the three incarnations with those of the past, like Rām and Kṛṣṇa. This is a difficult task: if people cannot understand the present, how can they comprehend the past? Every incarnation is full and complete in relation to the time, the environment, and the task. There is no distinction between the ways and the various appearances of God, such as Rām, Kṛṣṇa or Sai. Rām came to feed the root of truth". Then Mister Karanjia asked: "By the present *avatāra* you mean Sai Baba?". And Swami replied: "Yes, I incarnate from age to age". Karanjia further inquired: "But sceptics wonder why God should assume a human form. And why this task had to be divided into the three separate incarnations of Shirdi, Sathya and Prema Sai Baba". Swami answered: "The previous *avatāra*, Shirdi Sai Baba, laid the basis for secular integration and gave mankind the message that duty, that is, work, is God".

²⁶ Famous for his miraculous powers and 'childlike' (*bala*) and 'mad' (*unmatta*) aspects, the saint of Akkalkot, also known as Swami Samarth, died in 1878.

²⁷ An older contemporary of Akkalkot Maharaj, Manikprabhu (1817-1865) was the saint of Maniknagar near Gulbarga.

²⁸ See Dabholkar, *Shri Sai Satcharita: The Life and Teachings of Shirdi Sai Baba*, 338 (ch. 21, vv. 13-17).

These lines that I have read to you are just an excerpt taken from this long interview. It is very insightful and if you want you can take it with you and return it to me in three or four days.

- I Thanks a lot, Professor Kasturi, but I already have a copy of this interview.

Professor Kasturi says:

Swami likes to say that in the previous *avatāra* everything was cooked. Now, in this present *avatāra*, he has come to serve what was cooked. “That is why I have got to do it with so much love”, Swami says. Because, you see, when a mother is busy cooking she becomes very angry if somebody interrupts her: therefore, the time of Shirdi Sai Baba was the cooking stage, whereas this is the serving stage. Moreover, Swami tells us: “The mission of the present *avatāra* is to make everybody realize that the same God or divinity resides in everyone. People should respect, love and help each other irrespective of color and creed. Thus all work can become an act of worship. Finally, the Prema Sai incarnation²⁹ shall promote the gospel that not only God resides in everybody, but that everybody himself is God. That will be the final wisdom which will enable every man and woman to rise to be God. Thus these three *avatāras* carry the triple message of work, worship, and wisdom”.

Q So this is the essential message that Swami conveyed to Mister Karanjia?

A Yes, to Karanjia and to all.

Q In the literature on Shirdi Sai Baba, one comes across the figures of an anonymous *faqīr* and of the enigmatic Venkusha, who are presented as being the foster father and the *guru* of young Sai Baba respectively. By reading your books, I’ve learned what Sathya Sai Baba has said about Shirdi Sai Baba’s birth and childhood. But has he ever given more details about his foster family and especially Venkusha?

A No, but in Swami’s life there is one Venkavadhuta. He didn’t belong to Swami’s family, mind you. He was a wandering ascetic, an *avadhūta*, and once, while roaming about, he came to these areas. He passed away about eighty miles from here, in the state of Karnataka. Swami’s grandfather, Kondama Raju, followed him. And this Venkavadhuta promised him that God would be born in his family, that God would take *avatāra* in his family. He prophesized and promised this to him. And in the place in which he is now buried - you can go there and see his tomb if you are interested³⁰ - local people believe that he, Venkavadhuta, was none other than Venkusha.

I I see, so this would be the connection, the link between Shirdi Sai Baba and Sathya Sai Baba...

A Yes. The idea is that Venkusha, after his sojourn in Maharashtra, wandered about and got Swami’s grandfather as one of his disciples or, let us say, admirers. Swami’s grandfather was staying and going with him for some time. Then, when Venkusha regained his old habits and

²⁹ Less than two years before my conversation with Prof. Kasturi, Sathya Sai Baba announced the birth of Prema Sai Baba’s father.

³⁰ Unfortunately, at the time I did not have the opportunity to visit the Venkavadhuta temple.

manners of wandering, he gave him up.³¹ I have written about him in my book *Easwaramma*: in it you will find out more information about Venkavadhuta and Venkusha.

- I Wonderful, thank you. In your books I have read that Sathya Sai Baba's sister and even his parents were granted visions of Shirdi Sai Baba and of various places in Shirdi. This would have taken place when Sathya was very young, precisely in order to confirm his connection, his identity with Shirdi Sai Baba.
- A Yes, yes. But it was Swami's mother, not the sister. The sister got a picture from Swami; she's got it even now! It is folded, since it was found behind or underneath a bag of *jowar*.³² Besides the mother, there was also another lady who was granted visions by Swami, inside his own house. Swami told her: "Come, and I will show you Shirdi". And then she could actually see Shirdi Sai Baba sitting on his rock!
- Q Along the years several devotees of Shirdi Sai Baba, who knew him in the flesh, have come here to worship Sathya Sai Baba, recognizing his identity with him. For instance, I'm reminded of the *rānī*³³ of Chincholi. By the way, is she still alive?
- A No, she passed away. The only one who was in Shirdi in Sai Baba's times and is still alive, residing in Puttaparthi, is an old lady called Peddabottu.³⁴
- Q Is she the one who is known as Shirdi Ma?
- A Yes, Shirdi Ma. You should go visit her at her house. She has written a book about her experiences with Shirdi Sai Baba and you might ask her a copy. It is written in Telugu, however. If you go see her and say "Shirdi Sai Baba" to her, she will understand that you want information on him and she might respond to you.³⁵
- Q But she speaks only Telugu, doesn't she?
- A Yes [laughing], she speaks only Telugu.
- Q In conclusion, is there anything you would like to add about Dattātreyā, Shirdi Sai Baba or Sathya Sai Baba which you feel is important?
- A No, nothing else. I have told you all the important points.
- I Dear Professor Kasturi, thank you so much for sharing all this information and precious memories. It has been an honor to have this opportunity to talk to you. Sai Ram.
- A Sai Ram.

31 Not in the sense that he wasn't anymore devoted to him. Kasturi means that when Venkavadhuta left the area and started roaming again, Kondama Raju did not follow him in his wanderings.

32 Sathya Sai Baba's sister Venkamma was very close to him.

33 Lit. 'queen'.

34 Lit. 'big dot'. The *guru* nicknamed her Peddabottu because of the impressive *kumkum* dot she used to wear on her forehead. Also known as Shirdi Ma, her real name was Gali Sharada Devi (1888-1986). She met Sathya Sai Baba for the first time in Uravakonda in 1940 and settled permanently in Prasanthi Nilayam in 1958. Back in 1917, during her last visit to Shirdi, Sai Baba would have told her that he would be reborn in Andhra Pradesh and that she would stay with him forever.

35 In November 1985 Shirdi Ma, aged ninety-seven, was ill and confined to her bed. Though Prof. Kasturi was so kind as to propose to accompany me to her house, I didn't have the chance to see her. She passed away the following year, on Christmas day of 1986. The title of her Telugu book is *Sweeya Charithra* and was issued in Prasanthi Nilayam in 1984. In 2003, it was translated into English by Sathya Sai Shree Lakshmi and titled *Autobiography*.

Our conversation lasted about an hour, and we could still hear the *bhajans* being sung in the Mandir. Professor Kasturi accompanied me to the door and we said goodbye. I remember asking for his blessings and he simply smiled. That was the last time I saw him. Indeed, this interview was one of Professor Kasturi's last testimonies before his death, which occurred on August 14, 1987, after a brief illness.

While at the *ashram* I carried with me in a small cellophane package the eight mini-cassettes with all the interviews I had collected in Shirdi, Sakuri, Bombay, and Prasanthi Nilayam - including this one with Professor Kasturi - hoping that Bhagawan Shri Sathya Sai Baba might bless them during *darshan*. On Thursday afternoon of November 14, during *bhajans*, I was sitting in first line in front of the Mandir and it so happened that the *guru* came out of his room for one more *darshan*. He walked straight toward me and graciously blessed me and my precious envelope. On this occasion he played a *lilā*, i.e. a trick. He repeatedly asked me: "What is this?", and when I replied: "Interviews with old devotees of Shirdi", he remained silent for a few moments and slapped me on my left shoulder. Unexpectedly, he then took the package from my hand and asked: "For me?", and while saying so he turned and started moving away. I had not anticipated that he could do this and for a second - a very long second! - my heart sank and I thought I had lost my invaluable 'treasure'. Terrified at the idea of losing the tapes, I loudly replied: "No, no Swami, for a blessing!". He then stepped back and, with a benign smile, returned the package to me with perfect nonchalance. It was a real lesson in detachment and a most powerful exchange which I will never forget.