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Oral Testimonies on Sai Baba

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

Antonio Rigopoulos

Oral Testimonies on Sai Baba

Maestri, testi e fonti d'Oriente
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Giuliano Boccali

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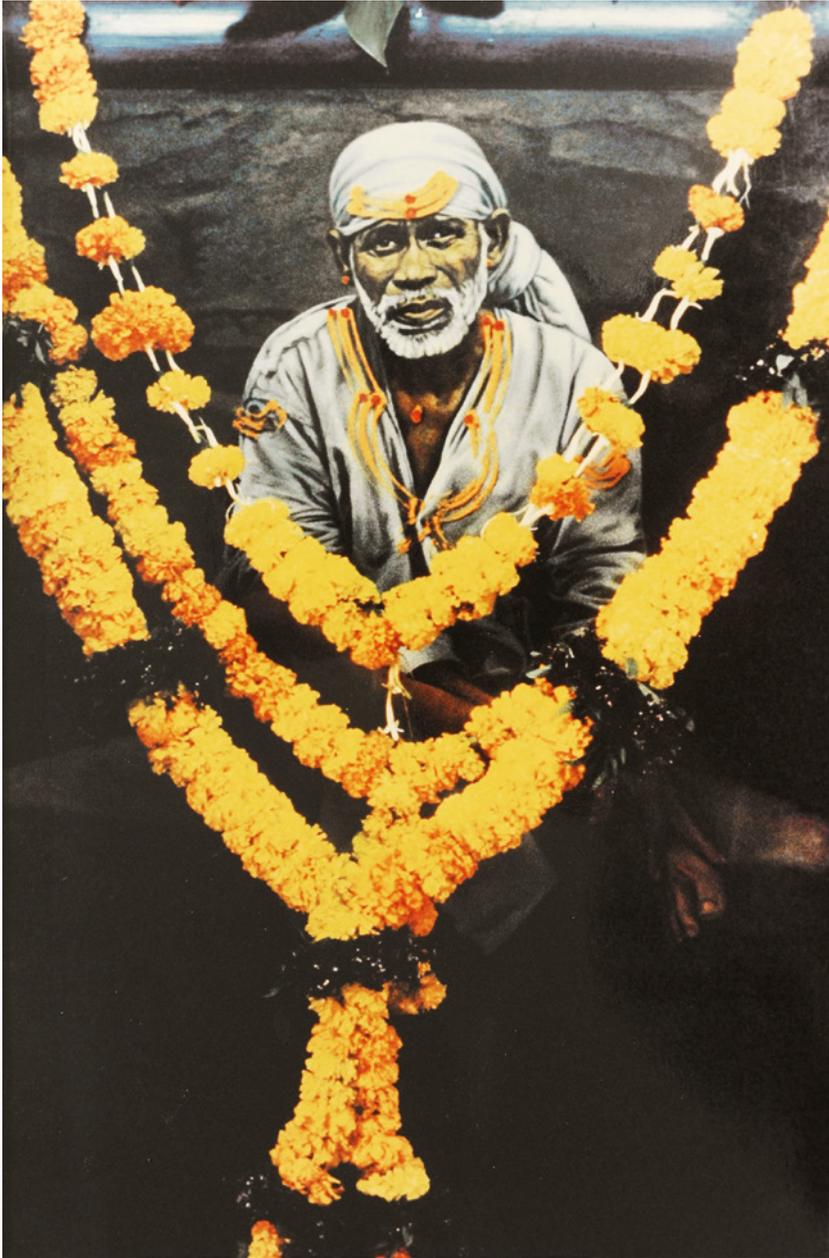
As Gathered During a Field Research
in Shirdi and Other Locales
in October-November 1985

Antonio Rigopoulos

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Sai Baba seated on a stone. This famous oil painting displayed in the mosque of Shirdi is based on an original black-and-white photograph. The owner of the painting, D.D. Neroy of Bombay, gave it to his *guru* Kammu Baba who later gave it to the Shirdi Sansthān. To Sai Baba devotees, this is the most familiar image of the saint

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Oral Testimonies on Sai Baba

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in October-November 1985

Antonio Rigopoulos

Abstract

The interviews and original audio recordings 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, Italy. 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.

Keywords Sai Baba. Shirdi. Oral testimonies.

Oral Testimonies on Sai Baba

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Antonio Rigopoulos

Acknowledgments

My special thanks go to Prof. Franco Michelini Tocci of the Ca' Foscari University of Venice and Prof. Mario Piantelli of the University of Turin, who, with their advice and encouragement, patiently guided my research. Without their inspiration and constant support this work could have never been accomplished.

It gives me great pleasure to thank all those who helped me during my sojourn and field research in India, in Autumn 1985. In general, to the Shirdi and Puttaparthi Sansthāns for their hospitality and cooperative spirit, and to all Sai Baba devotees, who have proved so kind, generous, and supportive. In particular, I wish to thank the Agrawal family and especially H.J. Agrawal and Murlidhar Agrawal for offering me hospitality in their homes in Bombay and Khamgaon, providing me with transportation and introducing me to several *ashrams* and holy men and women.

I owe a debt of gratitude to my guide and interpreter during my permanence in Shirdi, Swami Shekhar Rao. Indeed an ascetic, he patiently and earnestly accompanied me for two weeks around the village as well as to Sakuri, introducing me to several old devotees of Sai Baba.

Thanks are also due to Shri S.N. Tipnis, secretary and administrator of the Śrī Upāsni Kanyākumāri Sthān, who introduced me to Sati Godavari Mata of whose blessings I am unworthy of, and to Shri Baldev Y. Girme and his wife Aruna of Kopargaon. The latter couple helped me to meet and interview various people in Shirdi and Sakuri, and made possible my encounter with the venerable Swami Ram Baba in Bombay.

Finally, my thoughts turn with deep reverence to Bhagawan Shri Sathya Sai Baba, who, through his touch, blessed the package containing all my tapes, casting a benign glance upon me.

In Venice, Italy, my gratitude goes to Dr. Mahesh Jaiswal, Hindī lecturer at Ca' Foscari University, who listened to all my tapes and found the translations from Marāṭhī into English to be reasonably accurate, and to my dear mother Sally Ann Rigopoulos, who read, reread, and corrected my English, always giving useful suggestions along the way. I am also grateful to my good friend Paolo Schiavon, who helped me transfer all the original audio tapes to CD.

Heart-felt thanks go to my beloved wife Emanuela Botta, who always inspired me along the way, and to our dear children Sofia and Giovanni, who must have wondered precisely what it was that kept me busy in my studio for so many hours every day.

Last but not least, I am grateful to Massimiliano Vianello of Edizioni Ca' Foscari for his encouragement and utmost care in the preparation of this book along with its audio visual materials.

Antonio Rigopoulos
Venice, Italy
November 2020

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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

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1 Shirdi

Tuesday, October 15, 1985

Excerpts From My Diary

11:45 p.m. Early this morning I said goodbye to Mr. H.J. Agrawal¹ thanking him for his wonderful hospitality and around 7:20 a.m. I left Khamgaon² by car, together with Mr. Hanu and the Agrawals' driver. The weather was fine. On the way we made various stops, took some time to visit the beautiful sites of Ajanta and Ellora, and in the evening, in a pitch-dark countryside, we shortly halted at a farmer's house whose wife kindly served us something to eat. They were really nice to us and we talked a little about Sai Baba and my intended research.

After an adventurous trip through quite difficult, bumpy roads we finally arrived in Shirdi around 11 p.m. Though Mr. Agrawal had told me that it would take 7 hours to reach Shirdi from Khamgaon by car, in fact it took us

1 I first met H.J. Agrawal's elder brother, N.J. Agrawal, and other members of his family when, in the early 1980s, they travelled to Italy on a business trip to the town of Alba in the North-Western region of Piedmont, 62 km away from Turin. At the time, the father-in-law of my sister Diane, engineer Luigi Laschet, was the CEO of the Ferrero chocolate company the headquarters of which was and still is located in Alba, and the Agrawals supplied Ferrero with the vegetable oil they used to produce *Nutella*, the famous brand of sweetened hazelnut cocoa spread. The Agrawals used to visit the Ferrero factory in Alba at least once a year and it was through Mr. Laschet that I first came in contact with them. We became friends and once they even came to visit me and my family in Venice.

2 Khamgaon is a city in the Buldhana District of Maharashtra. I had arrived in Bombay with a flight from Venice on Monday, October 7, 1985, and for the next three days I was a guest at the house of Murlidhar Agrawal, son of H.J. Agrawal, located in the residential area of Marine Drive (Vishnu Mahal, Flat Number 1, Ground Floor, Churchgate 'D' Road). On October 10, around 7 p.m., I left Bombay by train from Victoria Station and reached Khamgaon in the early morning of October 11. Here I was a guest of Mr. H.J. Agrawal at his factory residence. In Khamgaon, the Agrawal family owned and still owns the Hanuman Vitamin Foods Ltd. Company, an edible oil refinery plant and solvent extraction, located in Akola Road. Since 1983, the Company's Director has been Murlidhar Agrawal.



Figure 1 I and H.J. Agrawal at the *ashram* of Panchlegaonkar Maharaj in Khamgaon

Figure 2 On the road toward Shirdi with H.J. Agrawal's driver (left) and Hanu (right)



Figure 3 The Godavari River

around 16 hours altogether! I am totally exhausted and given accommodation by a clerk of the Shirdi Organization, the Sansthān, in a small room of a lodging for pilgrims located near the main temple of the Samādhi Mandir, where Sai Baba's tomb is venerated. Grateful for having reached Sai Baba's abode safely on the very day of the saint's demise (October 15, 1918) I go to bed around midnight.³

Among other things, during my stay in Khamgaon I visited the *ashram* and school of Pandhe Gurujī, eighty-seven years old, a local teacher and a fine sculpture who was a staunch follower of M.K. Gandhi's ideals of truth and nonviolence and also of his *khādī* practice, i.e. the domestic production of hand-spun cloth as a means to achieve *swadeshi* or independence (Gandhi passed through Khamgaon at least twice during his *satyāgraha* campaigns and apparently Pandhe Gurujī knew him well). I also visited the small *ashram* dedicated to Dattātreya of Panchlegaonkar Maharaj, believed to exercise perfect control over snakes through his powerful *mantras* (their poison is extracted for preparing āyurvedic medicines) and who actually met Sai Baba when he was about ten years old. He also met Bhagawan Shri Sathya Sai Baba two or three times and had personal interviews with him at Puttaparthi. Unfortunately Panchlegaonkar Maharaj, who was around eighty-eight years old, was in Nagpur at the time and thus I couldn't talk to him. At his *ashram* I was garlanded with cobras since the *guru's* inmates insisted that it would be auspicious for my research trip. There were plenty of snakes around Khamgaon: on the day of my arrival a cobra was found near my bungalow and for safety reasons a mongoose was placed in my room during the night.

While I was there I also visited the big and well-kept *ashram* of Gajanan Maharaj (d. 1910), which is located in Shegaon, only 15 km away from Khamgaon. The cleanliness of the place with its bright orange walls and the intense devotion of the numerous *bhaktas* made a strong impression on me. The *śaiva* ascetic Gajanan Maharaj is very popular in the area and in the whole of the Vidarbha region, being venerated as a great saint and miracle-worker. There seems to have been a connection between Gajanan Maharaj and Sai Baba. The day he passed away in Shegaon, Sai Baba, in Shirdi, is said to have exclaimed: "My Gajanan is gone".

³ For an introduction to the saint of Shirdi, see Rigopoulos, "Shirdi Sai Baba", in *Brill's Encyclopedia of Hinduism*, 5: 641-50.

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2 Shirdi

Wednesday, October 16, 1985

Excerpts From My Diary

12:50 p.m. I am lodged in room 182 of the Sansthān. It is austere: an empty space with an iron bed, but I'm lucky to have a single room which I can lock. I'll have to get a mattress somewhere in the village. On Friday, however, I'm told I'll have to vacate it and find another accommodation. I am close to the library which is a good thing: the man in charge of it seems nice and it will be useful for searching out books and as a quiet place for studying and writing. Thanks to Mr. Hanu and the Sansthān I found a local guide, a fine man who seems efficient and reliable. His name is Shekhar Rao and here everyone calls him 'Swami', Swami Shekhar Rao. He leads the life of an ascetic and has no possessions. He has been living here in Shirdi for the last seven years and knows everyone in the village. His English is sufficiently good and he will be my guide and interpreter throughout my stay; we will meet here at my room at 5 p.m.

It looks like there are four old villagers who knew Sai Baba and who are still alive: the son of Shyama Deshpande, the son of Mhalsapati, and two more. We will visit them and will also visit the nearby village of Sakuri.¹ This morning Hanu and the driver left and now I am by myself. The weather is fine, not too hot. I went to see the *masjid*, i.e. the mosque, the Samādhi Mandir, the *nīm* tree where the Gurusthān or 'place of the *guru*' is located, and other places of interest.² There are lots of visitors and pilgrims and many more are expected for the imminent festival of Dasara. Significantly, they are all Indians and it looks like I am the only Westerner around. Everything looks well-preserved here in Shirdi.

¹ Also spelt Sakori, a hamlet only 5.7 km away from Shirdi.

² For a useful guide to the Gurusthān and the various places in Shirdi, see Williams, *Experiencing Sai Baba's Shirdi: A Guide*.



Figure 4 I with my guide and main interpreter Swami Shekhar Rao and a village boy

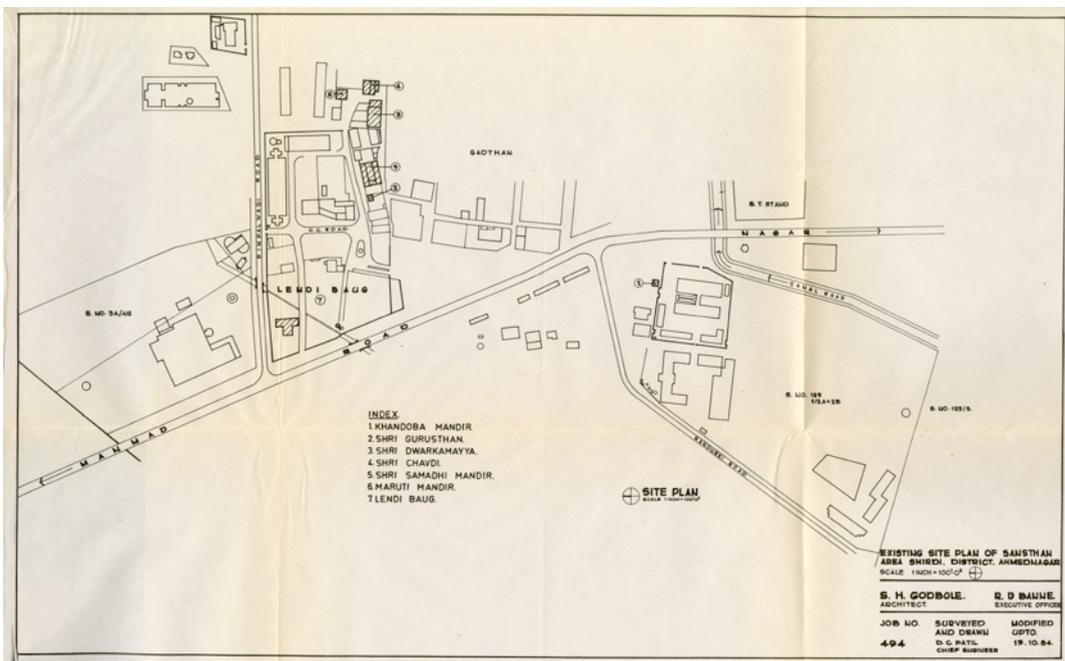
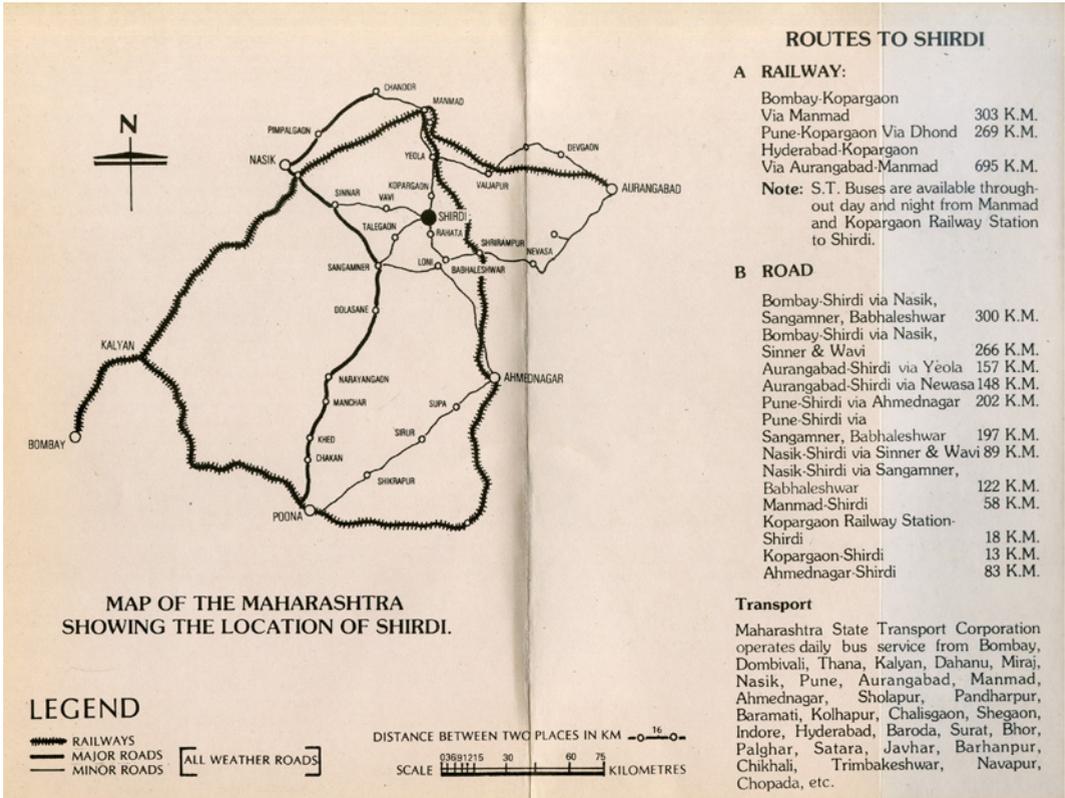


Figure 5 Map of Maharashtra showing the location of Shirdi

Figure 6 Map of the village of Shirdi

**THE SCHEDULE OF DAILY PROGRAMME AT SHIRDI
IS AS FOLLOWS.**

Programme:	Time
1) Kakad Aarti	5-15 A.M.
2) Holy Bath of Shri Sai Baba	6-00 A.M.
3) Abhishek and Worship	7-30 A.M.
	to
	11-00 A.M.
4) Satyanarayana Pooja	9-00 A.M.
5) Noon Aarti	12-00 Noon.
6) Pravachan or Puran (Reading of Sai Satcharitra)	4-00 P.M.
7) Dhuparati	Sunset.
8) Bhajan, Keertan, Vocal Music etc.	9-00 P.M.
	to
	10-00 P.M.
9) Shejarati	10-00 P.M.

Offering of garlands, prasad or any other article should be done by the devotees after 7-00 A.M. and before Shejarati.

Abhishek Coupon	0-50 per head	} In limited number only.
Satyanarayana	Rs. 10.00 per couple	

If any devotee intends to give any programme in the Samadhi Mandir or wants to take any Photographs, he should contact the Temple-in-charge in advance and obtain the necessary permission.

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Figure 7 The daily schedule at Shirdi in 1985

After yesterday's long journey this morning I took it easy, rested a while, and also had a good meal. Must be very careful with the water: I either drink bottled water (*Bisleri*) or coconut water which is good and safe. Unfortunately, due to the crowds there are lots of noises, even at night. There is a continuous flow of pilgrims and devotees coming from all over India who bring their offerings (flowers, garlands, food, etcetera) to Sai Baba's tomb or *samādhi*.

5:30 p.m. Met with Swami Shekhar Rao and made a tentative schedule with him. I shall first of all interview the four old villagers who knew Sai Baba. We will go visit them in their houses, at least one per day, starting with the son of Shyama Deshpande and the son of Mhalsapati. On the fifth day we shall go visit Sakuri. On subsequent days, I shall interview other people who live here and are old devotees of Sai Baba, though they never met him in person. I will try to do all interviews in the morning and to do research work at the library in the afternoon. For reasons of safety, Swami Shekhar Rao recommends me to lock the door of my room at all times. Apparently there are thieves around, especially at this time of the year, there being all these crowds. Now the people of the Sansthān say that I may be allowed to stay in this room until Sunday. We will see.

3 **Shirdi-Sakuri-Shirdi** **Thursday, October 17, 1985**

Excerpts From My Diary

10:15 a.m. The weather is fine. This morning I had the privilege of interviewing Uddhao, the son of the famous Madhavrao Deshpande alias Shyama, who was twelve years old when Sai Baba died or, as devotees say, took *samādhi*.¹ It was a wonderful meeting. I immediately realized that asking broad, open-ended questions is the best way to go. Although I had a list of questions in my mind² I just dropped it and let Uddhao say what he thought was important. He and his wife were very hospitable and we had a relaxed conversation while sipping a good cup of tea.

In their house I also met a passing visitor, Mr. Baldev Y. Girme of Kopargaon who, together with his wife Aruna and their eight-year-old son Pawan, had come to pay respects to Uddhao. Mr. Girme is a young man in his thirties who appears to be quite knowledgeable and he and his wife graciously acted as my interpreters, their English being fluent.³ Mr. Girme gave me the address in Bombay of a very old *guru* whose name is Swami Ram Baba, who is believed to be one hundred and thirty-eight years of age (!). Apparently he is still in good shape, speaks good English, and met Sai Baba in the old days. According to Mr. Girme, Swami Ram Baba can give me all possi-

1 The idea is that saints never die. They are thought to abide in yogic *samādhi*, i.e. in a state of absorbed concentration, of union with the Absolute *Brahman*.

2 The ones I had meticulously written down in preparation for my field research.

3 I am pleased to report that in August 2019, after thirty-four years, I was able to get in touch with Baldev Girme thanks to my dear friend Robin Agarwal who succeeded in tracing his whereabouts through A.R. Junnarkar: we had a nice conversation over the phone and I am now linked with him and his son Pawan through the email and WhatsApp. Unfortunately Aruna, Baldev Girme's wife, passed away many years ago. She was a staunch Sai Baba devotee who in her lifetime completed fifty-three readings of the holy *Shri Sai Satcharita* while in Shirdi. Nowadays Baldev Girme, who is seventy-two years old, lives in Pune.



Figure 8 The entrance to the masjid, which Sai Baba at some point renamed Dvārakāmā



Figure 9 The perpetual fire of the *dhūni* inside the masjid. The sacred ash or *udī* supplied to devotees is obtained from this *dhūni*

Figure 10 The stone on which Sai Baba used to sit inside the masjid

Figure 11 The hearth where Sai Baba used to cook inside the masjid

ble, first-hand information on Sai Baba and is in the whole of India the most qualified person to offer precise and detailed news on Sai Baba's life. I will certainly do my best to see him once I return to Bombay.

Baldev Girme and his kind wife have proposed to accompany me and Swami Shekhar Rao to Sakuri to visit Sati Godavari Mataji's *ashram*, since they are now celebrating some special *yajñas*⁴ there. I have gladly accepted. My impression is that this young couple of Kopargaon has great respect for me and my work and that they will further help me in my research. Significantly, one of the first things that Mr. Girme asked me – like several other Indians before him – is if I am married. When I answered “no”, he seemed disappointed. This typical question and reaction always puts me in an awkward position, as if I should in some way excuse myself for not being (yet!) married. He then insisted that I should get married soon and come back to India with my wife and children.

Mr. Girme told me that he also doesn't like all the noise that there is in Shirdi since it spoils its spiritual atmosphere. He says he comes here especially to silently meditate at the *masjid*, where Sai Baba's famous portrait is, and at the *cāvaḍī*,⁵ places which he believes are filled with spiritual vibrations. I also noted that the spiritual atmosphere at the *masjid* is stronger than at the Samādhi Mandir. At the mosque and at the *cāvaḍī* one feels a presence. I must return there.

Uddhao is a wonderful man. He has worked for forty years for the Sansthān totally for free, in obedience to his father's last wish. In his house he treasures various items which Sai Baba gave to Shyama among which is a statue of Gaṇapati which he daily worships with the chanting of *mantras*, the burning of incense sticks, etcetera. What struck me is that at one point of our conversation Uddhao said that for him Sai Baba is *Sākṣāt Bhagavān*, 'God in bodily form'. He underlined that he feels his presence constantly, at all times.

12 p.m. Reached Sakuri's *ashram* which is just few miles away from Shirdi around 11:15. It is a very tranquil and clean place. The difference with Shirdi is striking: whereas Shirdi is a noisy pilgrimage centre bustling with people, with long lines for entering inside the Samādhi Mandir, here there is a great silence and just few people around. The main building and the small temples (such as the Dattātreyā temple) are well-kept. In particular, the cage or *pinjra* in which Upasni Maharaj secluded himself for quite a long time made a strong impression on me.

I briefly interviewed an old man who lives here, Mr. Gorawke, who explained to me the significance and functioning of the sacrifices, the *yajñas*. The nuns or *kanyās* are performing one of these solemn sacrifices right now. Had the *darshan*⁶ of Sati Godavari Mataji.⁷ She gives me the impression of being an austere, self-denying woman, i.e. not easily approachable and somewhat intimidating. Perhaps this afternoon I will get a chance to talk to her. This afternoon I should be able to meet with a man of the local Sansthān who I am told wrote his thesis on Upasni Maharaj.

4 Sacrifices. A generic term referring to Vedic rituals.

5 A rural assembly hall.

6 'Looking at', 'viewing'. The transformative experience of seeing a holy person or a deity and being seen by him/her.

7 Born in 1914, she was seventy-one years old at the time. She passed away in 1990.

6 p.m. Had quite a long conversation with Shri S.N. Tipnis, who is the secretary and administrator of the Śrī Upāsni Kanyākumārī Sthān, which however I could not tape. He has been an inmate of the Sakuri *ashram* for the past forty years and is a bright intellectual who holds an MA and a PhD from the Deccan College Post-Graduate and Research Institute of Pune. He insisted with me on the need for a critical and rational study of Sai Baba's life and teachings, based upon reliable sources. He advised me to get detailed information from the Sai Baba Sansthān on the spread of Sai Baba's cult, both in India and throughout the world. He emphasized how Upasni Maharaj was Sai Baba's closest disciple. He said that Sai Baba's 'current' and power was lavished upon him, and subsequently Upasni Maharaj transmitted it to Sati Godavari Mataji: this was the line of succession, the *guruparamparā*.

He warned that an equally careful study should be made of Upasni Maharaj and Sati Godavari Mataji. He defined her as a great saint who is one with God, the heir of Upasni Maharaj as per the latter's explicit declaration and appointment. Shri S.N. Tipnis narrated to me episodes of Sati Godavari Mataji's purported power or *śakti*: a story involving a German fellow named Peter and another one of a devotee of Bhagawan Shri Sathya Sai Baba who had been directed by the latter to find solace at Sati Godavari Mataji's feet. Moreover he told me that Swami Muktananda,⁸ before attaining enlightenment, stayed for about six months here in Sakuri at the Dattātreya temple. Apparently, he felt drawn to this place.

Had a long *darshan* of Sati Godavari Mataji. It was a beautiful experience, which lasted more than half an hour. There were lots of *mantra* recitations to Viṣṇu-Kṛṣṇa during a Kṛṣṇa *pūjā* that was celebrated in public by Sati Godavari Mataji herself, which is a rare occurrence. Could not have an interview with her, however, she being too busy with the *yajña* performance. I certainly plan to come back here some other day: the place is highly spiritual, silent and isolated. In this way I'll be able to get some more books on Upasni Maharaj and perhaps will have a chance of meeting Sati Godavari Mataji.

I have been told wonderful things on Swami Ram Baba by Baldev Girme, and I must definitely meet him. I have been given two different addresses of his in Bombay: one is 9, Sheesh Mahal, 5-A, Pali Hill, Behind Macrnoells Roof Garden, Bandra, Bombay - 400 050, Phone: 533526; the other is c/o Shri Ashok Raheja 72, La Emerade 14th Road, Khar, Bombay - 400 052, Phone: 546274. Will have to inquire on where he is staying. Mr. Girme told me that Sai Baba once appeared to Swami Ram Baba while he was hospitalised. The doctors had given up hope on him but he recovered immediately thanks to Sai Baba's healing touch.

10 p.m. Today was a most intense and fruitful day. Thanks to Baldev Girme, this evening I had the fortune of meeting and interviewing another interesting person whose name is Shri Appa Saheb Borawke (Tukaram Raghujiv Borawke, usually spelt Borawake), a tall and lean man of profound spirituality who is also one of the twenty-two trustees of the Shirdi Sansthān (he is a prominent figure being the second in the list of trustees I was able to see,

⁸ A pupil of Swami Nityananda, Swami Muktananda (1908-1982) was the founder of the Siddha Yoga organization, drawing on the Kashmiri Śaiva tradition and *kuṇḍalini*-based *yoga* techniques. Under Swami Nityananda's instruction, he built the Gurudev Siddha Peeth *ashram* at Ganeshpuri, near Mumbai.

just after the Chairman P.K. Sawant; besides him there are only two other trustees from Shirdi: Shri G.B. Kote and Shri G.T. Shelke; eleven out of the twenty-two trustees are from Bombay). Many people around here consider Appa Saheb Borawke a saint. Mr. Girme accompanied me to his nice home and acted as interpreter: we had a very pleasant conversation. The Borawkes are rich landowners and they are quite famous for their cultivation of roses (the visiting card which he handed me reads: Borawake Roses. Post Box no. 9. Tal. Kopargaon, Dist. Ahmednagar, Phone: 266).

With Swami Shekhar Rao I then attended the *pāḷkhī* or palanquin ceremony, which is celebrated once a week on Thursday evenings. The men in charge of it wore magnificent bright red uniforms and turbans. The image of Sai Baba together with his robe and other paraphernalia was taken on the *pāḷkhī* in a ritual procession from the Samādhi Mandir to the *masjid* and then to the *cāvaḍī* where an *ārtī*⁹ was celebrated. From the *cāvaḍī* the procession returned back to the main temple of the Samādhi Mandir where there was the singing of *kīrtans* or devotional hymns which ended the ceremony.¹⁰ It was moving to see the intense devotion of the people who took part in the procession. I love all the songs and the *ārtīs*: *Allah Malik, Shirdi majhe Pandharpur Sai Baba Ramavar, Ananta tula te kase re smarave ananta tula te kase re namave, Ruso mama priyambika majavari pitahi ruso, Raham nazar karo ab more Sai*, etcetera. Must find tapes of them all. I am now back to my room and go straight to bed, being quite exhausted.

⁹ The ceremony of circling a tray of lights before a deity or a saint at the end of worship while chanting a hymn.

¹⁰ Sai Baba's evening procession from the mosque to the *cāvaḍī* began on December 10, 1909. Usually, Bapusaheb Jog or Bhagoji Shinde, a leper, held the ceremonial umbrella over his head.

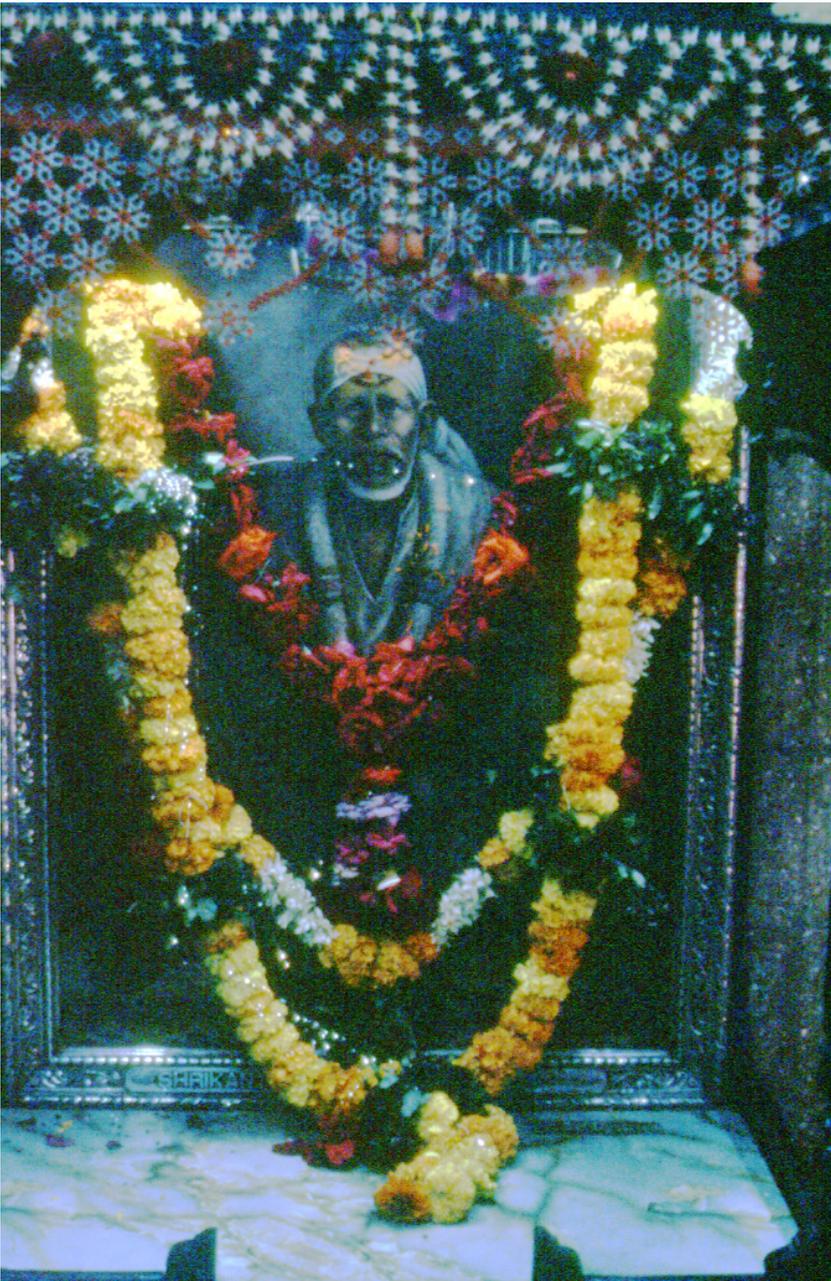


Figure 12 Oil portrait of Sai Baba inside the *masjid*, painted by Shyamrao Jaykar around 1913. It is reported that the saint liked this oil painting very much, embraced it, and said that it would live after him

Interviews of the day

In Shirdi, Uddhavrao Madhavrao Deshpande's house, which was his father's house, 8:30-10 a.m.

First conversation with Uddhavrao (Uddhao) Madhavrao Deshpande, seventy-nine years old, son of the deceased Madhavrao Deshpande alias Shyama (d. 1944) who was among the closest devotees of Sai Baba, often acting as his intermediary.¹¹

Uddhavrao and his wife were most hospitable, offering me and my interpreter Swami Shekhar Rao and Mr. Baldev Girme and his wife of Kopargaon a good cup of tea (*cāy*).

Q Could you tell me what were your first experiences with Baba?

A When Baba took *mahāsamādhi*¹² I was twelve years old.

Q What do you remember about him?

A Baba was only five foot and three inches tall, although he appeared to be quite taller. However, when his height was measured, that is what it was. Baba was very loving with me and all the children around him and even played with us.¹³ He often called me and gave me things or took something from me. During the whole day I was near Baba, with him at the *masjid*; he would often talk to me and we would have a good time together. Baba always wore a long white robe, never colored ones; this white robe is called *kafnī*. Baba always took his bath using the water from the village well. He often took his bath at the *masjid* sitting on a big stone, while continuing to speak with whoever was present. He sat on a big stone which is still visible there.¹⁴ Baba had a very big mole on his shoulder. He had a slight, trimmed beard. Once a week, a barber would come to the *masjid* and shave Baba. Baba had no hair, that is, he shaved his head. As per the Hindu custom, his ears were pierced. His complexion was light, and his skin sort of yellowish; there was a particular brightness, a radiance emanating from his body.

Q Could you tell me about Baba's teachings?

A To all people, to devotees as well as villagers, Baba only recommended the practice of saying the name of God, *nāmasmaran*. Sometimes, he recommended the reading of sacred texts such as the *Viṣṇusahasranām*, the *Rāmāyaṇ*, and the *Bhagavadgītā*.

Q Do you recall any particular episodes with Baba?

A At that time, Lokmanya Bal Gangadhar Tilak, one of the Congress leaders, came to Shirdi to meet Baba.¹⁵ From Shirdi, Tilak wanted to go to Yeola, a small town just near Manmad. But Baba told him: "Don't go

¹¹ Madhavrao Deshpande and his ancestors came from Nimongaon, a village about twenty miles away from Shirdi. His family moved to Shirdi when he was two years old.

¹² 'The great *samādhi*', meaning the saint's death.

¹³ Apparently, when Sai Baba received sweets such as *pedas* from his devotees he distributed them to all the children present at the mosque; see Chitluri, *Baba's Divine Symphony*, 46.

¹⁴ Originally, this large stone was used by devotees for washing their clothes. In the old days, the mosque consisted of only the raised area around the *dhūni*, so the stone was outside.

¹⁵ He came to Shirdi to visit Sai Baba on May 19, 1917.



Figure 13
Uddhavrao (Uddhao) Madhavrao
Deshpande and his wife
outside their house

to Yeola; rather, proceed directly to Manmad". There were riots going on in Yeola and that's why Baba told him: "Don't go to Yeola". Tilak had faith in Baba's words and so he went straight to Manmad without stopping in Yeola. From Manmad, he then got a train for Bombay.¹⁶ At that time, there was an old man named Bapusaheb Jog. Every morning, he used to come to Baba after he had taken his bath, and with his own hand he would mark Baba's forehead with the sign of the *svastik*.¹⁷ After doing this, Bapusaheb Jog would place the *belpatri* upon Baba's forehead, that is, he would offer him the *bel* leaves which are sacred to god Śiva, Śaṅkarjī.

Q What were Baba's habits?

A Baba used to sleep alternatively one night at the *masjid* and one night at the *cāvaḍī*. He usually didn't allow anybody to enter inside the *cāvaḍī*, and to ladies the entrance was absolutely forbidden. It is so even today. Baba used to take a full, complete bath every day, either at the *masjid* or at the Leṅḍī *baug*.¹⁸ Occasionally he would wear a *pitāmbar*

¹⁶ On the visit of B.G. Tilak (1856-1920), see Kher, *Sai Baba: His Divine Glimpses*, 124-9; Shepherd, *Sai Baba: Faqir of Shirdi*, 126-8. Sakharam Hari alias Bapusajeb Jog (d. 1926) was a learned Brahmin from Pune. Eventually, Sai Baba encouraged him to become an ascetic.

¹⁷ An auspicious sign, in origin probably a solar symbol. Sakharam Hari alias Bapusajeb Jog (d. 1926) was a learned Brahmin from Pune. Eventually, Sai Baba encouraged him to become an ascetic.

¹⁸ The locale of Shirdi's gardens.



Figure 14

Baldev Y. Girme and his wife Aruna of Kopargaon pose inside Uddhavrao (Uddhao) Madhavrao Deshpande's house. In the niche is the statue of Gaṇapati that Sai Baba donated to Madhavrao Deshpande alias Shyama, Uddhavrao's father

cloth, that is, a yellow silk cloth. There was a piece of cloth that was used to wrap Baba's head in. Baba himself wrapped it around his head with the end piece dangling to his left side.

Q Did Baba use to bless people? In which ways did he bless them?

A Rarely did Baba touch a person in blessing. He rather blessed people by making an assuring gesture with his hand, that is, by keeping his hand in a particular *mudrā*. Baba always used to give *udī*¹⁹ to his devotees as a token of his blessings, and sometimes he himself would put it on their foreheads. Blessings and *udī* were the same thing to the devotees, the tangible expression of his grace.

Q Is it true that Baba very much insisted that his devotees should cultivate *śraddhā*, faith, and *saburī*, patience?

A Yes, Baba told to devotees and people in general to have *śraddhā* and *saburī*, faith and patience. He made this recommendation very often.

Q Did Baba recommend surrender to the *guru*?

A Baba used to say words such as Allāh Mālik, Rām Mālik, or the names of Viṣṇu and Śiva. Baba always did this. Baba never read any book nor he ever left this village of Shirdi. He only went sometimes as far as Nimgaon, few miles to the right of Shirdi, or to Rahata, about six miles to the left of Shirdi.

19 The sacred ash which Sai Baba got from his perpetually burning fire (*dhūnī*).



Figure 15 Sai Baba on his begging round in the marketplace of the village

Q Is it true that Baba never gave *mantra* or *upades*²⁰ to anyone?

A Yes, Baba never gave neither *mantra* nor *upades* to anyone. Baba only gave *āśīrvād*, that is, blessings, and nothing else.

Q What about Baba's origins?

A So many people and devotees were asking Baba who his parents were, from where he came from, etcetera. Once Baba said: "My mother is from *Saptaśṛṅgī*". Now, *Saptaśṛṅgī* is the sacred place of *Devī*, the Goddess. And Baba added: "My father is *Śiva*, *Śaṅkarjī* from *Tryambak*". *Tryambak* or *Tryambakeshvar* is the famous place where *Śiva's jyotirlinga*²¹ is worshipped. Baba also told his devotees that it was of no importance to know about his origins. The profound significance was this: he came from God. It is for this reason that *Bapusaheb Jog* used to put the three horizontal marks on Baba's forehead, which are *Śiva's* symbol. When Baba was standing straight, his arms were so long that his hands reached his knees and even beyond; this is called *jānubāhu*.

Q Could you tell me about Baba's daily routine?

A In the morning, Baba used to leave the *masjid* around 8 a.m. and wandered in the jungle till about 10.²² Then he began to beg for food and alms, as he always did. He would only go to certain houses, that is, to four or five houses of the village, that's all. When doing this, Baba

²⁰ Teachings, formal instruction.

²¹ Lit. 'linga of light'. The form of supreme *Śiva*, which is believed to have manifested itself in a gigantic and brilliant column (*liṅga*) of light in twelve different places across India, thus creating a network of *śaiva* pilgrimage sites.

²² On the five houses from which Sai Baba begged his food, see Williams, *Experiencing Sai Baba's Shirdi: A Guide*, 119-22; Shepherd, *Sai Baba: Faqir of Shirdi*, 60-2.



Figure 16 The Leṅḍī gardens at dawn, where Sai Baba used to take walks. In front is the Nanda Deep or ‘Lamp of Bliss’ (between the *nim* and *bodhi* trees which were planted by Sai Baba), to the right is the Dattātreya shrine

cried “*Mā bhākrīān*”, which means: ‘Mother, give me some bread’. He then returned to the *masjid* and always sat near the fire of the *dhūnī*.²³

Q Could people enter freely inside the *masjid* to see Baba or were there any restrictions?

A Everybody could come, without distinction. Everybody had free access to the *masjid*.

Q Could you tell me about Baba’s miraculous powers?

A So many devotees were coming at that time to Baba and they would tell him: “Baba, I have no children”, or: “I’m alone”, etcetera. So they asked him to bless them, so that they could have issue or fulfil whatever their wish was. Then Baba used to bless them by making a sign with his hand and arm. Sometimes he would give a woman a coconut as a token of his grace: this meant that she would soon become pregnant and have offspring.

Q What does Baba represent for you? Who is Baba for you?

A [avoids the question and tells a story] One Sitaram Mahadev, a *sāhūkār*²⁴ of Sholapur, once came to Shirdi with a big statue of Gaṇapati which weighed about forty kilos and wanted Baba to bless it [in the meantime, he shows me the statue]. Baba then touched the statue, took it and placed it for a while on his stomach. Then Baba did not return the statue to its owner, Sitaram Mahadev, but presented it to Shyama Deshpande, my father, saying that he should keep it. As you can see,

²³ Another precious testimony on Sai Baba’s daily routine is offered by M.B. Rege; see Chitluri, *Baba’s Vani: His Sayings and Teachings*, 99. Moreover, see Pradhan, *Shri Sai Baba of Shirdi: A Glimpse of Indian Spirituality*, 48-50.

²⁴ Moneylender.

this Gaṇapati is still here in our house [he points at it] and every day we perform the *pūjā*²⁵ to it with great devotion.

Q What were Baba's teachings to you?

A [laughing] No teaching; Baba used to simply bless me. He never gave me any particular teaching. Shyama, my father, was like Baba's right hand and was associated with him for nearly forty years. He was a mediator, an intermediary between Baba and the other devotees. Whatever difficulties the devotees had, Baba used to ask Shyama to help them out.

Q Was there a special reason for Sai Baba's request of *dakṣiṇā*?²⁶

A Baba used to ask for certain amounts of money from his devotees as offerings, which he then gave away to the poor people at the end of the day. Whatever the amount he received during the day, he distributed it among the poor.

Q Were there any special teachings that Sai Baba gave your father?

A No, Baba didn't give any special teaching as such to my father. My father Shyama used to give medicines to devotees, along with Baba's *udī*.

Q Was he a doctor?

A No, he wasn't a doctor. But he used to give āyurvedic medicines to the needy who were sick, and always added Baba's *udī*. My father's faith impelled him to do so. In a very simple way, he used to give the medicines together with the *udī*, while reciting the name of Sai Baba, and the patient used to get relief. It was not that Baba told my father to do this; he did it on his own initiative, moved by his faith. My father Shyama, just before dying, told me that I should serve Baba without taking any money from the Sansthān. He wanted me to serve Baba freely, without material compensation. This I have done all my life, for about forty years, without taking a single *paisā*²⁷ from the Sansthān. Only service and nothing else. This is what my father recommended me to do and this is what I have done. My father thought that this was the most important thing I should do.

Q Could you tell me something about Upasni Maharaj?

A Upasni Maharaj was always staying at the Khaṇḍobā temple. He was very close to Baba. After his first meeting with Baba, he went to live at the Khaṇḍobā temple.

Q What kind of rituals were there in Sai Baba's times?

A During Baba's times, according to my memory, only two *ārtī*s were performed: one at 5 a.m., the *kākaḍ ārtī*, and the other one at midday, the noon *ārtī*. Between 4 and 5 p.m., there were *kīrtans*.

Q What did Baba do at the closing of the *ārtī*?

A He gave blessings and distributed the *udī*. He also conversed with some of the people that were present there.

Q Did Sai Baba himself sing the *kīrtans*?

A No, he never sang. He sat and listened.

Q What was the most important festival which was held in Sai Baba's days?

25 Ritual worship.

26 Monetary offerings. Sacrificial salary in Vedic times. Later, it became the salary due to priests and teachers.

27 A monetary unit equal to one hundredth of a rupee.

- A The most important festival celebrated during Baba's times was Rāmanavamī.²⁸
- Q Were there many Muslims devotees in those days?
- A Many Muslims came to Shirdi to have Baba's *darshan*. Some of them lived here, had a close relationship with Baba and used to serve him personally. For example, there were Faqir Baba, Maulana Baba, and Abdul Baba. They were with Baba all the time. There was also another Muslim devotee, by name Bighubai.
- Q Are there many Muslim devotees even today?
- A Even today Muslims come here to worship Baba, inside the temple.
- Q In which way did Muslims worship Baba during his life?
- A Simply by touching his feet; nothing else. The relations between Hindus and Muslims were cordial in his time.
- Q Is it true that for a long time Sai Baba refused being worshipped like a god?
- A Yes, it is true.²⁹ But after some time things changed. There was a certain Das Ganu Maharaj³⁰ who used to worship his feet only. Das Ganu's example was then followed by many and his worship increased and became common practice. Afterward, when Baba took *samādhi*, his worship became more and more ostentatious.
- Q Why do you think Baba didn't want to be worshipped?
- A I don't know.
- Q What does Sai Baba represent for you? Who is he?
- A Baba is *Sākṣāt Bhagavān*, God in bodily form.
- Q Could you tell me of any particular experience that you had with Baba?
- A I had many experiences with Baba. I will tell you one. Once I had a debt of five hundred rupees with someone, and I didn't have even a *paisā* to repay it. So, while performing the *pūjā* of Baba in the morning I began to cry and couldn't speak. I did the *pūjā* in silence. I called on mentally to Baba for help, telling him I had no money to repay my debt to that fellow and asking him what to do. I was greatly worried and anguished. That very day, it so happened that one Parsi gentleman came to me and lent me five hundred rupees. I actually didn't know how much money that man had given me; it was only when I returned home that I realized he had given me exactly five hundred rupees! In this way, I was able to repay my debt. Baba knew my problem and came to my rescue.

28 The festival commemorating Rām's birth, on the ninth lunar day in the light half of the month of Caitra (March-April).

29 Sai Baba never encouraged his Hindu devotees to worship him, and for a long time resisted their plans to honor him with the daily routine of *ārtis*. In fact, he came to tolerate it for the *bhaktas'* own sake, complying to their heartfelt devotion. In time, his acceptance of congregational worship led him to give explicit instruction to Bapusaheb Jog to take the place of Megha Shyam as the select *ārti* officiant when the latter died. On occasions, however, Sai Baba felt an urge to utterly disapprove and reject all such ceremonies, even throwing away or breaking into pieces the ritual paraphernalia. The saint's apparently contradictory behavior reveals the inner tension that characterized him, being torn between his intimate refusal at being honored as a god and the *bhaktas'* intense desire to worship him as their *deva*.

30 Narayan Dattatreya Sahasrabuddhe alias Das Ganu (1868-1962), a Chitpavan Brahmin who worked as a police constable, was a noted *kīrtankār*, i.e. a performer of song-sermons, and a prolific writer. He was instrumental in spreading Sai Baba's fame throughout western India. A few *bhajans* of his are famous, being sung daily in Shirdi during *ārtis*: *Sai raham nazar karna; Raham nazar karo ab more Sai; Shirdi majhe Pandharpur Sai Baba Ramavar*. On Das Ganu, see McLain, *The Afterlife of Sai Baba: Competing Visions of a Global Saint*, 54-90; Shepherd, *Sai Baba of Shirdi: A Biographical Investigation*, 221-6; Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba*, 2: 122-54; http://saiamrithadhara.com/mahabhaktas/das_ganu.html.

When I tried to trace the Parsi gentleman at the address he had given me, to give him back the loan, I discovered that the address didn't exist, and that no one in that village had ever seen the man. This is one of the innumerable *līlās*, i.e. wonders of Baba.

Q What happened in Shirdi when Baba took *samādhi*?

A Knowing that his death was imminent, Baba had told a few people that he was going to take *samādhi* shortly. At that time, about seven thousand people assembled here in Shirdi. They were all agitated and weeping, and there was intense commotion all over the place. Solemn ceremonies were held with great pomp. There was a long procession and everyone lamented and wept. It was then that Baba's body was placed in the Buti *vāḍā*,³¹ which became the present Samādhi Mandir. From that time on, it has always been kept there.

Q Could you tell me something about Meher Baba?

A No, I don't know anything about him. I only know that he was here for seven years with Baba, and whenever there were ceremonies and Baba used to go out with processions and all that, he was with Baba.

I Thank you so much for your kind hospitality and for sharing your precious memories with me.

Before leaving, I ask permission to take a photo of him and his wife in front of their house and they wholeheartedly agree.

[Uddhavrao Madhavrao Deshpande passed away in Shirdi in 1998, at the age of ninety-two]

³¹ A lodging for visitors, a traditional mansion. On the Buti *vāḍā*, see Satpathy, *New Findings on Shirdi Sai Baba*, 101-10.

In Sakuri, Śrī Upāsni Kanyākumārī Sthān, 11:15 a.m.

Conversation with Shri Shankar Gorawke, devotee of Sati Godavari Mata (1914-1990).³²

- Q Could you please briefly tell me the history of this Kanyākumārī Sthān?
- A Well, you see, I started visiting this place just in the past two years... But there are many books which are available in Marāṭhī, Hindī and English, through which you can learn the history of this Sakuri Sthān.
- Q How many nuns live at the Kanyākumārī Sthān?
- A At present, there are fifty-three *kanyās*,³³ living under the guidance of Godavari Mata.
- Q Could you tell me something about Upasni Maharaj?
- A He was sent here to Sakuri by Shirdi Baba and died here in 1941. He attained his knowledge from Sai Baba, in Shirdi. He lived in Shirdi for about four years. He attained his *ātmic*³⁴ knowledge from Sai Baba. Sai Baba was the *guru* of Upasni Baba. When his training was completed, Sai Baba told Upasni to leave and go wherever he wanted to go. Subsequently, Upasni Baba toured around Maharashtra for one or two years. Then, after about two years, he arrived in this village of Sakuri and he was given a place to stay. He then started the building of the Sthān by the construction of the Datta³⁵ Mandir, where he lived. At that time, there was nothing here. Nothing. Where now the Datta Mandir stands there was just barren land. No trees, no buildings, nothing at all. In those days, Upasni Baba lived in a hut and he was subsequently advised to build the Datta temple.

Shri Shankar Gorawke says:

As you know, *yajñas* are celebrated everywhere. The purpose, the intention of *yajñas* is that of bringing prosperity to the nation. The people who live in this country should lead a pure life, then the nation would elevate itself and good fruits would be gathered. This is possible through *yajñas*. Thus, people should promote the practice of *yajñas*. Then, there would be no more conflicts and tensions among people; among Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, etcetera. These communities should not fight among themselves. They should be one, one body all together. Each of these communities should endeavour so as to bring about the progress of our nation; India would then constitute an example for the entire world. Thus, this is the aim, the principal goal of *yajñas*...

In this Sthān, the *yajñas* are celebrated by women, by the *kanyās* alone. Here, no male has permission to enter in the area where the *kanyās* live.

Q Is this the only place in India where this occurs?

A Yes, yes. This is the only place. You will not find other places where *kanyās*, women, perform *yajñas* and chant *mantras*.

³² The transcription of this interview was first published in Rigopoulos, "Women and Ritual: The Experience of a Contemporary Marāṭhī *āśram*".

³³ 'Virgins', nuns.

³⁴ Spiritual, relative to the Self (*ātman*).

³⁵ Datta or Dattātreya is a popular deity in Maharashtra, revered as the incarnation of the Hindu triad (*trimūrti*) of Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva. He is the lord of ascetics. For an introduction to Dattātreya, see Rigopoulos, *Dattātreya: The Immortal Guru, Yogin, and Avatāra*.



Figure 17

Shri Shankar Gorawke,
devotee of Sati Godavari Mata, Sakuri

- Q The ancient *mantras*, the Vedic *mantras*?
- A In India there is no other place like this. This is the only one.
- Q Is it Sati Godavari Mataji who continued Upasni Baba's mission?
- A When Upasni was still alive, Sati Godavari came to Sakuri. She was eleven years old when she first got here. With her were two sisters, her mother and her father. Her birth-place was Shegaon. She was born there, and from there she came here to meet with Upasni Maharaj, together with her two sisters, her mother and her father. Upasni asked the girls to become *kanyās* and to live in Sakuri. Their mother and father promised to do so. It so happened that Sati Godavari and all her family came to live here in Sakuri. At the time, Godavari Mata was about ten, eleven years old. All her family lived here with her. Her two sisters are still living here today.
- Q Are they nuns?
- A Yes, yes. Their mother died about one and a half year ago, but she also lived here for the rest of her life. Upasni Baba's mother also lived here. Upasni was the teacher of Godavari Mata. He taught her everything: the dances, the music, the *mantras*, etcetera. Upasni brought here some very talented men, experts in the *saṅgīt*,³⁶ in the dances, in the *mantras* and they taught the *kanyās*. All these *kanyās* can sing, dance, and they are also good musicians... All the *kanyās* are good musicians.
- Q What happened when Upasni Baba died, and in which year did he die?
- A When he died, when he ascended to Heaven, Mataji, who had been his disciple, took care of everything, of all the Sansthān. Up to this day, she takes care of everything.



Figure 18
Darshan of Sati Godavari Mata, Sakuri

Q Could you tell me anything about the differences in Upasni Maharaj's and Godavari Mata's teachings? For example, I have read that Godavari Mata is a very sweet person, whereas Upasni Maharaj was extremely severe...

A I wouldn't know how to answer this.

Shri Shankar Gorawke says:

Seven are the most important *yajñas* which are performed in Sakuri. In March, the first *yāg*³⁷ begins; it is called Śrī Rām *yāg* and lasts seven days. The second *yāg* is in April, and lasts five days. In June, the third *yāg* is held. It is called Guru *yāg*, and lasts seven days. In August, we have the fourth *yāg*, which is called Gaṇeś *yāg*. It is celebrated during the festival of Gaṇeś Caturthī, and lasts ten, twelve days. The fifth *yāg* is the one we are now celebrating, in October. It is named Sat Caṇḍī *yāg*, and lasts nine, ten days. In January, we have our sixth *yāg*, the Sūrya *yāg*, which lasts fifteenth days. It is the longest *yāg* which is performed here in Sakuri. The seventh *yāg* takes place in February and it is called Rudra *yāg*, which lasts five days. These are the seven *yāgs* which are celebrated each year in Sakuri.

Q Could you tell me how much money is needed for the performance of a *yāg*, for instance this October *yāg*?

A It depends on how many days it lasts and on the things which are to be employed in the sacrifice. Some *yajñas* last five days, others seven. Anyway, for the realization of this October *yajña* we have spent around eleven thousand rupees.

37 Sacrifice, a synonym of *yajña*.



Figure 19 Entrance to the Śrī Upāsni Kanyākumārī Sthān, Sakuri



Figure 20 The Śrī Upāsni Kanyākumārī Sthān, Sakuri

Q Does this high cost derive from the fact that you have to buy ritual paraphernalia, etcetera?

A No, no. We have collected the money among our families. Three families have particularly contributed to the realization of this *yajña*.

Outside voice:

The local families provide for whatever objects are necessary for the performance of the *yajñas*.

Q But what are the necessary things?

A Oh, there are so many things, so many things... For example, animals. But you can ask Mister Tipnis, he is the one who supervises the material organization of the *yajñas*. He will tell you precisely the things which are necessary for the performance of *yajñas*.

I If I understand correctly, it is a big expense...

A Yes, it is very costly.

I Thank you.

In Shirdi, Tukaram Raghujiv Borawke's house, 6:45 p.m.

Conversation with Tukaram Raghujiv Borawke better known as Appa Saheb Borawke, eighty-two years old and one of the trustees of the Shirdi Sansthān. He was fourteen when he first met Sai Baba in 1917.

Mr. Baldev Girme of Kopargaon acted as interpreter.

Q Could you tell me about your first experiences with Sai Baba?

A I came to this town, Shirdi, because I had some agricultural lands at Nimgaon, a village nearby here. I started my business there around 1916. I was very young at that time. I was a school child. My elder brother, Rao Saheb Borawke, and my mother went to Sai Baba for his *darshan*. So Sai Baba asked him for some money and my brother said he didn't have any with him. But then Sai Baba pointed out that he had one rupee in his pocket which was given to him by one of his relatives to buy sweetmeats. So Sai Baba took that one rupee from him and afterward blessed him, saying that he would have plenty of money throughout his life. And this came true. Successively, I came in contact with Sai Baba in the year 1917. I only used to take *darshan* of Sai Baba but never had any intimate talk with him.

Q What does Sai Baba represent in your life? What are your feelings toward him?

A After Baba's death there were some family disputes and I didn't know what to do.

Q You were very young at that time, weren't you?

A Yes, very young. But the disputes which I am talking about took place in 1943, much after Baba's *samādhi*. I was very worried during that time, so I went to the temple and touched Baba's feet, and I begged Baba to give peace and well-being to my family. After that, thanks to Baba's grace, my life has been going very well, both spiritually and economically.

Q And this was because of Sai Baba's blessing?

A Yes, and it took place in 1943.

Appa recounts:

After that, every day at 10 a.m., I have been given the right to place flowers on the *samādhi* of Baba. It is a big honor. There were many conflicts as to whom should be chosen to do this, but finally I was given preference, because of Sai Baba's blessing. It's now nearly forty years that I daily bring flowers to Baba's *samādhi*.

Q Could you tell me about that more recent experience you had, which I have been hearing about around the village?

A Seven or eight years ago, there came here twenty-five to thirty-two people from Delhi. They had come to Shirdi to worship Sai Baba. I used to visit the Mandir twice a day and once, when these people were there and I was performing my *pūjā* and *ārtī*, all of them started touching my feet. I was flabbergasted... I said: "Don't touch my feet but go touch Baba's feet! I am no one!" But those people didn't listen. Then they said they wanted to visit my house. So they all came here, visited the house, and the next day they came to me saying that they wanted to do my *pūjā*.



Figure 21 Tukaram Raghujiv Borawke (center), better known as Appa Saheb Borawke

So then... I didn't say anything. They came in the morning to do the *pūjā* of me and my wife. Afterward, the next day, three ladies came to my house with a *tongā*³⁸ from Shirdi and at that time my eldest daughter-in-law was here. She was also very surprised. She asked: "What are these things which are going on?". She was also very interested about all this. My daughter-in-law asked: "Why are you worshipping my father-in-law?". She was quite curious about it. Then these people narrated a story saying that Sai Baba had given them a *dr̥ṣṭā*³⁹ in Delhi.

Q In a dream?

A Yes, in their dream.

Q You mean to say that they had a vision of Sai Baba of Shirdi in their dream?

T Yes. And in this vision Baba had asked them to worship Appa.

Q Did they know Appa or anything about him?

T No, no. They didn't know anything about him. It's quite a touching story.

Q What is in your opinion the most important teaching that Sai Baba gave you?

A After my family disputes, I didn't know what to do, and when a man is in difficulty he ultimately goes to someone. So, I went to Sai Baba and touched his feet, and Sai Baba has blessed me with everything. I was not living here but about ten miles from here, in a village called Brah-

38 A two-wheeled cart drawn by a horse.

39 'Vision'.

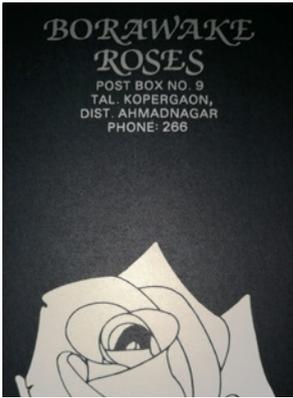


Figure 22
Business card of Appa Saheb Borawke

mangaon. I had some farms there also. But then ultimately I thought that Sai Baba had blessed me so much that I wanted to spend the rest of my life near Sai Baba, near Shirdi. So this is the thing which got me nearer to Sai Baba. The fact that Sai Baba helped me during my greatest crisis.

- Q Could we say that devotion, that is, complete surrender or *saranāgati* to the master, is the most important aspect of this story?
- T Yes, right. This could be the answer to his experience. You have rightly put it.
- Q What was the atmosphere in Shirdi or the impressions which you first got as a little boy when you first saw Sai Baba?
- A The very first sight of Sai Baba filled me with joy. I was very much pleased with it and I was very much satisfied just to look at him.
- Q Did you meet Sai Baba in the *masjid*?
- A Yes, I met him in the *masjid* on that first occasion.
- Q Did Sai Baba give any particular *upadeś* or teaching to your father and mother?
- T No, nothing, nothing. He just gave them blessings.

Appa says:

I would like to say something about Upasni Baba. Upasni Baba was here with Sai Baba for four years. My auntie was in very close connection with Upasni Baba. She used to even grind wheat, *jowar*, with him.

- Q She did this at the Khaṇḍobā temple?
- A No. At my auntie's place.
- Q Did you know Upasni Maharaj personally?
- A The only time I came in contact with Upasni Maharaj was when he planted some fruit trees.
- T Let me please give you a brief introduction about Appa. Appa is one of the leading agriculturists of Kopergaon and Shirdi. He had about a *lakh*⁴⁰ of sweet lime trees, about eight hundred acres with his joint-family. And Upasni Baba thought Appa to be an authority on horticultural

⁴⁰ A unit in the Indian numbering system equal to one hundred thousand.



Figure 23 Appa Saheb Borawke offering roses to Sai Baba's tomb, as per his daily custom

ture. He wanted to rent the lands of Sakuri to one Mister Eshvanandra Borawke. So he had called Appa there to discuss what amount of rent Mister Eshvanandra Borawke should pay to Upasni Baba's Sansthān. Appa told him that he should pay about twelve hundred rupees for the rent. This was the only contact which Appa had with Upasni Baba.

Q Do you mean to say that Upasni Maharaj thought Appa to be such an expert in these matters that he contacted him to see what the rent of the land should be?

T Yes.

Q In the books one reads that Sai Baba would often get angry...

T Appa will not be able to tell you about this. He was just a young kid at that time.

Q How old are you now?

A I am eighty-two years old.

Q Were there many Muslims worshipping Sai Baba? And were there more in those days or today? What would be the balance between the Muslims and the Hindus?

A Nowadays the majority of the worshippers are Hindus.

Q What about in the old days?

A Muslims were less, even when Sai Baba was living.

Appa remembers:

There was a time when a Brahmin priest used to do *pūjā* of Sai Baba on one side and simultaneously a Muslim devotee of Sai Baba by the name



Figure 24 Baldev Y. Girme offering roses to Sai Baba's tomb. At his right is Appa Saheb Borawke

of Abdul Baba used to perform *pūjā* on the other side. On the *samādhi* itself. I had many experiences with Abdul Baba.

Q Could you tell me about your experiences with Abdul Baba?

A There was one Ranganath Swami, a Madrasi. Basically, he was very active in Indian politics and in contact with Mahatma Gandhi and Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. At one point he got fed up with politics. He did not agree with Gandhiji, and so he went into the Himalayas. There he met a Swami or, better said, a Sadguru,⁴¹ who asked him to go to Shirdi and meet Abdul Baba.

Q Not Sai Baba?

A Not Sai Baba, Abdul Baba. Then he came to Shirdi and became a disciple of Abdul Baba. Due to his experiences with Abdul Baba he came to recognize Abdul Baba as Sai Baba.

Q You mean there was complete identification of Abdul Baba with Sai Baba?

A Yes. There are many stories concerning Abdul Baba. He even predicted Mahatma Gandhi's death. Once Ranganath Swami wanted to meet Mahatma Gandhi and since Abdul Baba knew Mahatma Gandhi's death to be imminent he told him that he should go and visit Mahatma Gandhi immediately, immediately. But unfortunately Ranganath Swami could not go and meet Gandhiji and so, after five days, he received the message of Gandhi's death and... literally Ranganath Swami was crying

⁴¹ 'Good or true teacher'. The supreme teacher who is identified with *Brahman*, the Absolute.

for about two hours continuously. This was one of the incidents with Abdul Baba.

Q Is Abdul Baba still alive?

A No. You can see his *samādhi* in Shirdi.⁴² The *samādhi* was built by me... that is, I gave twenty to twenty-five thousand rupees to the Sansthān in order to build that *samādhi*.

Q What do you think was the meaning of *dakṣiṇā* in Sai Baba's times?

A Sai Baba used to take *dakṣiṇā* from many individuals and then he would distribute it among certain people... twenty-five rupees to one, fifty rupees to another, fifty-five rupees to yet another one, etcetera. So he would take from whoever had and give to whom did not have.

T One can only come to the conclusion that he used to give *dakṣiṇā* to the needy, the poor.

Appa adds:

At about 7:30 in the evening, Sai Baba used to distribute whatever amount of *dakṣiṇā* he had collected during the day. *Dakṣiṇā* was not asked as a means of accumulating money for himself. Sai Baba had such great powers that just by putting his hand into his pocket he could take money out of it...

T He didn't want to show people his power of performing miracles. That is why he used to ask other people for *dakṣiṇā*.

Q Was it just a symbol then?

T Yes, it was symbolic... So that people would not know that he was performing a miracle and all that.

Q Thus he wanted to maintain anonymity?

T Right, he wanted to be anonymous. That is the correct word.

Q What do you think about the origins of Shirdi Baba? Nobody knows if he was from a Muslim family or if he was from a Hindu one...

T Appa will not be able to answer this question. It is a very difficult question. Nobody will satisfy you on this question... this is what I think.

Q Let's try to ask him anyway... in simple words. Was Sai Baba a Hindu or a Moslem in origin?

T But, you see, you must have read this in books... when this question was posed to Baba he would get very angry, would tear off his clothes and become naked...

I I know, I know this... I know that the most important teaching is not to give any importance to origins... I also know it is a question nobody wants to answer...

T Right...

I So, I understand from what he said that Sai Baba represents the Almighty, God, for him. This seems to be implicit from what he said.

T Yes, that is so.

Q Have you ever heard of Meher Baba? He was a disciple of Upasni Maharaj in Sakuri...

A No, I don't know anything about Meher Baba.

⁴² This *faqīr*, who was born in either 1869 or 1871, died in Shirdi in 1954. On Abdul Baba and his important notebook, see Warren, *Unravelling the Enigma: Shirdi Sai Baba in the Light of Sufism*, 261-333; Shepherd, *Sai Baba of Shirdi: A Biographical Investigation*, 15-17; Shepherd, *Sai Baba: Faqir of Shirdi*, 5-12; Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba*, 3: 171-7. See also <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=voA-xeeew3Mo>.

- Q Baba usually gave *udī* to the people when they left the village. What was the significance of *udī*?
- A [after a short coffee break] *Udī* had its own miraculous effect. Whenever anybody was sick, we used to give Baba's *udī*. The *udī* Baba used to give... and then we gave it to the patients or whoever was suffering or whoever was sick in the family. In the case the patient was suffering from fever, after giving him *udī* his fever used to vanish.
- I So *udī* had power in itself...
- T Yes...
- Q By Baba's blessing?
- T Yes, yes. By Baba's blessings the *udī* had its own power.
- Q Which were the most common miracles, if I may ask?
- T It cannot be a question... So many were the miracles.
- Q Do you remember any particular instance of a miracle or could you relate anything you feel to be significant for an understanding of Shirdi Sai Baba?
- A Sai Baba is Almighty, *Īśvara*,⁴³ the Supreme Satpuruṣa.⁴⁴
- T When you'll see Swami Ram Baba, you might tell him you had an interview with Appa Borawke... He will be much pleased.
- Q Do you have any questions to suggest?
- T Well, basically if you ask me about Sai Baba, I would say that to have faith and patience was his fundamental recommendation. I fully agree with these two principles of his. Nowadays people want immediate action, they think that once they go to Baba they should get whatever they want... But I do not agree with that. You should have faith and patience.⁴⁵ Even if you go to a church and ask Jesus saying: "I pray to you, you please give me this"... You cannot take these spiritual things into a mundane, materialistic, purely commercial sphere...
- Q Were you present when the *mahāsamādhi* took place? What happened at that time?
- A I was not present. I was at Sasur, in school, at that time. During vacation from school, I used to come to Shirdi and take Baba's *darshan*.
- T What Appa wants to say is that it was only after Baba had taken *samādhi*, in the years 1943-44, when he found himself in much difficulty, that he came to Baba. By touching Baba's feet, he realized the presence of Baba, the power of Baba.
- Q In other words, you want to say that he experienced Sai Baba's omnipresence?
- T Yes, that Baba is always present. This is what Appa wants to say.
- Q Do you experience Baba's presence always, at all times?
- A Yes, I feel his presence.
- Q Appa is thus considered a sort of saint here in Shirdi?
- T He does not claim to be a saint, though many revere him as such. Swami Ram Baba will be able to tell you much more about him than me.
- Q Does everybody know Appa here?
- T Yes, everybody knows him. He is one of the trustees of the Sansthān.

⁴³ Lit. 'lord', 'god'.

⁴⁴ Lit. 'true person/spirit'.

⁴⁵ Aruna, Baldev Girmé's wife, also confided to me that the couplet of *niṣṭhā* and *saburī*, i.e. faith and patience, was the heart of Sai Baba's teaching.

- Q Could you ask him if I can take a picture of him?
- T He daily comes at 10 a.m. to the Samādhi Mandir. So you can see him there and you may even take a photo of him.
- Q Thank you. Mister Appa also looks a bit like Shirdi Baba, doesn't he?
- T This is for you to make out... [everybody laughs] I'll tell you one thing, Mister Tony. Sai Baba will give you a personal experience so that you won't have to approach people and ask people... that is my feeling, and I only hope that Sai Baba will do something for you. I have that intuition and I have that feeling also.
- I I am sure that in the spiritual field words and studies are more or less useless, because it's always a matter of personal, intimate experience. In all religious or spiritual matters.
- T Yes, right.
- I I understand that these questions of mine can be considered improper, but I try to push things, even to provoke sometimes... hoping to get more information. Please thank Mister Appa Saheb Borawke and tell him that I consider it an honor to have had this opportunity of speaking with him. Thank you all.

Oral Testimonies on Sai Baba

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

Antonio Rigopoulos

4 Shirdi Friday, October 18, 1985

Excerpts From My Diary

12:45 p.m. Had a productive morning. I was able to interview a local villager who is eighty-seven years old and who was twenty-four when Sai Baba took *samādhi*. He is known as Bappa Baba and I had a good talk with him. He even showed me a coin that Sai Baba gave to him, which he treasures as a priceless relic.

I then visited the house/temple of Lakshmibai Shinde: she passed away in 1963 and her tomb is located just outside her house. I had the privilege to see the nine coins that Sai Baba donated to her just few minutes before taking *samādhi*, which are thought to be symbolic of the nine forms or limbs (*navāṅgāni*) of devotion, *bhakti*: hearing (*śravaṇa*), singing (*kīrtana*), remembering the divine name (*smaraṇa*), serving the feet of the *guru*/God (*pādasevana*), worshipping him (*arcana*), reverently prostrating to him (*vandana*), becoming his slave/servant (*dāsya*), becoming a friend of his (*sakhya*), and finally surrendering oneself completely to him (*ātmanivedana*). Seeing the nine coins made a strong impression on me.

I also interviewed my main interpreter Swami Shekhar Rao inside the library and we had a good conversation. In total, it looks like I should be able to interview seven persons who actually met or had some kind of interaction with Sai Baba before he passed away in October 1918: six in Shirdi and one in Bombay, i.e. Swami Ram Baba.

Had a good lunch. The schedule and rhythm of the fieldwork is quite tight and I'm a bit tired. This afternoon I must go to the hotel The Pilgrim's Inn to see if they have any rooms available and also to try to change some dollars into rupees. Baldev Girme's nephew, Bipin Girme, works there. I then plan to go to the Sansthān to ask them for more information on the spread of Sai Baba's cult in India and throughout the world. Perhaps they can help me find a few more texts on Sai Baba and some old issues of the monthly magazine *Sai Leela*. Hope they may be collaborative and willing to share their knowledge.

6:35 p.m. Found out many things this afternoon. According to a 1984 Directory of Sai Mandirs & Sai Institutions which was given to me (printed by a Shirdi Sai Mission located in Hyderabad, presided by one M. Rangachari), there are around one hundred and fifty centers of devotion to Shirdi Sai Baba in India. The only one present in Europe is in London. There is also said to be one in Africa, in Ghana, and a few are said to be present in Nepal, Sikkim, and Bhutan. According to the Sansthān, however, Sai Baba devotees and centers are much more numerous, especially in India. They say that in Europe it is probably true that there is only one center in London, which is run by Indians of the diaspora who reside there (the same applies for the Sai Baba center in Ghana). Thus, if Sai Baba appears to be quite popular in the whole of India, especially in Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh and the Southern States, he is virtually unknown outside of India.

The Sansthān gave me some information about Sri Narayan Baba (b. 1936).¹ He is given no credibility as Sai Baba's medium or successor/*avatāra*² of this age. As they repeatedly told me: "Sai Baba has neither successors nor heirs". Anyway, they know of his activities.³ He is said to be the leader of a small group of Sai Baba devotees. In a very terse way, they told me that he comes here to Shirdi with his following at the time of major festivals. For instance, he has organized the 1985 Annual Shirdi Yatra from Saturday, November 16, to Tuesday, November 19. They consider him as just a devotee of Sai Baba. They respect him as a Baba but they give no credit to his claim of being a medium between Sai Baba and the world since 1959. "It is simply not true", they say. Thus they don't believe in him.

With regard to Basheer Baba (b. 1942), the people of the Sansthān told me that he died approximately around 1980 though they are not sure as to the exact date. They said they will gather information and let me know in a few days. He used to come to Shirdi at least once a year together with his followers. Like Sri Narayan Baba, they consider Basheer Baba as just a devotee of Sai Baba, nothing more. They emphasize that no one here has ever given credit to his claim of being Sai Baba's reincarnation. They added that

1 Along with sixteen disciples, in August 1981 Sri Narayan Baba embarked on an America-Europe *yātrā* or pilgrimage/tour with the aim of spreading Sai Baba's renown. On August 28-29, 1981, he also came to Venice, and I had the opportunity to see him briefly (he and his party stayed at the Hotel Plaza in Mestre, but I happened to meet them quite by chance when they visited St. Mark's Square). On this occasion, I was given a copy of a special issue of his magazine *Sri Sai Vani* (vols. 18-19, July-August 1981) that publicized the *Sri Sai Baba Upadesh Prachar, America-Europe Yatra* organized by the Sri Bhagawati Sai Sansthan (Bombay-Panvel-New Delhi) whose headquarters was in Kurla, Bombay. Among those who accompanied Sri Narayan Baba was Leelavati Venkataraman, the 'wheel horse' of his Sansthān, i.e. its life and soul since 1966: prior to becoming a devotee of his, she had been active at the *ashram* of Ramana Maharshi in Tiruvannamalai. Along the years, Sri Narayan Baba has continued to spread Sai Baba's renown and his fame as a local *guru* is nowadays well established; see <http://www.narayanbaba.org/guruji.php>.

2 Lit. 'descent'. A divine incarnation.

3 The above-mentioned special issue of *Sri Sai Vani* reports on page 20 a letter to Sri Narayan Baba by K.H. Kakre, Court Receiver and trustee of the Shirdi Sansthān. Kakre writes:

Om Shri Sai Ram. We are very happy to know that you are undertaking Europe America Prachar Yatra with effect from 1-8-1981. It is the best enterprise of your Sansthan in general and yourself in particular in the interest of spread of Sai cult. We hope that during your visits to all the places, you will propagate the teachings of Shri Sai Baba and make best efforts for spread of eleven promises of Shri Sai Baba amongst the people there, thereby increasing the number of Sai devotees at abroad also. We wish you happy and safe journey and good response at all places. With blessings of Shri Sai Baba. Bon Voyage!

I may get more information on Basheer Baba from one Shivner Swami who stays at the *cāvaḍī* and so I immediately went to see him.

Shivner Swami told me that he has been living here for more than thirty years, working for free in the *cāvaḍī* and serving the Sansthān. He claims to be a *sādhu*, and many people around here revere him as such. When Basheer Baba came to Shirdi, Shivner Swami met him and came to know him a little. Apparently, Basheer Baba claimed to have obtained special powers, *siddhis*, soon after having had Sai Baba's *darshan*. However, according to Shivner Swami he would have misused these *siddhis* for egotistic purposes, that is, for making money for himself and buying some land. Thus, he soon came to lose his powers and fell into disrepute, revealing his spiritual immaturity. He said that Basheer Baba had numerous devotees in the Hyderabad area from where he came from. Shivner Swami did not remember exactly the year of his death: he said he might have died in 1982 or 1983. He invited me to come back to the *cāvaḍī* tomorrow around 12 p.m. so that we may have a longer conversation; before seeing him, I hope to be able to interview Mhalsapati's son around 9:30 a.m.

After these disappointing news on Basheer Baba, the one figure that stands out and requires a thorough investigation in his purported avatāric connection to Shirdi Sai Baba is unquestionably Bhagawan Shri Sathya Sai Baba of Puttaparthi in the Anantapur District of Andhra Pradesh.⁴ The popular *guru* of Puttaparthi claims to be the reincarnation of the Shirdi saint since 1940, when at age thirteen he declared himself to be Sai Baba to his astounded family and early devotees. To my knowledge, he never came to Shirdi but I read that he once met Sati Godavari Mataji in Sakuri.⁵

I will try to intensify my dialogue with the Sansthān, especially from next Monday. They can sure give me other useful information. From tomorrow I'll almost surely transfer to The Pilgrim's Inn hotel. In this way, I'll have a better and much safer room, certainly less noisy. The cost is eighty-five rupees per day, which is not too much. The problem is that I still need to change my dollars into rupees but hope to manage some way or the other.

⁴ For an introduction to Sathya Sai Baba, see Srinivas, "Sathya Sai Baba".

⁵ I came to know this from reading *Sathyam Sivam Sundaram*, the biography of Bhagawan Shri Sathya Sai Baba written by Narayan Kasturi. He states:

Four years ago [in 1957], when Baba was in Hyderabad City, He was invited to the Ashram of Godavari Matha, the disciple of Upasani Baba and Shirdi Baba, resident at Sakori. Welcomed by the women disciples with Vedic Recitations and the traditional ceremonies of Poor-nakumbham, they offered Puja. He must have blessed them with a glimpse of His Reality and His Identity for, they expressed a keen desire to come over to Prasanthi Nilayam. But, Baba said that He is as present at Sakori as anywhere, and that it is best they remain in Sakori itself. (Kasturi, *Sathyam Sivam Sundaram, Part I (1926-1960)*, 192-3)



Figure 25 Sai Baba temple in Andheri, Bombay, adjacent to Sri Narayan Baba's center. At the left is a photo of Sri Narayan Baba

Figure 26 Sai Baba temple in Andheri, Bombay. Images of Sri Narayan Baba surround the one of Sai Baba in a blessing pose

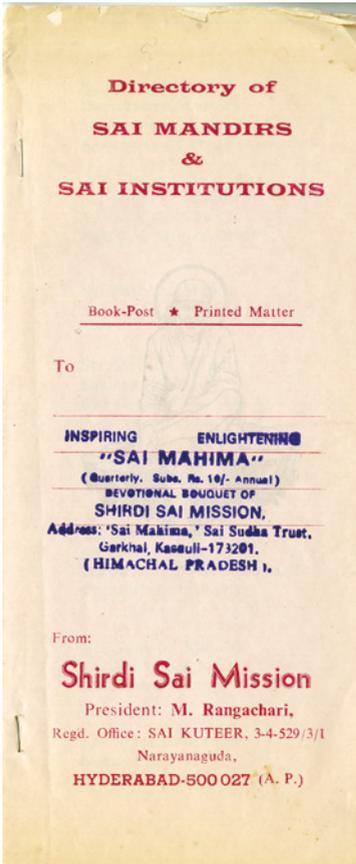


Figure 27 Front cover of the 1985 directory of Sai Baba temples in India and throughout the world

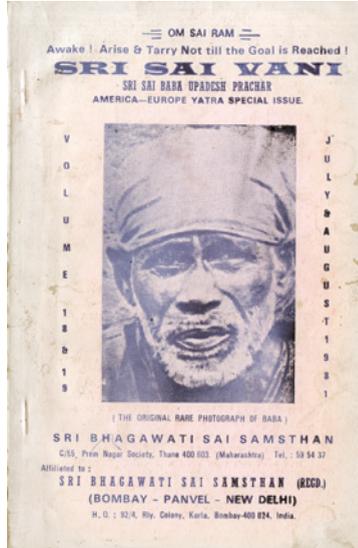


Figure 28 Sri Narayan Baba's magazine Sri Sai Vani, America-Europe Yatra, Special Issue (July & August 1981)

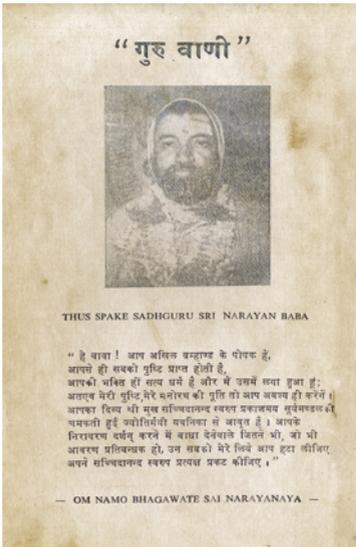


Figure 29 Sri Narayan Baba's words of blessing. Sri Sai Vani, America-Europe Yatra, Special Issue (July & August 1981)

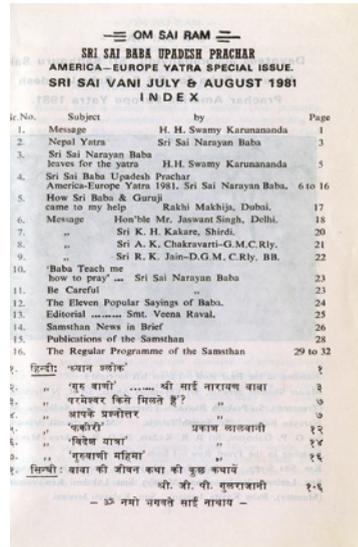


Figure 30 Index. Sri Sai Vani, America-Europe Yatra, Special Issue (July & August 1981)

Interviews of the day

In Shirdi, Bappa Baba's house, which was his father's house, 9-10:30 a.m.

First 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.

According to the *Shri Sai Leela* magazine, Bappa Baba was born in 1886. Thus, he would have been ninety-nine years old when I interviewed him. Bappa Baba, however, told me that he was twenty-four in 1918, when Sai Baba passed away: if this is true, he was born in 1894 and in 1985 he was ninety-one.⁶

- Q Could you tell me about your father's connections with Sai Baba?
- A My father was Lakshman Ratna Parke, who back in those days always celebrated Sai Baba's *pūjā*. The day after the *samādhi* of Baba, early in the morning, Baba appeared to my father in a dream. He told him to wake up and perform the *ārti* to him. Baba said: "[Bapusaheb] Jog will not come since he thinks I am dead. Don't think that I am no more. You go and do *ārti*". And so he did.
- Q What are your memories about Sai Baba?
- A I was twenty-four years old when Baba took *samādhi*. Sai Baba had very long arms: the ends of his fingers reached down to his knees. This is called *jānubāhu* in Hindī. Baba used to give *āśīrvād*, blessings to devotees; sometimes he placed the *udī* on the devotees' foreheads with his own hands.⁷ Baba always used to give some money to the poor and he also used to feed them. All the *dakṣiṇā* that he received from the devotees he redistributed among the poor. Inside the Dvārakāmāi,⁸ Baba himself cooked large quantities of food which he gave to the poor. Sometimes, he fed the people right in the Dvārakāmāi. He even used to grind wheat inside the Dvārakāmāi. Baba was very loving and kind to me: he used to give me lots of coins. Indeed, he gave money, coins, not only to me but to many other people. All the money Baba gifted me with, I have spent for my necessities. At present, I'm left with only this coin which I treasure as a relic [he shows it to me]. When Baba took *samādhi*, on October 15, 1918, I was present at the Dvārakāmāi, I was near Baba.
- Q What happened at that time?
- A That day was a Tuesday, Baba took *samādhi* at about 2:30 in the afternoon. Just before leaving the body, Baba asked someone to bring *pān*, that is, some betel nut leaves.⁹ He started chewing and eating them, then he drank some water and few minutes later he died. It was Madhav Phasle who brought the water to Baba and gave it to him. Baba drank a

⁶ For another testimony on Bappaji Lakshman Ratna Parke alias Bappa Baba, see Chitluri, *Baba's Rinanubandh: Leelas During His Sojourn in Shirdi*, 63-4.

⁷ Bappa Baba once told a woman devotee that "Baba used to apply Udi to the forehead of his devotees with his thumb and forefinger" (Chitluri, *Baba's Divine Symphony*, 297).

⁸ Lit. 'the many-gated mother'. The Hindu name that Sai Baba gave to his mosque.

⁹ *Pān* is a preparation combining betel leaves with areca nut.

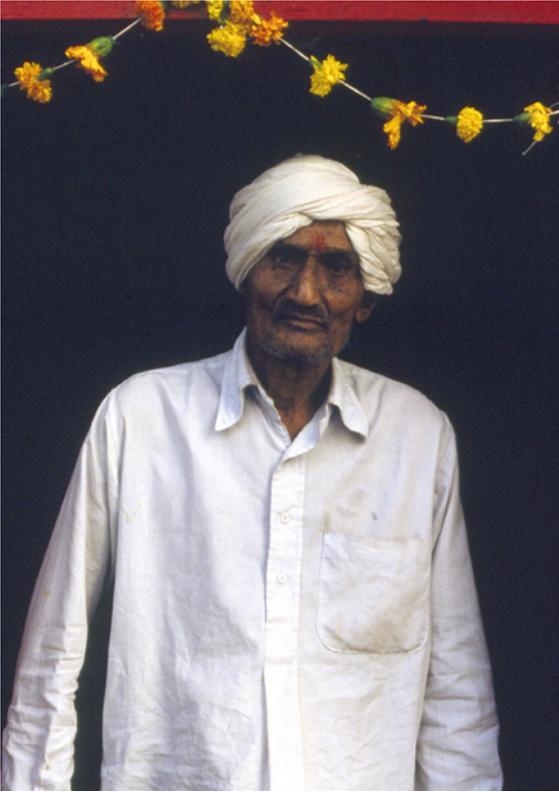


Figure 31
Bappa Baba,
son of Lakshman Ratna Parke

Figure 32
Coin that Sai Baba donated
to Bappa Baba and that
the latter treasured as a relic



little water, vomited some, and then passed away. Just before he passed away, I saw Baba giving nine rupee coins to Lakshmibai. Lakshmibai was always close to Baba, also fixing his food. When Baba took *samādhi*, another lady was present there at the Dvārakāmāi by the name of Bayaji Patil: Baba reclined his body right on her lap, on her thighs, and expired. In the imminence of his death, Baba sent all devotees who were present at the Dvārakāmāi to go to the Dixit *vādā* and take their meal. One gentleman by name Pillai, who was a doctor, was staying there. Baba asked me to go get doctor Pillai and bring him to the Dvārakāmāi because he wanted to see him. I did as Baba told me, but, by the time I got back with doctor Pillai, Baba had expired.

- Q What happened after Sai Baba took *samādhi*?
- A Soon after Baba had dropped the body, many disputes arose in Shirdi between the Muslim and Hindu communities. The Hindu and Muslim groups each claimed Baba's body, by saying that Baba really had been one of them. The Hindus said: "Baba was Hindu, therefore his body should be given to us". The Muslims said: "Baba was a Muslim", and so forth. While this argument raged on, Mister Hari Sitaram Dixit sent a telegram to the District Collector of Ahmednagar. For three days, Baba's body was kept on a plank inside the *cāvaḍī*. Then the District Collector arrived, and he decided the issue. He inspected Baba's body and, seeing that Baba wore a *langoṭī* and other garbs in the Hindu style, came to the conclusion that Baba couldn't be a Muslim; he could only be a Hindu. The *langoṭī* is a Hindu underwear; a sign of his belonging to Hinduism. After these things, the body was given to the Hindus for the celebration of the funeral rites which were performed three days after his passing away, around 5 p.m. Baba's body was placed in the Buti *vādā*. By that time, the Buti *vādā* had been completed and Mister Buti said that Baba had expressed the wish to be placed therein, where a Krishna temple was to be housed, and indeed a Krishna image had already been prepared as per Baba's will: this was to become Sai Baba's Samādhi Temple.
- Q Are you convinced that Sai Baba was Hindu?
- A Yes, Baba was Hindu. His way of dying was according to the Brahmin Hindu custom, *hindū paddhatī brāhmaṇe*.
- T Baba nonetheless had the habit of saying "Allāh Mālik". Nobody knows why [he laughs]. Only he knew. It's a mystery. Whenever some Muslim visitor came to the *masjid*, Baba would advise him to say "Allāh Mālik". In the mosque there are certain things that belong to the Hindu tradition. For example a bell is rung therein, and this is forbidden in the Muslim religion. The same can be said about the presence of the *dhūnī* inside the *masjid*.
- Q What was Sai Baba's daily routine at the *masjid*?
- A Always, at noon *ārtī*, Baba received many *naivedyas*, food offerings. After the *ārtī* was over, he used to distribute all the offerings he had received among the devotees and the poor. This happened every day. Baba was always sitting inside the Dvārakāmāi, on his usual *gādī*.¹⁰
- Q What was Sai Baba's most important teaching?

10 Seat of power (as of a king).

- A Baba gave no *mantras*, no teachings as such to people. He only used to give the ash, *udī*, and his blessings to devotees; that's all.
- Q Was devotion to God or the *guru*, *bhakti*, the primary virtue that Sai Baba asked people to cultivate?
- A One saint once came here to Shirdi from the Himalayas because he wanted to meet Baba. This saint asked Baba: "Show me God, *Brahman*". Then Baba told him: "*Allāh illāh hī bharāe*", which means 'God pervades everything, He is everywhere'. Baba added: "You can see Him in all forms and in all places, in the whole world. He is *Parvardigar*".¹¹ Moreover, Baba said to that saint: "You are in error concerning God. You have misunderstood the reality of *Brahman*. Go wherever you want and see: He is everywhere".
- Q But how can one experience *Brahman*? Did Sai Baba teach a way, a method leading to the experience of the Supreme?
- A Baba told that saint that if he could abandon all his wishes and goods, if he could free his heart and mind from all desires and ideas of possession, then he would surely realize *Brahman*. If one achieves detachment then one experiences *Brahman*. Baba said to him: "Nothing is more important than the purity of the heart, *suddhatā antaḥkaraṇa*".¹²
- Q What do you recall about Sai Baba's habits?
- A There is one big flat stone inside the Dvārakāmāī. Baba always used to sit on this stone; he even took his bath while sitting on it. The water was taken from the well at the Leṇḍī *baug*, the local gardens. Baba used to take a bath every morning. Actually before that, when Baba woke up in the early morning, he used to sit near the fire of the *dhūnī*. He stayed in front of the *dhūnī* for at least one hour and after that he took his bath.
- Q What did he do afterward?
- A After taking his bath, Baba went out for a walk. This was around 8 a.m. He used to go to the Leṇḍī stream, the *nala*, in the garden area, and there he would take care of various plants such as the *nīm*, *audumbar*, and *pipal* trees and give water to them. Then he came back to the Dvārakāmāī. After this, Baba used to go out on his round of begging. Afterward, he came back to the Dvārakāmāī and sat on his *gādī*, his *siṃhāsan*.¹³ Then the people who wanted to meet Baba could approach him and speak to him. Later, the noon *ārtī* was celebrated. At the close of the *ārtī*, Baba would distribute *naivedyas* and, after distributing them, he took his meal.
- Q Did you ever witness any particular miracle, *camatkār*, performed by Baba?
- A Concerning miracles, what I can say is that often Baba would tell the persons gathered at the Dvārakāmāī the particular things that were to happen in the future or that had just happened to people and devotees who were far away from Shirdi. When they later came to Shirdi, everyone could verify the truth of Baba's words: he knew all things beforehand. Often, as soon as a devotee arrived in Shirdi, Baba would immediately ask him: "Why did you go to such and such a place and

11 A term of possibly Persian origin meaning 'God-Almighty-Sustainer'.

12 Lit. 'purity of the internal organ'. The *antaḥkaraṇa* is the seat of thought and feeling.

13 A king's or *guru*'s seat.

why did you behave in such and such a way with that person? Why did you act and speak so and so?”. In this manner people realized the all-knowing nature of Baba down to the last detail, that he knew all things and all persons intimately and thoroughly.

Bappa Baba says [laughing]:

There are so many things to say and which I would like to tell you about Baba, but there is really no time now. We must stop our conversation here since I must take my bath.

However, before ending this conversation I would like to remember one more fact. Daily, Baba used to distribute among the people present at the Dvāarakāmāi a considerable amount of money, between one and two hundred rupees in coins. These sums, which during the day he received from devotees as *dakṣiṇā*, he gave to the poor. In the evening, Baba distributed the money and kept nothing for himself: at night time, he was always with empty pockets. This was his behavior.

┆ Thank you so much. It was really an honor to have this opportunity to speak with you.

Before leaving, I ask permission to take a photo of him and Bappa Baba kindly lets me take his picture.

[Bappa Baba passed away in Shirdi in May 1987]

In Shirdi's library, 11 a.m.

First conversation with Swami Shekhar Rao, my main interpreter, who comes from Karnataka.

Swami Shekhar Rao says:

I arrived here in 1978 and it is seven years that I have lived here in Shirdi. Only once, about five or six months ago, I left Shirdi for a short time, twenty days.

Q How old are you?

A I am almost fifty-six years old.

Q What made you come to Shirdi and remain here?

A One time a Mahārāj¹⁴ from Madhya Pradesh brought me here and I had *darshan* of Baba. This was very important for me and, thereafter, every year, I came to Shirdi for visits. Then, in 1978, while I was here, something happened inside me which told me to stay in Shirdi. From that date, I've been living here. I dreamt of Baba, telling me not to leave. In my experience, Baba is truly God. Whatever difficulty one may have, repeating the name of Baba with faith and love will resolve it. This has been my experience in the past seven years. About seven or eight months ago, I had the desire to go to a pilgrimage place dedicated to Śiva, where Śiva's *linga*¹⁵ is worshipped, but the night before leaving I again dreamt of Baba who told me not to leave Shirdi. Thus, I obeyed.

Q Do you often dream of Baba?

A No, only twice, but on important occasions as I've said.

Q What do you do here in Shirdi?

A For the first four or five years I worked as a gardener for the Sansthān. Then, because of some difficulties, I had to quit. Now I live by Baba's grace, depending upon the offerings and *dakṣiṇās* of devotees. In the last three years, that is from 1982, my mind has quieted down. I have acquired peace of mind, like that of a child, in an automatic and spontaneous way. I look upon other men as friends and companions, and I see women as mothers in my mind and heart. This is the sign of the birth of a *saṃnyāsīn*,¹⁶ which comes automatically, spontaneously.

Q What do you think a devotee should do to be as close as possible to Baba?

A I have read the *Shri Sai Satcharita*¹⁷ more than five times. By pondering over this text, I think I have come to understand the nature and teachings of Sai Baba.

14 Lit. 'great king'. A title used for royalty as well as holy men.

15 The phallus-shaped, aniconic representation of god Śiva.

16 A renunciant.

17 Its author, Govind Raghunath Dabholkar (1859-1929), was a Brahmin servant of the Bombay Government and his last appointment was as a magistrate in the Bandra suburb of Bombay. Though he lacked an academic education he was a poet at heart, well-versed in the classics of Maharashtrian literature such as the *Jñāneśvarī* of Jñāndev and the *Eknāthī Bhāgavata* of Eknāth. Shirdi Sai Baba nicknamed him Hemadpant after the learned thirteenth-century court poet and author of the Yādava dynasty. The *Shri Sai Satcharita*, a work subdivided into fifty-three chapters and comprising 9,308 verses, is the veritable 'Bible' for all Sai Baba's devotees. On this text and its author, see Shepherd, *Sai Baba of Shirdi: A Biographical Investigation*, 59-67; Shepherd, *Sai Baba: Faqir of Shirdi*, 72-5; Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba*, 2: 212-27. See also <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8fIHcNLYLDC>.

- Q What do you think about the life you lead here in Shirdi?
- A I worked as a gardener for the Sansthān. For this service the Sansthān gave me two meals daily, that's all. This is called honorary service, without payment. Now I live thanks to the devotees' *dakṣiṇās*.
- Q Can you please describe a typical day in Shirdi?
- A At 5 a.m. the temple is opened. At 5:15 the morning *ārtī*, called *kākaḍ ārtī*, is celebrated, which terminates at 5:45. At 6 there is the ritual washing, *abhiṣeka*,¹⁸ of Baba's statue. At 6:45 there is another short *ārtī*. Then there are *pūjā* and *darshan*. At twelve there is noon *ārtī*, followed by *pūjā* and *darshan*. I should say that *abhiṣeka* lasts from 7 a.m. until 11 a.m. In the afternoon, at 6 p.m., there is another *ārtī*, and at 10 p.m. there is the final one, making a total of four principal *ārtīs*. In the afternoon there are many *pūjās* and *ārtīs*, there is a great coming and going of devotees and people. Pilgrims of all castes come to Shirdi every day: Muslims, Sikhs, Punjabis, Sindhis, Marathis, Gujaratis, Madrasis, from Andhra, Bengal, Nepal, from all over India. Sometimes even foreigners come.
- Q Do Westerners come often?
- A Yes, although in this period there have been few. I have heard that in America there is a temple dedicated to Sai Baba. Many letters arrive here from outside India.
- Q What are the most important religious festivals held here?
- A In Baba's time, the only one was Rāmanavamī. In 1919 they started celebrating Puṇyatithi.¹⁹ Another important festival is Gurupūrṇimā.²⁰ I have seen six Rāmanavamīs, six Gurupūrṇimās, and six Puṇyatithis. During the three days of festivities, the Sansthān offers special food. Thousands of people come and participate in these festivals.
- Q Since you arrived here in 1978, have new buildings been built to accommodate the increasing number of devotees?
- A When I arrived, the Shanti Nivas edifice was being built. In 1978, the Sai *vāḍā* didn't yet exist. The Bhakta *vāḍā* was built about thirty years ago. They have built a lot here, starting from 1918.
- Q Thus the Sai Baba movement is expanding?
- A Yes, certainly. It is expanding.
- Q Do you think the Sansthān will build more in the future?
- A Yes. The Sansthān has bought more land recently. They have enlarged the *bhojanghar*²¹ which was initially very small, in front of the temple. In 1981, this large and well-organized *bhojanghar*, with tables, etcetera was built. Many people come here.
- Q Do the pilgrims stay here any length of time, or do they usually come and go the same day, after *darshan*?
- A Some come here to do *parāyaṇ*, that is, they stay here for seven days of *saptāha* to Baba.²² These devotees usually remain in Shirdi for sev-

¹⁸ Lit. 'sprinkling'. Anointment ceremony of a deity with water and other substances, such as milk and honey.

¹⁹ The death anniversary of Sai Baba.

²⁰ This festival falls on the full moon day in the month of Āṣāḍh (July-August). On this day, sacred to the memory of sage Vyāsa, Hindus honor and worship their teachers.

²¹ Canteen.

²² The continuous reading of a sacred text such as the *Shri Sai Satcharita* within seven days.

en, ten days. The majority, however, comes and leaves after *darshan*. Others stay from three to five days, with Baba.

- Q Are there special *yajñas* celebrated in Shirdi?
- A No, neither *yajñas* nor *mantras*. Only the four main *ārtīs* and the singing of *bhajans*.²³
- I Just pure devotion to Sai...
- A Yes, yes. Daily *bhajans* are held in the evening, from 7 p.m. to 9:30 p.m.
- Q Are *bhajans* sung only in the evening?
- A Yes, that's all. But during festivals *bhajans* are sung also during the day and there are special rites and functions.
- Q What do you think of the nearby *ashram* of Sakuri? What is your opinion of Sati Godavari Mataji?
- A I think well of her. Sakuri is a nice place. The *ashram* also is very good. I have seen it. There are only women who live there as nuns, with Godavari Mata. There is good service and it is a very silent place, fine for meditation. Upasni Baba took *samādhi* there, at Sakuri.
- Q Was it Shirdi Baba who told him to go to Sakuri?
- A Yes, yes. This happened in Baba's times. Something happened in Shirdi with Upasni Baba, I mean between him and the villagers. Then Upasni Baba went to Sai Baba and asked him to help him. He said: "What should I do now?". Then Shirdi Baba directed him to Sakuri, three miles away from here.
- I Thus it was Baba who directed him to go there, because he had problems with the locals...
- A Yes, yes. That's right.
- Q Do you know why Upasni Baba had problems with the Shirdi villagers?
- A I haven't seen this. I have only heard some old people talk about it and read something in books. That's all. Something must have happened anyway.
- Q Do you think Upasni Baba was Sai Baba's closest disciple in the old days?
- A Yes, yes. He was very close to Sai Baba. That's why he sent him to that place, so as to help him.
- Q Don't you think that Shirdi should be a quieter place, not so noisy and chaotic?
- A Yes, I do. But I believe that the people who come here obtain peace of mind and soul. Many people in fact say: "What a silent mind I have acquired after coming to Shirdi". That is my own experience too.
- Q Are all the inhabitants of Shirdi devotees of Baba?
- A Yes, without doubt. Even Mohammedans. There are several families of Islāmic faith here in Shirdi.
- Q Many Muslim families reside here?
- A Yes, there are more than fifty, actually more than a hundred Muslims living here in Shirdi.
- Q How would you estimate the percentages of Hindus and Muslims?
- A Here about twenty per cent of the population is Muslim. They also come to the temple and take *darshan* daily. Only twenty per cent.
- Q Do you plan to stay on here in Shirdi?

23 Devotional hymns.

A My mind and heart tell me so, to remain here. But it all depends on Baba's will. I tell Baba I want to stay here, at his feet, near him. But it all depends on him.

Q What about your family?

A I have left them all. I have no more family, nothing.

Q But do they know where you are?

A No, they don't. They don't know where I am nor what I do. I never write to them. I have no more relations with them. It is as I told you before: in my mind and heart I think of my fellowmen, of women and children as all being my companions, my mothers, my friends. This is my vision.

Oral Testimonies on Sai Baba

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

Antonio Rigopoulos

5 Shirdi-Kopargaon-Shirdi Saturday, October 19, 1985

Excerpts From My Diary

4:20 p.m. Today was a very good day. Nonetheless, the rhythms are quite stressful because I need to be alert and constantly on guard, trying to make the right decisions at every step. I just installed myself at The Pilgrim's Inn which is really a fine accommodation. The cost is eighty-five rupees a day which at this point I'm glad to pay.

This morning I interviewed Martanda Baba, a wonderful old man who is the son of the famous Mhalsapati, the first devotee of Sai Baba and the one who would have named him "Sai" when he first arrived in Shirdi.¹ Given his venerable age - he is purportedly one hundred and eight years old! - I could interview him only briefly and yet it was a fruitful conversation. Next I interviewed for more than one hour Balaji Pilaji Gurav, an old villager who is apparently ninety years old. We had an excellent talk in his own house. During the first interview which took place in what used to be Mhalsapati's own house,² Martanda Baba gifted me with a copy of a picture which shows Sai Baba holding in his lap Martanda when he was a little boy, with Mhalsapati by his side.

In the afternoon I went to nearby Kopargaon since I hoped to change my dollars at the local bank there. Kopargaon is just about 15 km north of Shirdi and by bus it takes half an hour to reach. The river Godavari, sacred to all Maharashtrians as the Ganges, passes through Kopargaon. Unfortunately, I arrived at the bank too late and couldn't change my money. The exchange rate is around twelve rupees for a dollar. I hope I'll be able to change it at my hotel next Monday, without having to return to Kopargaon. We'll see.

¹ On Mhalsapati, see Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba*, 2: 1-42; Shepherd, *Sai Baba of Shirdi: A Biographical Investigation*, 126-7. See also <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w287rCLSeLM>.

² On Mhalsapati's house, see Williams, *Experiencing Sai Baba's Shirdi: A Guide*, 116-18.

The weather is always good and the sun burns a lot.

Perhaps I will be able to interview Sri Narayan Baba this afternoon after 5! I and Swami Shekhar Rao discovered that he is here in Shirdi right now, together with numerous devotees. Really hope to have a conversation with him. In the house of Balaji Pilaji Gurav I could notice photos of Sri Narayan Baba as well as a few of his brochures. I am somewhat tired and also have a bit of a headache but am quite satisfied of the work done so far.

7:15 p.m., in my room at The Pilgrim's Inn. Unfortunately, I could not interview Sri Narayan Baba. When we went to look for him, he had just left to go back to his temple and headquarters in Bombay, where he will celebrate Puṇyatithi, Sai Baba's death anniversary. Too bad. Perhaps I will be able to see him once I return to Bombay.

Spoke with people of the Sansthān. They gave me the official program of the Shri Puṇyatithi Festival which will be held here in Shirdi between October 21 and October 23. They told me I might have a chance of speaking to the head of the Sansthān, its manager, on October 24 when the Puṇyatithi celebrations will be over. This year Vijayā Daśamī,³ the holiday on which Sai Baba passed away, falls on October 22. I am in Shirdi just at the most propitious time, during which the *samādhi* of Sai Baba is being celebrated. This is really a grace and hope to be able to participate in most of the celebrations.

Tomorrow I hope to have a long conversation with Shivner Swami at the *cāvaḍī*, after the passing one I had late this afternoon. After that I will return to Sakuri, to further visit the Śrī Upāsni Kanyākumārī *ashram*. In the evening I'll go back to the Shirdi Sansthān. I have asked the people of the Sansthān if I can buy some issues of *Sai Leela*, the monthly magazine which they told me is published in English since 1960 (prior to this date it was published only in Marāṭhī). Hope to find some old issues.

Late in the afternoon, I taped another brief conversation with Swami Shekhar Rao. In a short while I'll go down and have something to eat at the hotel restaurant. Hope the food is good. Being all alone it is important that I eat and drink well and have some good sleep, so as to keep myself in good shape.

³ Also known as Dasara, it is the culmination of the "nine night" (Navarātri) festival, celebrating the goddess Durgā's defeat of the buffalo-demon Mahiṣāsura. It is known as Vijayā Daśamī since it coincides with the climax of the Rām Līlā festival, on the tenth day (*daśamī*) of which Rām's victory (*vijaya*) over the demon Rāvaṇa is celebrated.

श्री साईबाबा संस्थान शिर्डी

-० श्री साईबाबा संस्थान शिर्डी -०-

**SHRI PUNYATITHI
FESTIVAL 1985**

21 Oct. to 23 Oct. 1985



- उत्सव कार्यक्रम पत्रिका -

FESTIVAL PROGRAMME

Note - Programme Are Subject to Change According to Convenience
टीप- सोईप्रमाणे कार्यक्रमात बदल करण्यात येईल.

-० श्री साईबाबा संस्थान शिर्डी द्वारा प्रकाशित -०-

Published by-Shri Sai Baba Sansthan Shirdi

First Day		कार्यक्रम
Monday 21st Oct. 1985 Ashwin shukla / 8 Shukla, 1907.		
Programme	Timing	कार्यक्रम
Kakad Arti to Shri Sai Baba	5.15 am. to 5-45	श्री श्री काकड वारती
Procession of Pothi & Portrait of Shri Sai Baba from Samadhi Mandir to Dwarkamai via Guruthan.	6.00 am. to 6.30	श्रीबा वोटोची व पोथीची निरवगुण व श्रीद्वारकामाई स्वयंसेवा (निरवगुण समाधी मंदीरावतून दुवकामावार्जे श्रारकामाई वरुडे वा निरवगुण)
1) Vena will be carried by Shri S. V. Savant		१) वना मा. श्री. एच. व्ही. सावंत हे घेतील.
2) Pothi will be carried by Shri B. V. Khamkar.		२) पोथी मा. श्री. बी. व्ही. खामकर हे घेतील.
3) Shri Sai Babers Photo will be carried by Shri P. V. Karkhanshi & Shri K. H. Kakre Akhand parayana of Pothi with effect from 6-30 A. M. of 21st Octo. 1985 at 22nd 6.00 a. m.		३) श्री साईबाबा वोटो मा. श्री. पी. व्ही. कारखानशी व मा. श्री. के. एच. काकरे हे दोन चालदारांचे सहकार्य घेतील. व त्यानंतर श्रारकामाई वरुडे प्रवास तिळावार्जे विधी
rsoy jata or Shri Sai Baba & Devotional songs etc.	6.30 a. m. to 7.30 a. m.	श्रीबा संकलनात व मातम बाहेर कार्यक्रम
Abhishek Pooja (No Satyanarayan Pooja)	8.00 a. m.	अभिषेक पूजा (सायनायक अभिषेक)
Auction of Sacred clothes ect. of Shri Sai Baba as Prasad to devotees	4.00 to 6.00 a. m.	(सत्यनारायण पूजा होणार नाहीत) श्री मा सर्व केल्या वारपोची व दुत वरुडो प्रवास तिळावार्जे विधी
Noon Arti & Tirtha praad.	12.00 to 12.30 noon	माथवाणु वारती व तीर्थप्रसाद
Adhyaya reading	3.00 to 4.00 p. m.	निताचे पोथी वाचन
Kirtan by Sau. Saroj Barde Bombay	4.00 to 6.00 p. m.	ह. स. व. श्री. सरोज वरुडे मुंबई यांचे कर्तन
Dhooparti	6.00 to 6.30 p. m.	दु. पा र ती
Vocal Music by Shri. Anant	7.30 to 9.00 p. m. & S. Damale, Bombay	दु. अनांत एच. दामले, मुंबई यांचा माथवाणा कार्यक्रम
Palangun Procession of Shri Sai Baba through Village	11.30 p. m. to 9.15 p. m. to 11.00 p. m.	श्रीबा पालगुणी यावाजुन निरवगुण
Shajari	11.00 p. m. to 11-30 p. m.	शे जा र ती

Main Day		कार्यक्रम
Tuesday 22-10-85 Ashwin Shukla. To Vijaya Dashmi		
Programme	Timing	कार्यक्रम
Kakad Arti to Shri Sai Baba	5.15 to 5.45 a. m.	श्री श्री काकड वारती
Procession of Pothi & Portrait of Shri Sai Baba from Dwarkamai to Samadhi Mandir via Guruthan	6.00 a. m. to 6.30 a. m.	श्री बा वोटोची व पोथीची निरवगुण वारकामाईजून मुवध्यातमावर्जे समाधी-मंदीरावार्जे वा निरवगुणी
1) Vena will be carried by Shri S. V. Savant		१) वना मा. एच. व्ही. सावंत हे घेतील.
2) Pothi will be carried by Shri B. V. Khamkar		२) पोथी मा. श्री. बी. व्ही. खामकर हे घेतील.
3) Shri Sai Baba's Photo Will be Carried by Shri P. V. Karkhanshi & Shri K. H. Kakre		३) श्री साईबाबा वोटो मा. श्री. पी. व्ही. कारखानशी व मा. श्री. के. एच. काकरे हे दोन चालदारांचे सहकार्य घेतील. व त्यानंतर श्रारकामाई वरुडे प्रवास.
Holy Bath of Shri Sai Baba and Devotional Songs etc.	6.30 a. m. to 7.30 a. m.	श्रीबा संकलनात व मातम बाहेर कार्यक्रम
Abhishek Pooja (No Satyanarayan Pooja)	8.00 a. m. to 11.00 a. m.	अभिषेक पूजा (सायनायक अभिषेक)
Auction of Sacred clothes ect. of Shri Sai Baba as Prasad to devotees		(सत्यनारायण पूजा होणार नाहीत) श्री मा सर्व केल्या वारपोची व दुत वरुडो प्रवास तिळावार्जे विधी
Bhikhan Zoli Programme	9.00 a. m.	श्रीबा संकलनात व मातम बाहेर कार्यक्रम
Kirtan by Sau. Saroj Barde Bombay	10.30 to 12.00 a. m.	ह. स. व. श्री. सरोज वरुडे मुंबई यांचे कर्तन
Noon Arti and Tirtha praad.	12.00 to 12.30 p. m.	माथवाणु वारती व तीर्थप्रसाद
Aradhana vidhi Programme	1.00 to 2.30 p. m.	निताचे पोथी वाचन
Adhyaya Reading	3.00 to 4.00 p. m.	दु. पा र ती
Sinhalangan Procession From Samadhi mandir to Shri Khandoba and back	5.00 to 6.00 p. m.	दु. अनांत एच. दामले, मुंबई यांचा माथवाणा कार्यक्रम
Dhooparti	6.00 to 6.30 p. m.	दु. पा र ती
Rath (Chariot) Procession through Village	9.15 to 11.00 pm	श्रीबा वारपोची यावाजुन निरवगुण
Artist's Programmes	11.00 to 6 a. m. [up to next day]	कलाकारांची प्रदर्शनादी याना बाहेरी वारुडे वारुडे प्रवास तिळावार्जे विधी
Samadhi Mandir will remain open for darshan through out night		टीप- समाधीमंदीर रात्री रात्री उघड राहील.

Last Day		कार्यक्रम
Wednesday 23rd Oct. 1985 Ashwin shukla / 10 Shukla, 1907.		
Programme	Timing	कार्यक्रम
Holy Bath of Shri Sai Baba & Devotional songs etc.	6.30 a. m. to 7.30 a. m.	श्रीबा संकलनात व मातम बाहेर कार्यक्रम
Abhishek Pooja (No Satyanarayan Pooja)	8. to 10.30 a. m.	अभिषेक पूजा (सायनायक अभिषेक)
Auction of Sacred clothes ect. of Shri Sai Baba as Prasad to devotees	8.00 to 10.00 a. m.	(सत्यनारायण पूजा होणार नाहीत) श्री मा सर्व केल्या वारपोची व दुत वरुडो प्रवास तिळावार्जे विधी
Gopalka Kirtan and Dahihandi Programme by Sau. Saroj Barde	10.30 to 12.00 noon	ह. स. व. श्री. सरोज वरुडे यांचे कर्तन व दहीहंडी कार्यक्रम
Noon Arti & Tirtha praad.	12.00 to 12.30 noon	माथवाणु वारती व तीर्थप्रसाद
Adhyaya reading	3.00 to 4.00 p. m.	निताचे पोथी वाचन
Dhooparti	6.00 to 6.30 p. m.	दु. पा र ती
Vocal Music by Kum. Kirti Shikdar	7.30 to 8.00 p. m.	कु. कीर्ती शिकदार पुणे यांचा माथवाणा कार्यक्रम
Puna		पुणे जा र ती
Shajari	10.00 p. m. to 10-30 p. m.	शे जा र ती
Drama Written Acharya Atr	10.30 to 1.30 a. m.	आचार्य अत्रे विधीत नाटक घराबाहेर वारुडे वारुडे प्रवास तिळावार्जे विधी
BAHER* by Natya Rasik Sarch Shirdi		
Festival terminates		उत्सव सांगता

Figures 33-36 The official program for Sai Baba's death anniversary, 21-23 October 1985 (1-4)

Interviews of the day

In Shirdi, Martanda Mhalsapati's house, which was his father's house, 9:30-10:30 a.m.

First conversation with Martanda Mhalsapati, known as Martanda Baba, son of Mhalsapati Chimnaji Nagare (d. 1922) who was the hereditary priest of the local Khaṇḍobā temple and Sai Baba's first devotee.

There is uncertainty on Martanda Baba's age. He himself claimed to be one hundred and eight years old. Uddhavrao Madhavrao Deshpande, however, told me that he was ninety-two. B.V. Narasimhaswami, in his *Life of Sai Baba* (2: 10), states that Martanda was born on Janmāṣṭamī (Krishna's birthday, falling in July-August) of 1897, whereas Ramalingaswamy, in his *Ambrosia in Shirdi* (52), states that he was born seven years earlier, on Janmāṣṭamī of 1890: thus in 1985 Martanda would have been either eighty-eight years old (as per Narasimhaswami's account) or ninety-five years old (as per Ramalingaswamy's account). The majority of the literature on Sai Baba follows Narasimhaswami and gives 1897 as Martanda's birth date.

Q What are your memories of Sai Baba?

A Baba himself arranged and celebrated my marriage, when my father Mhalsapati was still alive; I don't remember the exact year. I was forty years old when Baba took *samādhi*: I have seen that with my very eyes.

Q What do you remember of those days?

A When my father died he was given *samādhi*, and the *samādhi* was placed in his own house.

Q You are saying that Mhalsapati's tomb is here in this house?

A Yes, it is here [he indicates it to me]. This is the special feature of this house.

Q What happened at the time of Sai Baba's *samādhi*?

A At the time of the Dasara festival, on October 15, 1918, Baba expired, he left the body. Then, in 1922, my father also died.

Q I have read that your father was very close to Sai Baba. Do you recall any particular instance of their closeness?

A Baba loved our family very very much. He made many gifts to my father: here you can see Baba's *kafnī*, that is, his robe, a *kāṭhī*, that is, Baba's stick...

Q Is it this yellow stick I see here?

A Yes, right. He also gave us money, as these three silver rupee coins you see here [he shows them to me]. These three coins are the sign of Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Maheś, they symbolize the divine triad, the *trimūrti*.

Q What did you do in your youth, in Sai Baba's times?

A In those days I often went to the *masjid* and there I helped Baba by doing various services for him. For example, when Baba wanted to smoke the earthen pipe, the *cilīm*, I helped him to prepare it.

Q Did you and your father both helped Sai Baba?

A Yes, we both helped him. My father was fully devoted to Baba and we were all very close to him. We used to go see him every day.

Q Are these I see here pictures of your family with Sai Baba?

A Yes [he shows me one photo in which Baba stands at the centre, Mhalsapati is to his left, and Mhalsapati's wife, that is, Martanda's mother,



Figure 37 Sai Baba holding in his lap Martanda, son of Mhalsapati (left)

stands to his right]. My mother's name was Shivabai; this photo was taken near the Khaṇḍobā *mandir*.

Q Could you tell me something about the famous exclamation put forward by your father, when he first met Sai Baba?

A When Baba came to Shirdi the second time,⁴ my father addressed him with the words “*Āo Sāī*”, meaning: ‘Come, Sai’. My father was always staying at the Khaṇḍobā temple, he was the *pujārī*⁵ of that temple, and Baba made his appearance just there. It was my father who gave the name ‘Sai’ to Baba.

Q But what does ‘Sai’ mean?

A ‘Sai’ means ‘to give blessings to devotees’. Whoever becomes a *saṃnyāsīn*, an ascetic or a monk is called ‘Sai’.⁶

Q You mean to say that any ascetic may be called Sai?

T Yes.

Q Is it then an honorific title?

T Yes, an honor.

I He called him Sai only, however, not Sai Baba...

T Yes. He said “*Āo Sāī*”. Afterward everyone started calling him that way: Sai, Sai, Sai. Then, when he started growing older, people started calling him Sai Baba. The ‘Baba’ was added. When he arrived in Shirdi the second time he was only twenty-one years old. This is why

⁴ At the time of his definite settlement in the village.

⁵ Lit. ‘temple priest’.

⁶ The term *sāī*, with nasalization of the *ī*, is derived from Persian *sa’ih*. It is commonly applied to Muslim wandering ascetics.

Mhalsapati just said: “*Āo Sāī*”. Then, after twenty, twenty-five years, since Sai was growing older, people added the ‘Baba’ to Sai.

Q It is thus a title of respect?

T Yes, out of respect... Baba means ‘old one’. Like that.⁷

Q Is there anything you would like to underline as being especially important about Sai Baba?

A I have lots of memories but I’m really weak and have trouble talking; we should stop our conversation here.

Q Can I take your picture?

A Yes, sure.

Q One last question: who is Sai Baba for you? Is he God, *Brahman*?

A After some years, we came to the conclusion that Baba was *Bhagavān*, God: our hearts told us so. We came to realize that he was just like an *avatāra*, like Rām and Kṛṣṇa. Therefore, we offered him *pūjās* and my father performed the *ārtī* in Baba’s honor. Daily, at noon *ārtī*, my father used to offer *naivedyas* to Baba, food offerings. Baba would take some and then distribute the rest among the people who were present at the *maṣjid*.

Q Is there any other thing you would like to add?

A Just about fifteen days before he took *samādhi*, Baba told my father these words: “I am going. Within fifteen to twenty days I will be gone”. And, indeed, after fifteen days or so he left his body.

Q And what happened immediately after Sai Baba’s death?

A For three days Baba’s body was kept on a plank. Disputes arose. The Mohammedans said: “Baba belongs to us”. The Hindus said: “No, Baba belongs to us”. Then a court commissioner came to Shirdi and he decided what had to be done declaring that Baba was Hindu. Thus Baba’s body was given to the Hindus.⁸

T They discovered that Baba wore a *lanḡoṭī*,⁹ and thus it was decided that the body should be given to the Hindus.

Q When was the *lanḡoṭī* discovered?

T After three days.

Q How did they find it?

T They checked the body; the commissioner examined Sai Baba’s body. Then it was decided... The *lanḡoṭī* which Baba wore belongs to Hinduism.

Q Could you ask Martanda Baba if he is convinced that Sai Baba was a Hindu?

T It is naturally so...

Q Are you convinced that Sai Baba was Hindu? How do you explain that he so often spoke about God calling him Allāh or Faqīr?

A Yes, Baba was Hindu. But Baba was loving toward all, whether they be Hindus or Mohammedans. He was loving to all. Be they *faqīrs*, *sādhus*, *yogīs*, Mohammedans, etcetera. he loved everybody.

Q You mean that he was favorable to all, that he made no distinctions whatsoever among people based on their religion, caste, stage of life, etcetera?

⁷ In Hindī the term *bābā* means grandfather and is used to respectfully address old men and ascetics.

⁸ On these issues, see Satpathy, *New Findings on Shirdi Sai Baba*, 1-20, 170-2.

⁹ Waist cloth, a strip of cloth covering the genitals. This *lanḡoṭī* was worshipped by Balaji Pilaji Gurav’s family.

- T Yes. He would often take his meals with *faqīrs* and eat mutton or fish with them.
- Q What about Sai Baba's miracles?
- A Baba only gave blessings to devotees, *āśīrvād*. To devotees as well as to everybody who came to see him, he used to give the *udī*. He gave the *udī* and blessed them.
- Q Did he place his hand on their heads or not?
- T Sometimes he himself put the *udī* on their foreheads. In any case, he always gave *udī* to the people. This was the main thing: Baba's blessings.
- Q Sai Baba's blessings meant that everything would be all right?
- T Yes. Whatever a person's problems, Baba's blessings were the assurance that everything would be all right. Then a person was not to worry any more.
- I [to my interpreter, Swami Shekhar Rao] Please thank Shri Martanda Baba. Let us leave him some *dakṣiṇā*. Tell him it was an honor to have this opportunity of speaking with him.

Before leaving, I ask to take a few photos and Martanda Baba grants me permission. He also shows me some other pictures of he and his father with Sai Baba.

[Martanda Baba passed away in Shirdi the following year, in 1986]

In Shirdi, Balaji Pilaji Gurav's house, 11-12:15 p.m.

First conversation with Shri Balaji Pilaji Gurav, who settled in Shirdi in 1912.

Q How old are you?

A I'm ninety years old.

T When Baba took *samādhi*, he was over thirty.

Balaji Pilaji [correcting the interpreter]:

When I was twenty, not thirty, Baba took *samādhi*. When Baba took *samādhi*, I was present there, and he wore the very *lanṅoṭī* which I have here.

T He has the *lanṅoṭī* Baba wore, that very one.

Balaji Pilaji says:

Baba gave me money, metallic coins, not as *dakṣiṇā* but as money for my economic necessities. I have here some coins which I still keep.

Q Could you tell me what, in your opinion, was Sai Baba's most important teaching?

A I became a close devotee of Baba when I was fourteen years old. I came to Shirdi with my father in 1912; I was fourteen then.¹⁰ When Baba took *samādhi* I was twenty. In the six years between 1912 and 1918 I received a lot from Baba.

Q What did you use to do with Baba?

A My father played music, did *bhajans*. My father's name was Pilaji Gurav. I played too, the *tabla* in particular.¹¹ My father played the *sanai*.

Q Is it true that Baba often got angry?

A Sometimes, when I was young, I remember having been beaten by Baba. Sometimes Baba would beat me.

Q Why did he beat you, were there any reasons?

A No. Without reason or cause... Baba would simply get angry with us youngsters. One time I remember going to the Leṅḍī *baug* with Baba. Some trees which Baba had planted and which he took care of had been cut and damaged. Then Baba got angry and told me: "Haven't you seen this? Why do you allow the trees to get damaged? Go away...". So Baba said.

Q Did he beat you?

T No, no, he told him to go away.

Q You mean that Baba got angry because Balaji Pilaji was supposed to guard the trees and he hadn't done so?

T Yes, yes. In those days he was the keeper of Baba's garden.

Q Thus, there probably were some young people who had climbed up the trees, damaging them?

T Yes, right.

¹⁰ Balaji Pilaji Gurav and his extended family came from Korhale, a small village about eight miles away from Shirdi. On the incident that brought him to settle permanently in Shirdi, see Chitluri, *Baba's Divine Symphony*, 38-9.

¹¹ It is reported that he also used to play the clarion at *ārtī* times.

Balaji Pilaji adds:

I told Baba: “Baba, how can you talk to me like this, blaming me for the damage? The trees are the Government property, they belong to others!”. But Baba said: “Even trees have a life of their own, which needs to be safeguarded. They must not be cut or damaged. One must prevent this from happening”.

- I So someone had literally cut off parts of the trees: this was the reason why Baba was so mad.
- T Yes, yes. Baba said that one shouldn't do that.

Balaji Pilaji remembers:

Once, during the Rāmanavamī festival, a water shortage occurred in Shirdi. There was no more water and nobody knew what to do. There were thousands of pilgrims in Shirdi for Rāmanavamī, and the situation was serious. The villagers thought: “What shall we do, where shall we go?”. Then everybody went to Baba and asked him what should be done. Baba then did the following: he took from the villagers some *jowar*¹² and he poured it in the village well which was not supplying water anymore. It so happened that soon after having poured the *jowar* in the well, lots of water appeared in it again. From that moment water was never scarce, and we were able to fetch it from the well at all times.

- Q Was this a miracle of Sai Baba?
- T Yes, this is the meaning.
- Q Could you tell me something concerning Sai Baba's teachings? In the six years you were close to him, did he ever give out any instructions?
- A When someone came to Baba, Baba used to simply give him *udī*, saying: “Don't worry anymore. Don't think about the future. Go, and all will be well”.
- Q He would say so?
- T Yes, and he never gave any *mantra* to anybody.
- Q Could you explain why Baba made such a frequent use of Islāmic words and phrases, such as calling God “Faḳīr”?
- A In those days many *faḳīrs* used to come to Shirdi and meet Baba. Baba used to stay with them, take his food with them, and do as they did. Baba always said “Allāh Mālik”, ‘God is one’. He would always raise up his finger when saying this.
- Q So raising his forefinger he would utter “Allāh Mālik”?
- T Yes. In the same way he used to say the names of Rām, Kṛṣṇa, Śiva...
- Q Did he also use Hindu names such as Rām, Kṛṣṇa, Śiva, etcetera?
- A Yes, both Hindu and Muslim names... both.
- Q What did Baba do during the day? What were his most important occupations?
- A In the early morning, when Baba got up, he would go to the Leṇḍī *baug* and then, when he returned, he would go into the village around 9 a.m. He used to cry out to people, saying: “*Lāo mayi, lāo mayi*”, which means: ‘Give to me, give to me!’. He asked for something to eat. Then,

12 Sorghum, the staple grain of Maharashtra. Here the *jowar* was ground into flour.

after about an hour, he would return to the Dvārakāmāi. Here he would take a bath. Then he would be ready for the noon *ārtī*.

- Q After having begged and come back to the Dvārakāmāi, could people go to him and meet with him freely, or did they need Baba's permission to have access to him and talk with him?
- A No. Everybody had free access to the mosque and could talk to Baba. However, sometimes Baba would not allow certain persons to come inside. For example, there was one *faqīr* whom he didn't allow in.
- T I can't remember the name of that *faqīr* right now. I'll tell you later. It's written in the books.¹³
- I Thus, in some cases Baba did not allow certain people in.
- T Yes. Only in special cases though. Even to Mohammedans he didn't permit entry in the *masjid*.¹⁴
- Q Do you know if Baba ever gave any specific teachings to anybody?
- T He has already answered this. Baba would only give *udī* and blessings. That's all. No teaching, no *mantra* to anybody.
- Q Were there more Hindus or Muslims coming to see Baba?
- A Eighty per cent Hindus. Only about twenty per cent Muslims.
- Q What was Sai Baba's personality like, when he interacted with people?
- A During the day, Baba would never rest or sleep. After the noon *ārtī* many devotees came to Baba, to meet him. Sometimes *bhajans* were performed, the names of God were sung, *kīrtans*, etcetera.
- Q Thus Baba would rest only at night?
- A Baba would have dinner between 7 and 8 p.m. One night he slept at the Dvārakāmāi and the following one at the *cāvaḍī*.
- Q What time did he used to get up?
- A At 5 a.m.
- Q Did you ever see Sai Baba pray or meditate?
- A After 10 a.m, coming back from the village to the *masjid*, Baba would return to the Leṇḍī *baug* and stay there an hour or one and a half hours. He stayed there alone, no one would be near him.
- Q Would he pray or meditate there, you think?
- T Nobody ever saw what he was doing there. So Balaji Pilaji says.
- Q Were all the villagers Baba devotees in those days?
- T Yes, yes. Everybody.
- Q Could you ask him about Narayan Baba?
- T Today he was here in Shirdi. Today only.
- Q Can we go see him?
- T Yes, I'll take you. I've seen him today. He was in the temple.
- Q Can you ask him if he believes Narayan Baba to be, as he claims, a 'medium' of Sai Baba? Narayan Baba claims to be in touch with Sai

¹³ Most probably Balaji Pilaji Gurav had in mind the case of Haji Siddiq Falke, a Muslim from Kalyan; see Dabholkar, *Shri Sai Satcharita: The Life and Teachings of Shirdi Sai Baba*, 172-5 (ch. 11, vv. 77-113).

¹⁴ For instance, G.S. Khaparde (1854-1938) - a prominent lawyer and politician, member of the central legislative assembly who served as an aide to the nationalist leader B.G. Tilak - in his diary entry of January 20, 1912, writes: "Presently a Jahagirdar of a village somewhere hereabout came and Sayin Baba would not let him approach, much less worship. Many people interceded for him in vain. Appa Kote came and did his utmost to secure at least the usual kind of *puja* for the Jahagirdar and Sayin Baba relented so far as to let him enter the *masjid* and worship the pillar near the fireplace, but he would not give *udī*" (*Shirdi Diary of the Hon'ble Mister G.S. Khaparde*, 59).

Baba's spirit from 1959, but the Sansthān doesn't believe him and regards him as just one of Baba's devotees.

A Narayan Baba has been coming to Shirdi for twenty years. He used to work as a keeper of the railway track. Now, however, he has left his job. Now his only concern has become devotion to Sai Baba. There is a Sai Baba temple which he has erected in Panvel, in Bombay. I've heard that people have erected Sai Baba temples even in America... in America.

Q But do you believe that Narayan Baba is a 'medium' of Sai Baba?

A Nowadays many people come here with Narayan Baba.

Q But do you believe him to possess these powers?

A Narayan Baba is just a Baba devotee.

Q Thus you view him as a mere devotee?

T Yes; he doesn't seem to possess any power.

Balaji Pilaji [correcting the interpreter]:

He has some powers really.

Q However he chiefly views him as just a devotee of Baba?

T Yes, correct.

Balaji Pilaji adds:

I know nothing about the *guru*, the teacher of Narayan Baba. I think that, for him, Sai Baba is his teacher... that is, I think he considers Sai Baba to be his teacher.

Q Could you tell us a particularly significant story about Sai Baba?

A Well, that of the water shortage and of the pouring of *jowar* in the well was one. Sai Baba never drank tea. One day a *saṃnyāsin* from Haridvar came to meet with Baba. At that time that *saṃnyāsin* was really a true *saṃnyāsin*, that is, he didn't possess anything apart from his *kafnī*... He told Baba: "You see in what conditions I find myself. Mahārāj, Mahārāj, Mahārāj, please help me!". Baba didn't say anything to anybody and it so happened that one Deshpande,¹⁵ one of Baba's devotees, brought food: bread, tea, and other things to the *maṣjid*. This Deshpande brought in these things and served them to Baba. But Baba said: "No, this food is not for me. Give it to this *saṃnyāsin*". So goes the story.

Q Without that monk asking or telling anything to Sai Baba?

T No, no. The monk told Sai Baba of his necessities, and Baba, without telling anything to anybody, had that Deshpande bring him food automatically, spontaneously.

Q Thus the food came without any request?

T Deshpande brought it, and he offered it to Baba.

Balaji Pilaji [describing a photo of Sai Baba leaving the *maṣjid* for the Leṇḍī gardens]:

This man, from left to right, is Nana Saheb Nimonkar. The last one to the right is Buti Saheb. The one in the middle, holding the regal umbrella, is Bhau¹⁶ Shinde.

¹⁵ Most probably Madhavrao Deshpande alias Shyama.

¹⁶ Lit. 'brother'.



Figure 38 Sai Baba on his way to the Leṅḍī gardens. To his left is Gopalrao Buti, Nanasahab Nimonkar stands on his right. The leper Bhagoji Shinde holds the ceremonial umbrella. This photo was probably taken around 1912

Q Thus Mhalsapati is not in this picture?

T No, he is not in it. Here they were heading toward the Leṇḍī *baug*.

Balaji Pilaji says:

In 1914, Buti Saheb came to Shirdi to meet Baba. Before coming here he went to visit Gajanan Maharaj at Shegaon. It was Gajanan Maharaj who told Buti to go to Shirdi and meet Baba. He added: "He will give you what you long for".

I The connection between Gajanan Maharaj and Shirdi Baba is most interesting.

T First Buti Saheb went to Gajanan Maharaj, and then Gajanan Maharaj directed him to Shirdi to meet Sai Baba.

Balaji Pilaji narrates:

Some astrologer had predicted to Buti that the time of his death was approaching. He told Buti to be careful, even though there was really no way to escape fate. Thus Buti was desperate. For this reason he first went to Gajanan Maharaj and the latter advised him to go see Sai Baba. After meeting with Sai Baba and having explained his situation, Baba... [Balaji Pilaji interrupts his narration, getting back to it soon after]

I should add that, when Buti Saheb came to Shirdi, he met with a man called Patil who was a local villager.¹⁷ Patil told Buti to go meet Baba, and that all would be well... to not worry about anything and to not fear. Buti went, met with Baba, and thus was able to escape death. Only then did Buti become a close disciple of Baba.

Patil told Buti Saheb: "Go to Baba and sit there, stay there. Don't wander here and there. Then all will be well". That evening passed and nothing bad happened to him. Thus he was able to escape death.

T Buti was an educated man and also a very rich man, a millionaire.

Balaji Pilaji continues:

The day after, around 8 a.m., Buti was massaging Baba's legs. Then Buti told Baba he wanted to leave since he needed to go to the bathroom... He said: "Give me permission to leave now". But Baba told Buti: "No, not now. You must not go anywhere now; you may go later". That same day, but an hour later, Buti again asked Baba if he could leave saying: "I must go to the toilette Baba". But Baba again did not give him permission to leave saying: "Not now. You must not go anywhere now". Only after 10:30 a.m. did Baba give Buti permission to leave and go where he wanted.

Q What is the explanation of all this?

T Buti was afraid of the prediction that astrologer had made, and by going to Baba he avoided evil consequences. Baba did not allow Buti to leave since those were particularly dangerous and negative hours for him.

Balaji Pilaji continues:

After 10:30 a.m. he finally reached the toilette in the grounds' area. In those days only the grounds' area had toilettes. There was also a *sevak*, a servant,

¹⁷ Either Bayaji Kote Patil or Tatya Kote Patil.



Figure 39 From left to right, the Shirdi villagers Martanda Mhalsapati, Lakshmbai Shinde, Bappaji Lakshman Ratna Parke, Balaji Pilaji Gurav, and Bayaji Kote Patil. This picture, taken from a book, was shown to me by Balaji Pilaji Gurav

with Buti. In fact, Baba had told Buti: “Don’t go there alone but bring along your *sevak* with you”. The *sevak* in this case was like a bodyguard. Then, they went down to the grounds with some water and there Buti walked some distance away from where the *sevak* was. Buti was then heard crying, and when his *sevak* came running toward him he found the skin of a snake near him. Crying, they speedily left the place and returned back.

Q Had a snake bitten Buti?

T A snake was there but it didn’t bite him, no.

Balaji Pilaji:

So they ran away and went to Baba. I myself, Balaji Gurav, was sent by Baba to that place to see what had happened.

Q Baba knew that something was going to happen?

T Yes, he knew.

Balaji Pilaji:

I went to see if there was a snake there, so that I could tell Baba. But I found only the skin, the armor of the snake there. I took the skin in my hands and brought it to Baba. Or actually, having found the skin only, I threw it away and told Baba that I had found only the skin. Indeed, a snake changes its skin every six months.

Q What is the significance of this whole story?

T Buti escaped death, since if he had gone to the toilette between 8 and 10:30 a.m. he would have been bitten by the snake which was there. On the contrary, going there later, he saved his life.¹⁸

¹⁸ This story, albeit with noticeable differences, is told in Dabholkar, *Shri Sai Satcharita: The Life and Teachings of Shirdi Sai Baba*, 358 (ch. 22, vv. 93-103).

Balaji Pilaji:

Then Buti said to everybody, the villagers and so on, that Baba had saved his life. He said he wanted to build a *vādā* here, as a token of gratitude. He had the money for doing it. He asked Baba and Baba said yes, he accepted his offering.¹⁹

After noon *ārtī*, when Baba took his food, he would be surrounded by lots of animals that would partake of his food: dogs, cats, crows, etcetera. Baba called them lovingly.²⁰

Q Thus he loved animals?

T Yes, yes. He loved animals.

Balaji Pilaji:

Baba would call them and partake his food with them. He would throw food at them.

Q Did Baba sing a song when he gave out the *udī*? I've read there was one which said: "*Ramte Rām āojī āojī...*"²¹

A Devotees loved to take out the *udī* from the *dhūnī*. Then they would give it to Baba, putting it in his hands. Baba would then return it to them in the same way.

Q Was this a sign of blessing?

T Yes, yes. It was so.

Q What's the power of *udī*?

A If someone has any trouble...

Q Both physical and mental?

A Yes: physical, mental, pain in the stomach, in the legs, in the body, fever, anything. If one came to Baba and told him about his problems, Baba would give him the *udī*. After having eaten the *udī* and having put it on one's forehead, the cure would be naturally brought about.

I Well, this is quite important...

T This is what people believe concerning the *udī*.

Q Is it true that Baba didn't want people to offer him any kind of worship, and that only after a long time he permitted it?

A I arrived here only in 1912; I wasn't here before. I wouldn't know how to answer this. I met Sai Baba in 1912 only. From 1912 to 1918, in these six years, what I have seen I can tell you about.

Q What was the people's reaction to Baba's taking *samādhi*? What happened at the time of his death, on that October 15 around 2 p.m.?

A Here I was, seated on the *gādī* [Balaji Pilaji shows me a picture].

T [explaining the picture] One of Baba's devotees, at the time when Baba left the body. Balaji Pilaji Gurav was there at the time of Baba's *samādhi*, sitting outside of the *masjid*. He was about twenty years old at the time. With Baba was also Bayajibai, and Baba left the body leaning on her lap, on her heart. So Pilaji says.

¹⁹ On Gopalrao Mukund Buti, also known as Shrimant Bapusaheb Buti, see Satpathy, *New Findings on Shirdi Sai Baba*, 101-10.

²⁰ Apparently, Baba ate little. He let other people and animals such as cats and dogs eat his begged food first; see Chitluri, *Baba's Divine Symphony*, 40.

²¹ Lit. 'come, come oh playful Rām'.

Balaji Pilaji:

I have seen with my own eyes the moment of Baba's leaving the body on Bayajibai's lap. I was there, seated at the entrance of the *masjid*. I was only twenty then, and in my mind I thought: "What is happening now to Baba?". I was really worried. Thus I thought to myself. In the meantime, Baba expired, with Bayajibai near him. Even another person was nearby there, just outside of the *masjid*. He immediately ran to the village to inform everybody of what had happened. So he did. At that time people were eating, the villagers were eating at the Dixit *vādā*, etcetera. So they left their food there and ran up to see Baba.

Q To the Dvārakāmāi?

T Yes, to the Dvārakāmāi.

Q Was everybody weeping?

A Yes. Everybody came to know that Baba had expired. Mohammedans and Hindus crowded the place around the *masjid* and soon started to contend among them, each group saying: "This body of Baba belongs to us, is ours..." [the interpreter laughs]. So they quarrelled like this for some time. While these disputes were going on, Kaka Saheb Dixit sent a telegram to the Nagar²² inspector, in which he said something like: "Baba expired. Please come and settle the issue". Thus they came with a commission. Actually, the inspector came to Shirdi, not the commission. The inspector came from Nagar. He told the people that the body needed to be examined. Only after doing this they could settle the issue. So he said.

Q What did they discover on Baba's body?

A After Baba left the body, some people washed him. They gave him the last bath, as it is called. The Hindu devotees did it. In doing this, the *laṅgoṭī* was discovered.

Q You mean to say that they discovered that Baba wore a *laṅgoṭī*?

T They discovered Sai Baba's *laṅgoṭī* while undressing him for his bath. It happened so. Then the *laṅgoṭī* was shown to all. There were many Mohammedans present there on that occasion. They had to accept the Hindu point of view when they realized that Baba wore a *laṅgoṭī*. So the inspector decided once and for all that the body belonged to the Hindus since Muslims never wear *laṅgoṭīs*.

Q Are there today many Muslims who are devoted to Baba?

A Yes, there are. They are not many, however.

T Only around twenty per cent.

Balaji Pilaji says:

So the body was given to the Hindus.

Q: Have you ever heard Baba singing *kīrtans*?

A Very rarely. Sometimes, if Baba had something in his heart, then he would sing. But little, not much.

Q Which divine names did he sing about? Rām, Kṛṣṇa?

A Yes, yes. But very rarely. Only sometimes.

²² Nagar stands for Ahmednagar.

In Shirdi, Sansthān headquarters, 5:15 p.m.

Brief conversation with members of the Shirdi Sansthān on Basheer Baba.

- Q Can I ask you about Basheer Baba of Hyderabad?
 A Basheer Baba died in 1980.
 Q Can you tell me anything about him?
 A He often came here, and some of his devotees accompanied him. But we know nothing of his Sansthān or what he told his followers. We don't know. He came here as a devotee of Sai Baba.
 Q Do you know if he had a great number of devotees while alive?
 A Yes, there were many disciples of Basheer Baba, but they all came from the Hyderabad area. Not from Maharashtra or Shirdi, only from Hyderabad.
 Q Then he had many devotees in his *ashram* in Hyderabad?
 A Yes, yes. In Hyderabad.
 Q Do you know the name of the *ashram*?
 A No, we don't know.
 Q So he died in 1980?
 A In 1980 or 1981. We will be able to give you the exact date later, if you wish.
 Q Do you know if Basheer Baba wrote any books or gave any particular teaching?
 A We don't know anything.
 I Because I read that Basheer Baba said he was Shirdi Baba's successor...
 A No, no. Shirdi Baba did not designate successors. It is not like that.
 Q However, Basheer Baba was certainly a devotee of Shirdi Baba, wasn't he?
 A He just came here...
 Q Did he come often?
 A About once a year.
 Q Alone?
 A With some of his disciples. There were many of his disciples who came here.
 Q Do you know if his *ashram* is still active, if it still exists?
 A No, we don't know. We know nothing about it since his death.
 Q But do you think it's extinct?
 A After his death, none of his devotees came here anymore. However, we don't know.
 Q Do you perhaps have the address of his *ashram*, which he might have given you when he came here?
 A No.
 Q You don't even know in which area of Hyderabad it was located?
 A No. But you can ask Shivner Swami for information, who is in the *cāvaḍī*. You can go there.
 I Thank you all.

In Shirdi, inside the *cāvaḍī*, 5:45 p.m.

Brief conversation on Basheer Baba with Shivner Swami, fifty-nine years old, keeper of the *cāvaḍī* who has been living in Shirdi for more than thirty years.

Shivner Swami says:

The last time I saw Basheer Baba here, he gave me *darshan* and told me that he had received *yogadaṇḍa*,²³ some powers. Then, for several years, he was absent from Shirdi.

Q Is that because he was searching only for money and publicity, as I have been told?

A Because he was attending to other things: his house, his land, his family. He was married, had wife and children.

Q Therefore, he wasn't an authentic master, a *guru*?

A He was a bit greedy.

External voice:

He got into trouble.

Q And you say he died in 1983?

A Yes.

External voice:

No, not in 1983 but in 1985, in January.

Q This year?

T Yes, he says he died this year, in 1985. However, no one has gone to see, to verify this.

I I see. Well, we can return tomorrow to continue the interview.

A Alright. When Basheer Baba was here, I saw him. He was very famous at that time. He went around India collecting many devotees. But lately he didn't behave well [he laughs].

External voice:

He showed himself to be what he was, and people understood...

Q They understood that he was a cheat?

External voice:

Yes.

I Thank you. See you tomorrow.

23 A magical staff.

In Shirdi, Leṇḍī gardens, 6:45 p.m.

Second, brief conversation with Swami Shekhar Rao.

Swami Shekhar Rao:

Now, my habit is the following: I arise every morning at 5 a.m. and I take Baba's *darshan*. All during the day I do *japa*²⁴ on Baba, simply reciting his name. This is all. I also read books about Baba. I have no pleasures, desires, money, worries and such things.

Q You live in complete detachment then?

A Yes. I don't want money, things... nothing.

Q Are there other devotees in Shirdi leading such saintly lives?

A This I can't say. Only they and God know. I would like to have an *ashram* here in Shirdi, like the one you have seen in Puttaparthi, for Baba. There are no *ashrams* here.²⁵ Many *sādhus*²⁶ and *saṃnyāsins* come to Shirdi and don't have a place to reside.

Q You mean a silent place, for meditation practices?

A Yes, for meditation and other things also. There is no place like this for them around here.

Q So you would like to build an *ashram*?

A Yes, I would like to, my heart tells me so. But only Baba knows what will happen.

I This is very interesting, very nice.

T Yes.

I Thanks.

²⁴ Lit. 'muttering'. The constant repetition of a *mantra* or of a deity's name, performed in a low tone.

²⁵ In fact, there was one: the small *ashram* of the Parsi holy man Homi Baba.

²⁶ Lit. 'good men', holy men.

6 **Shirdi-Sakuri-Shirdi** Sunday, October 20, 1985

Excerpts From My Diary

Sakuri, 2:30 p.m. Another good day. This morning at the *cāvaḍī* had a long conversation of about one and a half hour with Shivner Swami, who has been living in Shirdi for the past thirty years. It was a good interview, with many profound and interesting stories about himself and on Sai Baba and his teachings. It was quite moving. While conversing with Shivner Swami, I also interviewed another man who was with him and who lived here as a kind of begging *sādhu* for five years and who has recently moved to Bombay, in the Andheri area: his name is A. Nagesh Churya.

I then moved to Sakuri and had another long and absorbing conversation with Shri S.N. Tipnis, the Kanyākumārī Sthān's secretary and manager, who is no doubt the most authoritative figure here second only to Sati Godavari Mataji. I later had Mataji's *darshan*. I plan to come back to Sakuri one more time on October 24; hope I will be able to talk to her. The celebrations for the present *yajña* will be over on October 23 and thus I hope that on the 24th she might find the time to see me, even for just a few minutes. Around 4 p.m. I should again see Mr. Tipnis who has promised to give me some important books for my research. Had a good meal here at the *ashram* and now I can rest a while.

7:15 p.m. Back in my hotel room in Shirdi. Bought more books in Sakuri, among which are the first two parts of volume 1 of *The Talks of Sadguru Upasani-Baba Maharaja* edited by Godamasuta and *Sage of Sakuri (Life Story of Shree Upasani Maharaj)* by Shri B.V. Narasimhaswami (pt. I) and Shri S. Subbarao (pt. II). I spoke with Mr. Tipnis. He gave me a book that he published in 1975, titled *The Saints of the Deccan of the 20th Century*, which focuses on Swami Ramdas, Gulabrao Maharaj, and Gondavalekar Maharaj. It is



Figure 40 The road from Sakuri to Shirdi

dedicated to Shri Godavari Mataji. I told him I will come back to Sakuri on the 24th. He said he will show me his PhD thesis which he wrote on Upasni Maharaj, and has promised to offer more useful information. It will also be my last chance to have an interview with Sati Godavari Mataji. Tipnis said that she has been informed about me and my research. Apparently, she instructed him to tell me all the important things about Sakuri and the Kanyākumārī Sthān.

I and my guide and interpreter Swami Shekhar Rao left on foot following the main road and walked half the distance between Sakuri and Shirdi. It was a beautiful walk under a beautiful, clear sky. The road is all along lined with old, magnificent trees and to the left and to the right are vast fields. Peasants could be seen at work with their oxen. It was a spectacular scenery. Halfway along the road a truck picked us up in quite an adventurous way and thus we got back to Shirdi in just a few minutes.

Had a third, brief conversation with Swami Shekhar Rao and then spoke with a couple of secretaries of the Sansthān. Hopefully, tomorrow they should fix me an appointment for an interview. Tomorrow I must get up early around 5:30 a.m. so as to be at the Gurusthān at 6 sharp. From here will start the procession with the picture of Sai Baba that will solemnly open the Pūnyatithi celebrations. Tomorrow I must also send two telegrams, one at home and another one to H.J. Agrawal in Khamgaon; they should receive them in two or three days. I took a shower and will soon go to eat at the hotel's restaurant. It has been another eventful day, having seen many people and having learned lots of things. I am truly grateful for the work done so far, which looks very promising.

Interviews of the day

In Shirdi, inside the *cāvaḍī*, 8:15 a.m.

Long conversation with Shivner Swami, fifty-nine years old, and my occasional interpreter, Mr. Nagesh Churya of Bombay.

- Q Could you tell me about life here in Shirdi when you arrived for the first time? Was it very different from today? Were there more people or less people?
- A In those years there was not such a crowd as today. Now, however, Baba is better known, he is known everywhere and therefore day after day the people increase. He leads them to him.
- Q Can you tell me about your daily routine here in the *cāvaḍī*?
- A I must open the *cāvaḍī* at 5 a.m. I must clean, do *pūjā*, direct prayers to Baba's pictures and sit here, being careful that women don't enter on the right side of the *cāvaḍī*. This is the reason I must stay here all day, to tell women not to go inside.
- T This happens in the morning. The *cāvaḍī* is one of Baba's four temples. There is the Dvārakāmāi where Baba lived all his life, that is, for about fifty-two years. It's a mosque. Then, after Baba left his body it was placed in the Buti *vāḍā*, which is now known as the Samādhi Mandir, as it was Sai's wish to be buried there. The building became a temple after Baba died. Behind the Samādhi Mandir is the Gurusthān, where Baba was found the first time he came to Shirdi, under the *nīm* tree. Under that tree he was seen practicing penance when he was a lad of fifteen. Later, he became known with the name of Sai Baba. This is the fourth temple, the *cāvaḍī*. Baba used to come here on alternate nights to sleep. Baba slept one night in the Dvārakāmāi and one night in the *cāvaḍī*. This continued until his *samādhi*. In the beginning, about 1912, Baba was worshipped only in the *cāvaḍī*. The devotees used to bring Baba here in a great procession, offering him *pūjā*, followed by *ārtī*, and then he was offered a *cilīm*. The *cilīm* is an earthen clay pipe. Baba used to smoke tobacco in it. He would aspirate a puff, and then the pipe was passed around to all the devotees. At the end, the devotees left Baba here alone. Then he would prepare his bed. Even here he used a peculiar system, placing fifty sheets one on top of the other, to form his bed. He would do this by himself. Baba didn't like his devotees to serve him; he did his chores personally, whatever they were. So, after having prepared his bed, he retired for the night. The next morning, everything would begin all over again. Devotees came to him very early in the morning, before 5 a.m., and they celebrated the *kākaḍ ārtī*, here in the *cāvaḍī*. Then they would lead Baba back to the Dvārakāmāi, where he would open his *darbār*. In Hindī, *darbār* means a royal court assembly. Here people came to meet Baba, to seek his blessings, his grace. Therefore, when Baba was in the *cāvaḍī*, he lived in relative isolation, whereas in the Dvārakāmāi he used to meet with people.
- Q Can you tell me what you think about Baba's origins, his *guru*, etcetera? What is your opinion on these issues?
- T There are two stories regarding Baba's hypothetical *guru*. One time Baba casually said that the name of his *guru* was Venkusha, and that he

came from Selu, a place in Andhra Pradesh.¹ Then, since Baba was seen sitting under a *nīm* tree, some devotees asked him why he was so attached to this tree, always sitting under it. Baba explained that it had belonged to his *guru*, and he said “ancestor”. When a hole was dug in the ground at that spot, following the instructions of Khaṇḍobā – you know that Khaṇḍobā is a form, an aspect of Śiva, who would possess men and respond to the questions of persons interrogating him – it was asked of Khaṇḍobā, during the trance of a devotee, news of the young lad, Baba. Khaṇḍobā answered that that place had belonged to the lad’s *guru*, and this was the reason he was so attached to it. He said that if a hole was dug there, an opening would be found, an underground entrance to a small tomb. Therefore, the local people dug there, found a tunnel that descended for about one metre and sixty-five centimetres under the ground, and they saw that there was a small room constructed in a way that resembled a tomb. They found lanterns burning inside, but no one could understand who could have put the oil there and lit those lanterns. The local people had never imagined that such a thing existed under the ground in that place. When they discovered the room, they found flowers inside, lamps burning. The fragrance was such that it seemed as if someone had just celebrated *pūjā* and then gone away. They were all consternated. Baba told them that that place had belonged to his *guru* whom he had served for twelve years. Baba added: “Today all that I am, I owe to his grace”. Therefore, this place is named Gurusthān. Then people began to get curious about Baba’s origins. They wanted to find out, to arrive at some definite conclusions. Since one time Baba had casually said that he came from Selu and that his *guru*’s name was Venkusha, some people went to Selu to investigate. They were told that years before there had been a man called Venkusha, whose real name was Gopalrao Deshmukh. He was a pious man who lived a very religious life, an enlightened soul. The people also said that Venkusha had a small lad with him, and that at a certain moment the boy had left and gone away. They recounted that Venkusha had saved him from some accidents. In fact, some people were jealous of the boy, and one time they hit him with bricks.

Q Because the boy was so saintly, pious?

T Yes. So his *guru* protected him from that incident, stopping the brick in mid-air before it could hit the boy with force. However, Venkusha then permitted the stone to continue its course, hitting the boy but without damage. Thanks to his protective grace, he slowed the speed and striking power of the stone.² When Venkusha told the boy that it was time to leave him, he said: “All the powers that I have, I invest them now in you”. So said Venkusha. And he went on: “Now you must continue to wander and save humanity”. In this way the *guru* asked the boy to leave that place. And the boy, taking along the brick which had been hurled at him, left. This is the narrative of the inhabitants of Selu, told to investigators from Shirdi.

¹ Here my interpreter and informant was mistaken: Selu/Sailu is a town located in Maharashtra, Parbhani District, not in Andhra Pradesh.

² However, according to the standard version of this story which was first voiced by Das Ganu it was Venkusha who received the blow in lieu of his pupil.



Figure 41 Shivner Swami (right), keeper of the *cāvadi*, together with Mr. Nagesh Churya



Figure 42 Sai Baba is taken in procession from the *masjid* to the *cāvadī*

- Q People went to Selu to investigate and this was the story they told them?
- T Yes, this is what the local people of Selu told them. Therefore, there was an agreement with what Baba had said, even though they did not find Venkusha there. The Selu villagers said there had been a man named Gopalrao Deshmukh, who was devoted to god Venkaṭeśvara, and maybe for this reason he was called Venkusha. Then there is the chronological issue. Baba was first seen here when he was sixteen years old. Baba took *samādhi* in 1918, and therefore they say that Baba lived in Shirdi for fifty-two years. Thus, if you calculate these years and you try to confront them with the episode of Gopalrao and his life in Selu...
- Q But how can this fit with the Gurusthān story that he served his *guru* for twelve years here in Shirdi? They seem too many. Couldn't it be a symbolic number?
- T Not only that. If Baba stayed in Shirdi for fifty-two years, and you subtract fifty-two from the year 1918, you should find out the date in which Baba first arrived in the village of Shirdi, that is, 1866. If you also consider that when he first came to Shirdi he looked about sixteen years old, then the date should correspond with the period of time spent in

Selu with Gopalrao, don't you think? Therefore, we suppose that many years ago a certain Gopalrao was in Selu, right? But unfortunately the dates don't correspond.

Q You mean to say that Baba was too young?

T Yes. Therefore, even though there was a man named Gopalrao Deshmukh, whom people presume was Venkusha, this narrative does not allow us to arrive at a definite conclusion.³ When Baba was asked about the Gurusthān, he said he had served his *guru* for twelve years. This would mean that he arrived here at age four and thus could have not been in Selu. Therefore we cannot reach a conclusion. On the other hand, Baba is eternal, you know. Therefore, when Baba said that his *guru* was here [he interrupts himself]... As when Baba once told a Swamiji, one of the most celebrated of his devotees who wrote many books on Baba and who made lots of research: "I was in the army of Lakshmbai during the war of independence",⁴ etcetera.

Q Could it be that he referred to preceding incarnations of his?

T Sai Baba said many things: that he was here, that he was there... And this because Baba is eternal. And although we cannot see him today, he is always here. He is here since the birth of this universe. He is the creator, you know. Therefore, we cannot say anything in a definite way.

Shivner Swami says:

Baba said: "Ten thousand years ago I was already in this Dvārakāmāi". So Baba said, and you will find it written in books also.⁵

Q Thus, historically speaking, his origins remain a mystery. Is there any particular teaching that Baba underlined? For example, *bhaktimārga*, that is, devotion, surrender, or *jñānamārga*, the path of knowledge?

A You have asked what Baba gave the most importance to. I think it was to remember God always, in every moment. It is *nāmasmaraṇ*: it means repeating constantly the names of God. Baba himself repeated constantly the name of Allāh. Allāh, in Urdu, means Lord. Therefore, Baba always had the name of Allāh on his lips. He himself practiced this and became an example for all his devotees and followers. He always said that remembering God was the most important thing, and also that this *sādhanā*, this spiritual exercise, was the easiest. Whatever work one does, even if one lives a very social life and must do many things daily, still *nāmasmaraṇ* is a *sādhanā* that one can practice even while being busy with other occupations. Even if one is doing heavy physical

³ For an examination of this story, see Kher, *Sai Baba: His Divine Glimpses*, 37-41, 43-8.

⁴ It was B.V. Narasimhaswami who recorded that Sai Baba was involved in India's war of independence, that is, in the Sepoy Rebellion of 1857-59 in which the Rani Lakshmbai of Jhansi (1828-1858) took part. This was told to him in 1936 by the Sanskrit scholar Balkrishna Govind Upasni Shastri, the brother of the famous Upasni Maharaj who was closely linked to the Shirdi *faqīr*. On B.V. Narasimhaswami (1874-1956) who was the key figure in the popularization of Sai Baba's cult starting in the 1930s, see McLain, *The Afterlife of Sai Baba: Competing Visions of a Global Saint*, 91-132; Shepherd, *Sai Baba of Shirdi: A Biographical Investigation*, 68-73. See also Vijayakumar, *Shri Narasimha Swami: Apostle of Shirdi Sai Baba*.

⁵ For instance, in December 1910 Sai Baba is reported to have said: "This world is funny. All are my subjects. I look upon all equally... God is very great and has his officers everywhere. They are all powerful... I am very powerful. I was here eight or ten thousand years ago" (*Shirdi Diary of the Hon'ble Mister G.S. Khaparde*, 3-4).

labor, mentally he can continue the repetition of the name he has chosen: Sai Baba, Rām, Śiva, etcetera. Any name. The important thing is to repeat it incessantly, until it becomes such a habit that one recites the name of God with every breath, inhaling and exhaling.

Q It becomes a continual *sāadhanā*?

T Yes. Thus the practice of *nāmasmaraṇ* will remain with the *sādhaka*⁶ until the moment of his death. And if one pronounces the name of the Lord at the moment of death, our Scriptures say: “Whatever you think of at the last instant, so you become”;⁷ and that means that the *sādhaka* reaches God himself, the goal, the ultimate aim of human life. If you remember him... Thus, toward this goal, it is necessary to practice *nāmasmaraṇ* all your life. Then God’s name will automatically arise in you even at the moment of death. This was the teaching that Baba underlined. You know, another saint of Maharashtra, Swami Rāmdās, recited the name of Rām incessantly. He then became greatly enlightened, had the vision of Rām, his *darshan*, and became a very popular saint in Maharashtra. Therefore, this extraordinary power can be realized by anyone, if he sincerely practices *nāmajapa*.⁸ Baba insisted on this point. He insisted on another point also: I would call it ‘charity of food’, *annadān*, that is, to feed the poor. Baba himself used to prepare food and invited many people to partake of it.

Q Did he prepare the food alone all by himself?

T Yes, yes. Even during the manual labor and all the preparations, he wouldn’t let anyone else interfere. He used to bring the necessary foodstuffs, vegetables, etcetera, from the bazaar, buying them with his own money. He did all the cooking alone, and when the food was ready he served the people who gathered around, whoever was present, rich or poor.

Q Can you ask the Swami why, in his opinion, the expression ‘Allāh Mālik’ was always present on Baba’s lips and not, for example, Hindu names such as Rām, Kṛṣṇa, etcetera?

A Baba wanted to create unity between the two religions. Therefore, he usually said to Muslims: “Recite Rām Rām, and Allāh will bless you”. While to the Hindus he said “Allāh Mālik” [the Swami and the interpreter burst into laughter]. Baba always said: “God is one”. This means that there are only different paths to reach him, the one God. There is no reason to argue about religion. Baba, for example, kept a fire burning in the *maṣjid*, built a Tulsi Vrindavan,⁹ and had a big bell as in a Christian church. Sikh devotees viewed the Dvārakāmāi as a Gurudvāra.¹⁰ Baba named the mosque Dvārakāmāi precisely because it was open to all. Baba usually recited the names of Hindu divinities, as he also recited “Allāh Mālik”. To some devotees he said: “I am a pure Brahmin”. To others he said: “I am a Muslim”. Or: “Even if I am a Muslim, continue to adore your own *guru*”.

6 The practitioner of a spiritual discipline.

7 See Kṛṣṇa’s solemn assurance to Arjuna in *Bhagavadgītā* 8.5-7.

8 The muttering of a *mantra* or holy name; a synonym of *nāmasmaraṇ*.

9 Holy basil (*Ocimum sanctum*) regarded by *vaiṣṇavas* as sacred to Viṣṇu and kept in a special masonry structure.

10 Sikh temple.

- I "God is one": this seems to have been the essential point...
- A One time Baba used to give medicine to the ill. A few years later, he said: "I used to sing 'Hari Hari, Allāh Allāh', and then I became Hari, I became Allāh. From that day onward I began to give *udī* to the sick".
- Q As medicine?
- A It means that by singing, reciting the name of God, we become God. Then Baba stopped giving medicine, and only gave *udī*.
- Q Can you tell me something about Basheer Baba?
- A I saw him. At the beginning he was in great difficulty and stayed here for some years.
- Q When did he arrive here the first time?
- A Before he became famous. He came here and stayed in the Leṇḍī gardens. At that time he was unknown. Afterward he went up on a mountain to meditate, and they say that Sai Baba appeared before him and gave him a *yogadaṇḍa*, a stick. This is a wooden stick; it is used in combination with a *jholī*¹¹ when begging for food. There was one Raghendra Swami who was also a saint, and Basheer Baba blessed him, that is, gave him *mantralaya*.¹² Raghendra Swami asked him if he had really seen Sai Baba, and Basheer Baba said that he had been blessed by him. From that time on, his popularity grew.
- Q He became famous because he had a vision of Sai Baba who gave him a *yogadaṇḍa*?
- A Yes, yes. So he became very famous. But lately I have heard from people from there, that is, Hyderabad, that he has lost his powers, and that he has begun to make buildings for himself.
- Q You mean that his yogic powers are gone?
- A Yes. Sometime ago he came here. People were worshipping him, as they worship Sai Baba, in his room. The last time I saw him, he was celebrating some *yajñas* in the Leṇḍī gardens. Then after a few months he died.
- Q Do you believe that Basheer Baba had changed in his last years, that he was no longer a spiritual person?
- A I met some of his devotees, people who were close to him, who stayed with him, and they told me he was not the same as before. He took money from devotees and did not repay them. Many of his disciples told me so. This is the reason.
- Q The reason why he lost his powers?
- A Yes.
- I I'm asking you these questions because I know that Basheer Baba said he was Sai Baba's successor, his successive incarnation.
- A Yes. He wanted to go all around the world but Baba didn't allow him to.
- Q Therefore you think that he had some powers but that in his last years he lost them?
- A Yes.
- Q Because of his bad behavior?
- A Yes, right.
- Q What brought Basheer Baba to Shirdi the first time? Why did he come here and stay for a few years?

¹¹ A rectangular piece of cloth in which ascetics keep their begged food.

¹² Yogic absorption by means of a magical formula.

- A You know, when spiritual powers obtained through profound practices are used badly or for material profit, living a lavish and comfortable life and abandoning spiritual discipline, then the powers you attained earlier will come to a sudden end. This has happened to many spiritual personalities. In the beginning, for instance by reciting the names of the Lord, they obtained some powers, but then, interrupting their pious religious lives and abandoning their *sādhanā*, they inevitably lost whatever powers they had acquired. Then they return to being normal, ordinary men. This has happened to many people.
- Q And this is what happened to Basheer Baba?
- T Yes, this is what I also think.
- Q What is your name, sir?
- T Nagesh Churya.
- Q Do you live here?
- T I lived here in Shirdi for five years. I arrived in Shirdi on September 1st, 1978. At that time I knew nothing about Baba, but so many people told me that Shirdi was such a nice place that I thought of coming here, with the idea of staying only one day and leaving that same evening. But after arriving here, I liked the place. You know, the first thing you notice when arriving in Shirdi is the mental peace of the place. Whatever tensions you have accumulated in the place where you live, whatever your anxieties or problems, when you arrive in Shirdi all these just disappear and you experience mental peace such as you never felt before in your life. Therefore, a person begins to love Shirdi and to come often, in order to enjoy this peace. In this way, contact with Baba is developed, and a person understands that he who has protected him for all these years is none other than Baba... Do you understand?
- Q So you stayed here?
- T I remained here for five years, although my intention had been to stay only one day. I left my work and all the rest, and I remained in Shirdi, living as every other *faqīr* or mendicant I should say. But it was Baba's love, this love that he has for all his devotees, that induced me to remain here. Then I began to get interested in spiritual life, and began to read the Scriptures and whatever literature I could find about Baba. I began to study his figure. Then I had two visions of Baba. Thus I can say that my sojourn in Shirdi benefitted me in many ways. I had previously lived a very different type of life, in Bombay. Now, however, I have understood the reason why one is born as a human being, the significance and the aim of human birth. And what we should reach after having obtained this human body. I only understood these things after arriving here in Shirdi. Now I try to make sincere efforts to reach that goal, that destination. Baba has promised that, from birth to birth, he will be with us and guide us, and will help each devotee to reach the goal, the ultimate aim of human life, that is, becoming one with God.
- Q Thank you. You have described a marvellous experience. You now live in Bombay?
- T Yes, I returned to Bombay because Baba never gives an excessive task to anyone. If I remember correctly, there was one Mister Jog here in Shirdi, who always celebrated the *ārtī* to Baba. He wanted to take up

saṃnyāsa,¹³ but even to him Baba said: “The time will come for that, but you must wait”. You know, Baba used to say that a person must be qualified to obtain something. Therefore, a person like me or like us, who are tied by numerous karmic bonds on the basis of the good or bad that we have done, must undergo the results, the consequences of these actions. Unless these ties are dissolved, for example by reciting the name of the Lord as the Scriptures say, one cannot enter monastic life because of a lack of spiritual maturity. Therefore, until in our *karmayoga*¹⁴ we do not reach an equilibrium or balance, the moment is not ripe to take *saṃnyāsa*, that is, to lead a life of begging.

- I Studying the books about Sai Baba I realize that his teaching is very modern, in the sense that he addresses all types of persons, in particular people who lead ordinary worldly lives, who are *grhasthas*.¹⁵ Therefore, it’s an opportunity for spiritual growth addressed to anyone desiring it, even if he has family, wife, children, job. I think this is especially important, because if Baba’s teaching was restricted to the *saṃnyāsa* aspirant or the renunciant, then only a small minority could hope for enlightenment, for *ātmajñāna*.¹⁶ Thus, I think this was a great grace which Baba offered to his devotees, inviting them to practice *nāmasmaraṇ*, etcetera wherever they found themselves. Don’t you think so?
- T As you know, different types of spiritual practices were prescribed when the *Vedas* were written, according to the different eras. For the present age of *kali*,¹⁷ the *Vedas* recommend the practice of *nāmasmaraṇ* as the most appropriate. The *Vedas* knew that in the *kali* age human life would be short and that man would live totally absorbed in mundane, worldly affairs. Therefore, it would be difficult for man in this age to practice complex *sāadhanās*. Thus the simplest *sāadhanā*, which is the remembrance of God, was already prescribed when the *Vedas* were written. The Samartha Sadgurus¹⁸ like Baba, lead their devotees along the spiritual path in the best way possible, this is their goal. Therefore, these Samartha Sadgurus continue to change their techniques, adopting those that are most suitable in a particular historical period. So, during Baba’s time, when God incarnated as Sai Baba, he privileged this technique of *nāmasmaraṇ*. If we look at the crowds arriving in Shirdi today, we see people from high society, I mean people living modern lives. They cannot arise at 3 a.m. as people did one time, bathe in the river, meditate, etcetera. Today our times are not conducive to such practices. Moreover, Baba cleared up one point, and that is that every religion has equal dignity, that there is no difference between religions, or difference between the God of one and the God of another. God is one, one energy that manifests itself from time to time with different names and different forms. For this reason, we should not think that Islām is different from Hinduism, that Christianity is different from

13 Renunciation.

14 Lit. ‘the discipline of action’. A path to liberation outlined by Kṛṣṇa in the *Bhagavadgītā* and requiring an attitude of detachment from the results of one’s actions (*naiṣkarmya*).

15 Householders.

16 Lit. ‘knowledge of the Self’.

17 The last and most degenerate of the four world ages or *yugas*.

18 All-powerful, supreme *gurus*.

Hinduism. Our present type of comprehension is very negative. We have hostility toward each other, arriving at very negative excesses. People belonging to a different religion from our own are considered enemies because they practice things that we don't. Baba wanted clarity and the elimination of all that enmity. For this reason, he wouldn't allow anyone to know what religion or sect he belonged to. When Muslims came to him, he told them: "Recite Rām, Rām", or: "Recite Kṛṣṇa, Kṛṣṇa and Allāh will bless you". This, you see, is a completely different kind of teaching. Telling a Muslim to recite the name of Rām, and that Allāh will in consequence bless him, means that one can recite any name, it's the same. So, to Hindus Baba said: "Allāh Mālik", 'Remember Allāh'. Many people heard Baba say: "What is there in the name of Allāh? Do you think that Allāh is different from Viṭṭhal of Pandharpur? Do you think that Allāh is different from Rām? He is the same". So Baba said. With techniques such as *nāmasmaraṇ* Baba made it easier for people in our times to lead spiritual lives. These techniques are adapted to the times by the Samartha Sadgurus. Their ultimate aim is to confer liberation to all those who surrender completely. For this scope they recommend different methods and techniques from time to time, and the devotee should persevere in these. This is what I think.

- Q Could you ask Shivner Swami what his intentions were the first time he came to Shirdi? Did he think he would stay so long, for thirty years, or did he come only because he wished to visit a holy place? What was his experience with Baba like?
- T I will refer what Swamiji told me. Swamiji left his native city, Kamuthi, at the age of fifteen. I should add that he had a strong, innate spiritual vocation, having developed detachment from worldly things at the age of fifteen. Thus, he began to wander.
- Q Excuse me, what city did he come from?
- T Kamuthi, which is in Tamil Nadu. It's a city in the South. He stayed in the company of numerous *sādhus* and *saṃnyāsīs*, and finally Swamiji reached Ganeshpuri, where Swami Nityananda was flourishing.¹⁹ In those days, he attracted large crowds. Swamiji stayed with Swami Nityananda for about two years, and then thought about going to the Himālayas to undertake other ascetic practices, he thought about going to Badri or Kedar. But Swami Nityananda was also known as *antaryāmī*,²⁰ and he knew the desires and intimate thoughts of every individual. Therefore, one day he suddenly ordered Swamiji to go to Shirdi. He told him: "All that you can aspire to reach in this life is to be found only in Shirdi". Nityananda told him that he would obtain everything in Shirdi. But, you know, as it almost always happens, Swamiji knew nothing of Sai Baba of Shirdi at that time; he didn't even know his name. So when he was ordered to go to Shirdi he could no longer stay at Ganeshpuri with Swami Nityananda. So he left and went to Bombay, and began to make inquiries about Baba, asking news and information about Shirdi...

¹⁹ Swami Nityananda (c. 1896-1961) was an influential Maharashtrian saint and miracle-worker, the *guru* of Swami Muktananda who met him in 1947. In 1936, Swami Nityananda settled in Ganeshpuri, near Mumbai, where he had an *ashram* built in which he spent the rest of his life.

²⁰ Lit. 'the inner ruler/controller'.

Q In what years?

T About 1951 or 1952. While he was making this inquiry, one day a person showed him a photo of Sai Baba he had in his shop. You know, many people in Bombay worship Baba. He was very popular in Bombay from the beginning, in his own times. When Swamiji was shown the photo, he thought: "He certainly looks like a Muslim. What can I learn or attain by going to a Muslim?". Therefore, he wasn't very enthusiastic about going to Shirdi. So he remained in a temple, a Hanumān temple at Khar, a suburb of Bombay. Since he couldn't decide what to do, he simply stayed there, wasting time. After about seven or eight days, when no one else was present, he heard a voice, telling him: "I asked you to go to Shirdi, but instead you're wasting your time here". Swamiji looked around but saw no one and so he thought that it was an illusion or his imagination, so he continued staying there, mainly because he didn't want to go to a Muslim. After three or four days he again heard the voice, the same voice. This time it sounded threatening, saying: "So, are you going or not?". Swamiji got frightened and decided to go to Shirdi. He came from the South and didn't know the local language of these places, so he decided that instead of going to Shirdi by road he would follow the railway tracks. This way he thought that he would surely reach Shirdi, and he would not be confused or be afraid of getting lost. So that's what he did. If you were to do this today, you would see that for miles and miles there are neither inhabitants nor houses. Swamiji at that time wandered as a beggar. He had no money and had to walk the whole way. Only when someone offered him food could he nourish himself. This means that he lived only on alms at that time. So, while he was following the railway tracks in complete solitude, Swamiji for three or four days had nothing to eat, and he was starving. One night about midnight, as he walked along the tracks, he suddenly got the idea that since he was going to a *guru* - as tradition would have it - the *guru* as such should be able to take care of his disciple in all circumstances... The *guru* must be able to save the disciple, even from death. A Samartha Sadguru should be thus. And it is said that one should find such a *guru* and follow him. It's not said to follow just any kind of *guru*. So Swamiji wanted to test Baba because he didn't know him, he knew nothing of him. And so he had this thought: "If Sai Baba is so great, he must know that I have been without food for four days, and that at least one meal a day is necessary to stay alive. Therefore, if I must depend completely on him, he should also see to my necessities". Swamiji thought: "If here, in this exact moment, Baba furnishes food for me, then I'll believe that I can totally depend upon him". So he reasoned. Just then, he heard a train approaching from behind him and he moved to one side to let it pass. As the train passed, he heard a package fall to the ground. He thought that a passenger must have lost one of his bags. Out of curiosity, he wanted to see what had been dropped, what was inside the package. So he took it and opened it. Baba was faithful to his words. The package contained food, seven or eight *capātīs*,²¹ made of wheat and vegetables, etcetera. So Baba gave him this proof... Because Swamiji had mentally asked him for food, think-

21 Unleavened flat bread.

ing that, if helped, he would completely surrender to him. Baba granted his wish, giving him food at that precise moment, and making him understand he could surrender totally to him, for all things. So Swamiji developed faith in Baba, even if he knew nothing about him. This was the first significant episode. When he finally reached Shirdi, he obviously had many other experiences.

Swamiji recounts:

I was going toward Shirdi, but at a certain point I left the train tracks at Nasik, and went toward Tryambakeshvar. It was night and I didn't know the way but I went on. I met a *sādhu* who gave me food and had me stay there at Tryambakeshvar for six months. After six months, someone came from Shirdi, and he also stayed at the place where the *sādhu* lived. Together we talked about the Dvārakāmāi and the Samādhi Mandir. The same day, Swami Nityananda appeared to me in a dream, saying: "Are you still here? Then you don't want to go to Shirdi?". The next day I left, telling the *sādhu* I was going to Shirdi. He wanted me to remain and he built a small hut for me, but I left Tryambakeshvar and finally arrived in Shirdi. At that time I used to walk by night, along the tracks. Near the station at Nasik, about midnight, a police jeep arrived and stopped me. An inspector asked me where I was going and I told him I was going to Shirdi. He asked: "Why are you walking?", and I replied: "Because I have no money. I go on foot". Then the man invited me to sit in his jeep. He offered me tea and gave me some money, saying: "Offer my *praṇāms*²² to Sai Baba". Then I met three or four *sādhus* who told me to get on the train, and they invited me to go with them to Kashi. I accepted, but when I came to Shirdi and saw the image of Baba in the Dvārakāmāi, Baba himself appeared to me in the form of Hanumān and then, after a while, he appeared as an Arab. I sat in the *masjid* looking intensely at the image, and in certain moments it appeared similar to Hanumān, and in others it seemed an Arab. I sat there all day and thought: "Here there is something strange. This is not just a picture".²³ I stayed there until they came to close the Dvārakāmāi. The next day I heard that the Sansthān gave free meals to the poor. So I went there but they didn't give me food. That's because there weren't *saṃnyāsins* there. They asked me where I came from and I told them I came from Bombay. But they didn't give me anything. At that time, there was a man named Sagun Merunai who was from the South of India and who had come to stay here since Baba's time. He called me and gave me a meal. Sagun Merunai was a *saṃnyāsin*. He came here, saw Sai Baba, and Baba told him to remain here. He sold books about Baba. First, he used to run a small hotel for pilgrims. He told the man in the canteen to give me food, and so I took my meal there, and the next day I went to sit in the Dvārakāmāi. I used to meditate there. I meditated on Baba. Afterward, for three days, I didn't ask anyone for food. Some people gave me *prasād*²⁴

22 Reverential salutations, bowings.

23 Sai Baba's expression in this portrait is at once intense and compassionate and devotees worship it and meditate on it. The saint himself used to say that there is no difference between his physical self and his image.

24 Lit. 'grace', 'favor'. In particular, food which is offered to a deity or *guru* during worship. This food is regarded as sacred and devotees partake of it as a holy communion, i.e. as a token of the deity's or *guru's* grace.

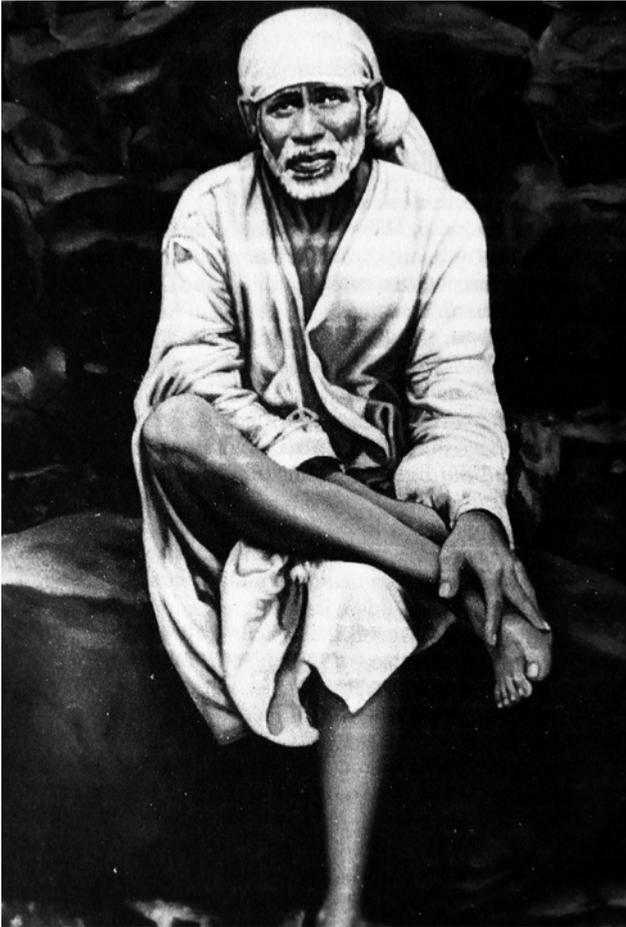


Figure 43
Sai Baba seated
on a stone

which I ate with a little water. Then I asked Baba to have at least one meal assured every day, and I prayed to him for this. I prayed and meditated. At that time Shyama Deshpande's son, Uddhao, came to the Dvārakāmāi. He rang the bell very loud. I opened my eyes and he asked me if I had had anything to eat. I said: "No". Then, after *ārti*, he brought food and gave this *naivedya* to me. After that, I met a *sādhu* in the Dvārakāmāi who often used to go see Swami Nityananda. I spoke with him and he told me that Swami Nityananda told him to learn to recite the *Bhagavadgītā*. He said: "I am not an educated man, but thanks to the grace of Swami Nityananda I can now recite the eighteen chapters of the *Gītā*". That man learned the *Gītā* by heart; I had to look at the book to see if what he said was correct... Thus he usually gave me food in the Dvārakāmāi. Then, one evening around midnight, I was in the Leṇḍī gardens. It was a full moon night and I wasn't meditating, I was just sitting there. At that hour there was no one else around. Then, I saw Baba seated on a stone.



Figure 44 The *cāvaḍī* where Sai Baba used to sleep on alternate nights

Q You saw Sai Baba seated on a stone?

A Yes. He remained there for half an hour, then he disappeared. Only then did I realize that Sai Baba is alive, is here. Then I decided to remain in Shirdi. On another occasion, in the Dvārakāmāi, my spiritual master, Mukhtaya Swami, who had told me to come to Shirdi even before Swami Nityananda, and whose *samādhi* is at Kanyakumari, appeared to me at noon. I wasn't meditating. My eyes were open, and I saw my master, Mukhtaya Swami, come out of Baba's image. He stood there for a little while, and then disappeared. Then I read the *Shri Sai Satcharita* and found out that Baba had given to one Mulay Shastri the *darshan* of his master who had taken *samādhi* several years previously.²⁵ After another six months, my *guru* again appeared to me at the same spot in which he appeared the first time [he laughs]. I arrived at the conclusion that the image in the Dvārakāmāi is no common image, and that Baba is really alive, present. For whatever I need, I go to Baba in the Dvārakāmāi and tell him, and Baba helps me. Also in the past Baba helped me. For example, Baba once told me: "This man will help you, he will give you..." and infallibly the man arrived and gave me money to buy books, etcetera.

Q Therefore Sai Baba has protected and guided you all your life?

²⁵ See Dabholkar, *Shri Sai Satcharita: The Life and Teachings of Shirdi Sai Baba*, 190-2 (ch. 12, vv. 126-50).

A I tried two or three times to make a trip, to go away. I wrote to the *ashram* of Shivananda,²⁶ asking to go and live there permanently, and Shivananda wrote to me saying: "Don't come here. You live in a great and holy place. In our *ashram* there are twenty-four programs at night. You remain in Shirdi and do your best with your *sādhanā*". That's what he wrote to me. From that *ashram* once came his secretary, Krishnananda, and he stayed here for six months - today he is back again at Shivananda's *ashram*. I used to go to a canal near here to take a bath, and so did he. I met him there. I asked him where he came from and he said he came from Shivananda's *ashram* and that his name was Krishnananda. I then told him I had written a letter to Shivananda and he said: "Yes, yes. I wrote the reply to that letter and Swamiji signed it". Then he told me he wanted to remain in Shirdi because there were many debts that Swamiji had to pay. And he said: "Everyone doesn't ask money to Swamiji, but they come to me, the secretary, and people torment me. That's the reason I came here, and I have no intention of returning to the *ashram*". Then he went on, saying: "I can't find peace of mind at Rishikesh. Instead, here I have found peace". Then, about six months later, Baba appeared in a dream to Krishnananda and ordered him to return to the Shivananda *ashram*, to return to his *guru*. So he went back, but first he went to Swami Nityananda, as I had advised him to do. And also Swami Nityananda told him to go back to his *guru*. So he returned to Rishikesh and is still living there today. After these things I have told you, I tried to leave Shirdi [he laughs] but it wasn't possible. So I remained. In the early times there were three policemen here in Shirdi: one of the village, one of the Sansthān, and another one. It so happened that someone stole the silver ornaments of Sai Baba. In that period, they didn't allow *sādhus* and others to remain here for more than three days. I was here, but they didn't allow me to sleep here. Anyhow, I participated in the *ārtīs* and slept outside the village. One of the policemen asked me: "Why do you stay in Shirdi for so long?". I answered that Baba wanted me to stay here. One time, when I was praying in the Samādhi Mandir, the third policeman told me: "If you don't leave, I'm going to take you to the police station". I told this to Baba. I went to the Dvārakāmāi and told him that they wanted to take me to the police station. I prayed in the Dvārakāmāi, and that same night a circus came to Shirdi. A man from the circus had a fight with that policeman and beat him up. Then he left and I stayed on. However, after a few days, the policeman returned and, upon seeing me, said: "Are you still here?", and I answered: "Yes, certainly. Baba has ordered me to remain here". On another occasion, I really thought I would leave. Indeed, the village people invited me to go, as well as others. But then I said that I wouldn't leave because Baba didn't want me to. A few days later I thought to myself: "This is a very noisy and crowded place. I would prefer to live in a small place where I can meditate". So this time I said to the people: "I'm leaving". But now the very people who kept telling me to go said: "Don't go away. Baba won't allow you to go". Those same people said so. And I tried to leave on another occasion also. I said noth-

²⁶ Swami Shivananda (1887-1963) was the founder in 1936 of the Divine Life Society advocating a synthetic form of *yoga*, with its headquarters at the Shivananda *ashram* in Rishikesh.

ing to anyone and one evening I went to the Khaṇḍobā temple to pay my respects and then depart. But suddenly I felt very weak, I couldn't walk, and I had the shivers. I went back to the Dvārakāmāi and slept there and prayed to Baba saying: "I won't leave anymore [he laughs], help me". And the next day I felt fine as before.

I Incredible...

A I tried yet another time, having this idea in mind: to go to a small village and collect alms, because I don't like noisy places. So, without saying a word to anyone, at about 2 or 3 a.m. I decided to leave. I went down a small road that flanked a narrow canal, and I walked along for an hour or two until I felt tired and thirsty. But I saw there was no water in the canal, nor anywhere else. Then I saw a well under a *nīm* tree. The steps were not very good and I could not descend to get the water, nor did I have a pail. The tree branches descended down to the water level, inside the well, but even by climbing on the tree I wasn't able to reach the water. So while I was thinking about this problem, wondering what to do, I fell asleep. After an hour or two it was sunset, and I thought: "Where am I sleeping?". Then I saw the image of Sai Baba under the *nīm* tree, seated on his stone. I wondered and brooded over this, thinking: "The water is in the well but I can't drink it. Baba has appeared under the *nīm* tree, here, for the first time". I then realized that Baba wanted to tell me that wherever I go he is with me. I cannot even have a drop of water without him, even though the water is at hand and I can see it. Then I decided to go back to the Dvārakāmāi and stay there. Since that day, I haven't tried to leave Shirdi anymore [he laughs].

T This story is very interesting, isn't it? It has great symbolic value. It means that only Sai Baba can extinguish the spiritual thirst of Swamiji. The water is there, but he can't reach it. The only thing that can calm his thirst is Sai Baba. That day Swamiji realized this, so he abandoned forever his idea of leaving Shirdi and remained here. It's very interesting.

We begin to say goodbye but Shivner Swami further tells us:

Not only I, but many other people, other devotees, have told me that they have seen Sai Baba in person, that they have had his *darshan*. Thus it is very evident that Baba is still living today, and he continues to appear here and there. From Delhi, one Doctor Swati once went to a hospital in London, since he was very ill. His wife was with him. The doctor in the hospital said his case was very serious and that he was not able to cure him. "He is dying", he said to the wife, "and you'll have to take his body back to India". You know that Baba, in his eleven assurances, had said: "Even after I leave my body, I will run toward my devotees who are in need of help".²⁷ So Doctor Swati's wife, for the entire night, kept repeating Baba's phrase, adding: "Baba, you promised that you would come to help your devotees, therefore please save my husband". That night Baba appeared at the hospital. The ill man had two photographs near his bed, one of Baba and one of Guru Nanak. Indeed, he was a Sikh. Sai Baba appeared at the hospital, and a nurse saw him in flesh and blood. He asked

²⁷ On Sai Baba's eleven assurances, see Rigopoulos, *The Life and Teachings of Sai Baba of Shirdi*, 376.

her: "How is my son?". The nurse was very grave and answered: "It's not possible for him to pull through". But Baba said: "He will be alright", and he blessed the man. He stayed there for a while and then went away. The next day the sick man said he felt well. The nurse told him that the night before his father had come and had inquired about him. The man asked: "My father? What did he look like?". Then the nurse saw a photograph near the bed and said: "That's him". Doctor Swati answered: "That is not my father. That is the Universal Father! He is Sai Baba". Doctor Swati narrated this experience and wrote about it before returning to Delhi. Many facts such as this happen even today. Baba is alive and he appears to devotees, saving their lives. In New York there is a man named Namdev, alias Robert Pink. He has also written a book about Sai Baba. The first time he came here he was suffering from diarrhoea. He came and told me of his problem. I told him to take some *udī*, mixed with water. But he didn't have any. He went to the toilet, and when he returned to his room he found a packet of *udī* in his bag. So he told me. He drank some *udī* and was cured. After that, he made a habit of coming here. He would come and remain a while, collecting episodes from Baba's life, and he wrote a book in English. He wanted to publish it with his own money, he didn't want to collect donations in New York. Thus many foreigners come here and Baba appears to them, helping his devotees.

T You see, before taking *samādhi*, Baba told his devotees not to worry. He said: "I am eternal. Thus, don't think that I will leave you behind nor that I will die. I am always alive. I will always run to my devotees whenever they are in difficulty. When someone takes refuge in me, or when someone has completely surrendered to me, then I will be with him night and day. My vigil over my devotees will be constant and I will take care of them".

Q Is this one of Sai Baba's famous promises?

T Yes, this is one of the eleven promises. And the story of the doctor who went to England for an operation proves it. You know, Baba manifests himself suddenly to save his devotees from danger. For example, this Doctor Swati needed an urgent and difficult operation, and was in one of the best hospitals in London. His case was very serious and he was in the intensive care unit, where no one had permission to enter. It happened that a nurse on night duty saw an old man who said he was the father of that patient, and he said that he felt that his son would soon recover. Instead, the hospital personnel and the doctors had lost all hope of saving the patient. They knew he would die within a few hours and that there was no hope for any possible recovery. This is the reason why the night nurse allowed the old man to enter the intensive care unit, although it is normally not allowed. The nurse was convinced that the old man had come all the way from India to have a last look at his dying son, and so she thought: "Why not allow him to enter? Since his son is about to die, let the old father see him". After a few minutes, she looked through the window to see what the old man was doing inside the room. She saw him passing his hand over the patient's body, and walking around the body three or four times. You know, it was as if he meant to keep death away. Baba in this way placed a limit not to

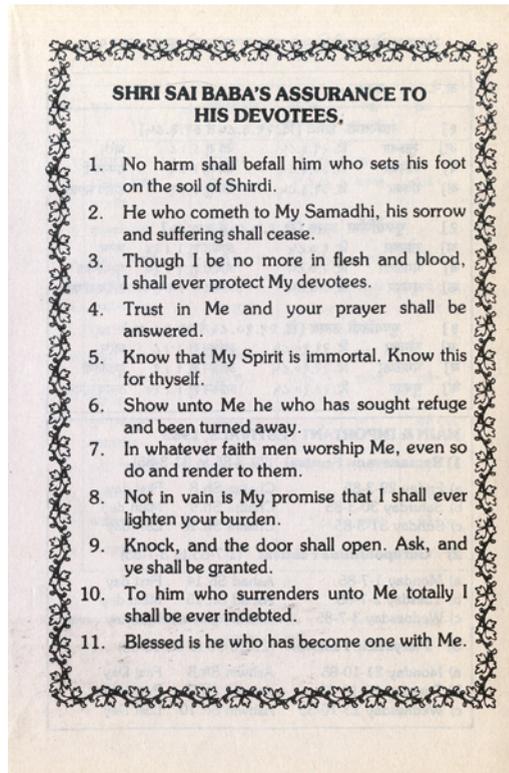


Figure 45
Sai Baba's eleven assurances
to his devotees

be surpassed, a boundary line, beyond which death could not pass.²⁸ The next morning the hospital personnel arrived and, to their surprise, the patient was better and had regained consciousness! Then the nurse told the sick man that the night before his father had come to see him, and had said he had high hopes that he would recover, and she added: "Well, this has actually happened and today you seem much better". The patient was greatly surprised and thought: "How is it possible that my father came to England from a small village in the Punjab, with all the formalities of passport, visa, etcetera?". So he asked for a description of this old man from the nurse. She pointed her finger at the photograph the patient had brought with him. The patient was a Sikh and he had photographs of Guru Govind, Guru Nanak, and one of Sai Baba, who was his *iṣṭadevatā*,²⁹ his favorite deity. The nurse knew nothing of Sai Baba, but seeing his photo on the bedside table, said:

²⁸ Here my informant had in mind a famous episode which is narrated in Dabholkar, *Shri Sai Satcharita: The Life and Teachings of Shirdi Sai Baba*, 11-14 (ch. 1, vv. 104-38): after grinding large quantities of wheat at the mosque, the saint instructed the women of the village to throw the flour at the side of a brook at the village boundary. Local people in Shirdi gave the interpretation that in this way the saint banished a cholera epidemic, preventing it from entering the village. It was not wheat, but the terrible disease that he fed to the quern to be crushed. Dabholkar was present at the mosque when Sai Baba performed this strange feat: he was filled with admiration and wonder and thought that he should write a book on his life, i.e. what was to become the *Shri Sai Satcharita*.

²⁹ Lit. 'chosen deity'.

“That is the man who came yesterday”, pointing her finger at Baba’s photo. This story proves that Sai Baba even today comes to help us devotees. Whenever Baba wants to manifest himself, he does so. This means that he is always alive, in accord with his promise.

- Q Marvellous, thank you. Could you tell me anything about Narayan Baba, and what you think of him?
- T Look, if I must give an opinion it is this. Baba can use any person as his instrument, in order to help his devotees in one way or the other. Baba can even make you one of his instruments. Imagine, for example, that he wants to send me something through you. He would manifest himself to you under the form of another person, giving you a package, for example, and giving you my address, asking you to deliver this to me, to Nagesh, since you are going to Bombay. And if you felt like doing a favor to that man, then you’d come or send it to me. This doesn’t mean that you have become Sai Baba, however...
- Q I understand. But do you believe that since 1959 Sai Baba speaks through Narayan Baba? The latter claims to have had a mystical vision or something of the sort, and since then Baba has been using him as his instrument, speaking through him.
- T I don’t think it’s like that.
- I The Sansthān doesn’t believe this. I have spoken with them yesterday and they don’t believe this.
- T I don’t believe it either, because Baba said that he would always remain active and vigorous for the welfare of his devotees even after having left his body. Baba said so, and he has kept his word. Every time one of his devotees thinks of him, he is there with him, wherever the devotee happens to be. He could even be beyond the seven seas, but Baba is there at the moment the devotee thinks of him. When Baba himself is so active and working for the good of his devotees, then there is no reason to believe the story of incarnations, or that Baba possesses the body of someone, and so on, or that Baba speaks during an individual’s trance, etcetera. I personally don’t believe this. Because, according to Baba’s promises, he is always with us, and we really experiment this. I myself have had certain experiences with Baba... You know, with the many problems I have had, I always prayed to Baba and told him about my problems. For example, yesterday I left Bombay to come to Shirdi on the 2 p.m. bus. I couldn’t get at the bus stop in time, and I was eight minutes late. Usually the driver leaves exactly on the hour. Therefore, when I was still two or three miles from the bus stop, I prayed to Baba, asking him: “Baba, help me not to miss this bus!”. Because I had a group of people from Delhi with me who wanted to visit Shirdi. Thus it would have been very inconvenient for them, not for me alone. Above all, I didn’t want those devotees coming from so far away to have this hardship of missing the bus. So for this reason I asked Baba, praying: “Please, don’t let us miss the bus”. And even though we arrived eight minutes late, the bus was still there, just starting to leave. I was able to speak to the driver and tell him why I was late, how I had got held up in traffic, etcetera. The driver was understanding. He stopped the bus and let us all get on. You see, all this is Baba’s doing. We must think of him. So, if Baba is always with us one can communicate directly with him, and when Baba acts directly in helping his devotees there is no reason to look for any intermediary.

- Q Then you consider Narayan Baba simply as a devotee? That's what the Sansthān says. From others I've learned that he comes very often to Shirdi and spreads Baba's teachings.
- T Even the people who pretend to be incarnations of Sai, as well as those who say they are his instruments, simply tell people to continue remembering Baba, to recite his name, to surrender to him, etcetera. Now, just as Swamiji does, I say to people in the simplest way: "Go to the Samādhi Mandir, go to the Dvārakāmāi, tell everything to Baba. Recite his name and you will be free, your difficulties will be solved". Therefore, when they come here to Swamiji, he tells them the same thing and they are relieved of their problems. Swamiji tells them: "Those who are sincerely near to Baba and who have prayed to him, those who have sincerely surrendered to him, for them Baba will take care of everything. It's not me. I tell everyone to go to the Dvārakāmāi but this doesn't mean that I am Baba's instrument. I am here as one of you. It is you who have done these things, such as praying to Baba, etcetera".
- Q Thus you mean to say that it is the devotees themselves who 'force' Baba to intervene and help them, through their faith, *śraddhā*?
- T Yes, therefore it is you and Sai Baba, with no one in between. A simple soul and simple mind such as Swamiji tells you this. Other people complicate things, thinking to be instruments, incarnations, etcetera. You know, it is easy to confuse people. I tell you that it is not necessary to go to any presumed incarnation when Baba is present here in Shirdi. Even if we can't see him, because he has left his physical form, he is here spiritually.

Thanks and regards follow.

In Sakuri, Śrī Upāsni Kanyākumārī Sthān, 11 a.m.

Long conversation with Shri S.N. Tipnis, secretary and administrator of the Śrī Upāsni Kanyākumārī Sthān. This exchange took place in his office within the ashram with no need of any interpreter since Shri S.N. Tipnis spoke English.³⁰

Shri S.N. Tipnis says:

I would like to tell you about the relationship between Sai Baba and Upasni Baba. Upasni Baba, like other saints, had from his youth a strong impulse and desire to lead a godly life. Since he was a child, he used to visit many different places, practice seclusion and hard penances. Even before meeting his *guru*, he was already very advanced on the spiritual path. But, you see, without the *guru* it is not possible to reach the highest level of spirituality...

Q The *guru* is thus necessary?

A Yes. So while searching for God and his *guru*, he passed through many different places, and finally somebody advised him to go see Sai Baba in Shirdi. He met with Sai Baba and, due to his grace, Upasni Baba reached the greatest spiritual height; which is a truth we still experience today. You see, when he went to Sai Baba, the first thing Sai Baba told Upasni Maharaj was: "I waited for you for many years. We are bound together by innumerable births. You are my Paraśurām". Paraśurām³¹ means one who has come to dissipate the world's ignorance... Sai Baba spoke very highly about him. After this first meeting, Upasni Baba stayed with Sai Baba for a four-year period. After this, he left Shirdi and went to Karagpur, and then finally came to Sakuri. This is a very small village. At the time, he preferred to live in the outskirts of the village, somewhat removed from it, because he wanted to keep away from society. Soon, however, people started coming to him and the construction of a building was started, in Shirdi Baba's times. See, the relationship between Shirdi Baba and Upasni Baba is absolutely peculiar, similar to that between Ramakrishna Paramahansa and Vivekananda.³² It is a *guru-śiṣya*³³ relationship, of a very

³⁰ The transcription of this interview was first published in Rigopoulos, "Women and Ritual: The Experience of a Contemporary Marāṭhī āśram".

³¹ These words might point to Sai Baba's identification with Rām, thus establishing a peculiar bond with Upasni (identified as Paraśurām). Paraśurām (lit. 'Rām with the axe', which was donated to him by Śiva), the sixth *avatāra* of Viṣṇu, appeared in the world before Rām, the seventh *avatāra*. They were both living at the same time, the elder incarnation showing jealousy of the younger. The *Mahābhārata* represents Paraśurām as being struck senseless by Rām, and the *Rāmāyaṇ* relates how Paraśurām, who was a follower of Śiva, felt aggrieved by Rām's breaking the bow of Śiva, and challenged him to a trial of strength. This ended in his defeat. The relationship between Upasni and Sai Baba is reported to have been similarly characterized by moments of opposition and friction.

³² Ramakrishna Paramahansa (1836-1886) was a highly influential Bengali *guru* and mystic. From a Vedāntic perspective, he recognized the value of both *saguṇa* (with attributes) and *nirguṇa* (devoid of attributes) forms of worship, and revered Islām and Christianity as different paths leading to the same ultimate goal. Vivekananda (1863-1902) was Ramakrishna's foremost disciple and the driving force behind the Ramakrishna Mission. Steeped in Vedānta, he promoted Hinduism as a world religion and as the 'Mother' of all religions at the Chicago World Parliament of Religions in 1893.

³³ Master-disciple.

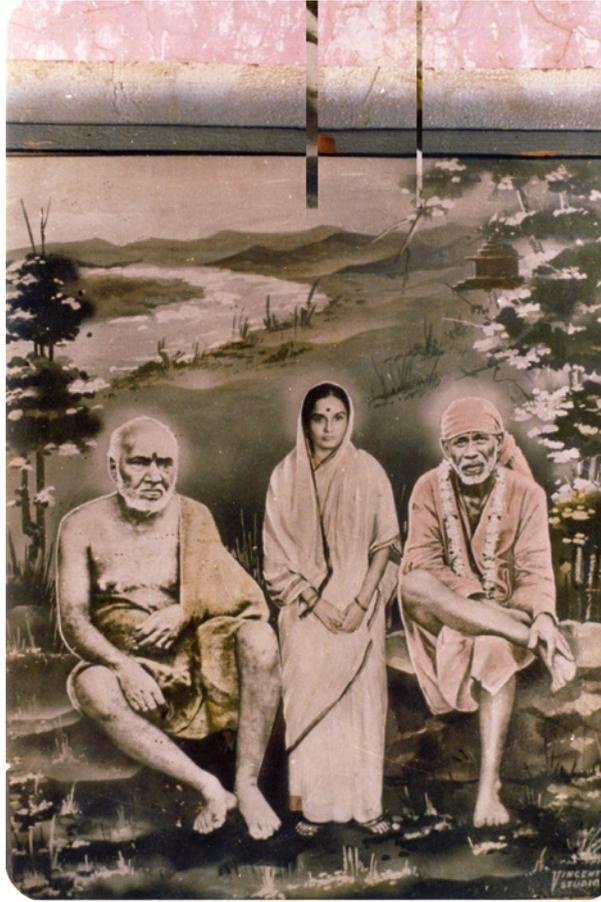


Figure 46
A young Sati Godavari Mata
between Upasni Maharaj
(left) and Sai Baba (right)



Figure 47 Portrait of Upasni Baba at the Śrī Upāsni
Kanyākumārī Sthān, Sakuri



Figure 48 Sati Godavari Mata in the 1970s



Figure 49 A full-size oil portrait of Sati Godavari Mata at the Śrī Upāsni Kanyākumārī Sthān, Sakuri

deep character. For example, many were the disciples of Ramakrishna Paramahansa, but yet Vivekananda's position in the hierarchy of relationships was absolutely unique. When Vivekananda met Ramakrishna the first time, the latter told him: "You are truly great, you have come to do my work, for my mission. You are a divine incarnation". The same thing Sai Baba said to Upasni Baba, when they met each other. Do you follow me? And Sai Baba told him to keep silence and to live at the temple, the temple of Khaṇḍobā. The temple was in a bad condition, Upasni Maharaj could not have shelter in it, his only companions were snakes and scorpions... He suffered many calamities. Some people would beat him up, because at times they thought he was a bit of a lunatic. Yet he was truly receiving Sai Baba's grace. When people came to see him, he used to tell them the same things Sai Baba said. So things were in those days... In a few months he acquired many virtues... For several months he did not take either food or water. He was thus reduced to a skeleton, and still he would keep himself busy with hard physical labor. Few people realized Upasni Maharaj's greatness, his spiritual potential.

Q Was he always protected by Sai Baba's grace, in all his calamities?

A Yes. And Sai Baba told him: "We have prenatal connections. Do not fear. I will have you reach the highest spiritual greatness, the summit of realization".

Shri S.N. Tipnis narrates:

One time it so happened that Upasni Baba started cooking. He was a Brahmin and he knew how to cook. So one day he thought he should prepare *naivedya*, food for the *guru*, and bring it to Baba. That day he went to see Sai Baba who asked him: "Why have you come to me?". Then Upasni replied: "Baba, I have cooked some food and I brought some *naivedya* for you". But Sai Baba said: "When I came to you, you sent me away. So then why do you come here now?". Then Upasni Maharaj asked: "But Baba, where were you?". He was surprised and felt sorry... Then Sai Baba again told him: "I really did come to see you". And Upasni Baba: "But I haven't seen anyone. There was only a dog with me, inside the temple". Then Sai Baba said: "That was me. And you sent me away". Upasni felt really bad, and again asked Sai Baba: "Was that really you?". And Sai Baba replied: "Yes. I am not in the dog only, or in the cat, etcetera. I fill the entire cosmos, the whole universe".

The following day, Upasni Baba was cooking some food and there was a beggar standing near him. He forgot Baba's instructions and... he didn't want to give him anything, since according to our tradition the food which is reserved for a *guru* or a saint has not to be given to anyone else... It's a strong religious tradition. We don't want anybody else to partake of it. Thus, seeing the beggar, Upasni Baba sent him away. Then, after a few minutes, the food being ready, he went to Sai Baba. But, even before coming close to him, from a distance, Sai Baba shouted at him angrily: "Go away. Why have you come? You told me to leave, so then why do you now come to me?". Then Upasni asked: "But Baba, where were you?". And Baba replied: "I was close to you, and you told me: 'Don't stay here'". Then again Upasni said: "Oh Baba, forgive me, I'm sorry. It was really you who stood

in front of me as a beggar?”. And Baba said: “Yes. I am in all beings”.³⁴ After this episode took place, a profound inner transformation occurred in Upasni Maharaj. We cannot fully grasp it with our limited intellects, but from a superficial point of view we can say that there was a total transformation. Upasni Baba did not meet with Baba often, still there was radical inner transformation. He continued to do hard manual labor. He was a changed person by then... This is what really counts. This casts light on the relationship which is established between a *guru* and his disciple, and it shows the greatness of Sai Baba.

Q When did Sati Godavari Mataji arrive here in Sakuri for the first time?

A Upasni Maharaj arrived here in 1917. This whole area was a cremation ground at the time; but thanks to him it was transformed into a beautiful place... Thanks to Upasni Baba’s spiritual greatness. It became a place of pilgrimage. Around 1924, Godavari Mata arrived in Sakuri for the first time, together with her mother. As a matter of fact, her parents had a devotional nature, and used to visit several pilgrimage sights in Nagpur, Berar, etcetera. Coming here, they passed through Shegaon, where the famous temple dedicated to Gajanan Maharaj³⁵ is located.

Q Ah, so they came from Shegaon?

A Yes. Shegaon is Godavari Mata’s birthplace. Her childhood was characterized by intense devotional feelings. So, when her parents heard of holy places or holy men, they would visit them. They liked doing this and participating in the worship. When they came here to Upasni Maharaj’s place, this was their first visit to Sakuri. It was in the month of January or February 1924. They came with their daughters. Godavari Mata was maybe eight or nine years old at the time. When they first came here, Sakuri was still in its first stage of development. There was Upasni Maharaj’s *jhopṛḍī*, his hut, and the *mandap*³⁶ where Upasni sat. Many people from all corners of India had come, since the name of Upasni Maharaj had already become famous. They used to take his *darshan* and then leave. There were lots of flowers, garlands and fruits which the devotees would offer him. Godavari Mata was a little girl, and for this reason she got to sit in the first lines for Upasni Maharaj’s *darshan*. Upasni then placed the garland that a devotee had put on his neck on little Godavari Mata’s neck... Then, pointing out various things and places, he said: “Little girl, you will have to take care of all these things in the future”. You have to keep in mind that she was only eight or nine years old at the time and that she had never gone to school, having been educated at home. She knew nothing about the world. Upasni Baba’s words revealed themselves to be the gospel truth. Then, Godavari Mata stayed in Sakuri for about two or three years, and at the

³⁴ These two episodes of Upasni Maharaj not recognizing Sai Baba’s presence in a dog and in a *sūdra* beggar, probably took place in October 1911; see Narasimhaswami; Subbarao, *Sage of Sakuri*, 45-7.

³⁵ Apparently, Gajanan Maharaj first appeared in Shegaon on February 23, 1878. The local people recognized him as an *avadhūta*, i.e. a naked ascetic having relinquished all ties. It is said that he came to be addressed as Gajanan because he used to constantly chant the words *gaṇ gaṇāt bote* or *gaṇāṅguṇa gaṇāt hote* in praise of Gaṇeśa.

³⁶ An open hall, a temple porch. Also, a temporary platform set up for weddings and religious ceremonies.

age of twelve she became Upasni Maharaj's disciple. She was his first informal disciple... After Upasni Maharaj's *samādhi*, which took place in 1941, the whole responsibility fell on Godavari Mataji's shoulders. Upasni Maharaj left this world on December 24, 1941. After him, for more than forty years, his work of spiritual regeneration and of awakening of consciousness, of transmission of values and spiritual truths to people has been continued by Godavari Mata. Not only did she continue his mission, but she also expanded it through her spiritual fervor. Even Westerners come here to Godavari Mata seeking peace, guidance, and enlightenment.

- Q Could you tell me what is, in your opinion, the most important teaching Mataji offers, alongside her *darshan*? How are we to attain peace of mind?
- A You see, the fundamental teaching of Mataji is that of assuming in one's own self the divine name, *nāmasmaran*, so as to advance on the spiritual path and gain peace of mind. Peace of mind is gradually reached through the repetition of God's names. This can be done also by people who have worldly duties or who are heads of families.
- Q Thus she recommends the practice of *japa*, of *nāmasmaran*?
- A Yes. It is *nāmasmaran* or *japa*. This is the most important thing; devotion to God, devotion to the *guru*, *bhakti*... But I would like to answer by telling you about something which happened some years ago. An American scholar came and he interviewed the mother. He asked Mataji about God-realization. I shall give you the same answer which Mataji gave to that man. Mataji said: "To enquire about God or God-realization is something which is very remote. Man should first of all behave as a man. At the moment, however, the situation in the world is such that man has lost the qualities of love and compassion toward his fellow-men. But man should behave first of all as a human being, since he has taken this body on himself. Nowadays, however, people live like animals...". You see, before becoming human one must first pass through inferior stages, and then gradually proceed in his evolution. If someone has not yet realized the conditions, the qualities pertaining to his state, he shouldn't even dream or think about successive stages, God-realization, etcetera. Thus, Mataji says that man must first of all behave as a man; only then will he have the right of inquiring about divine realization. All this refers to the basic human values... A *sādhaka* or not, each individual who lives in the world should have love, compassion toward his fellow beings. If one does not have this, then he is just nothing... Then the values leading to spiritual progress are absent. Spiritual values are the necessary, essential things that one must possess when undertaking the path of God-realization. Without these, you can talk about God, or you can write books, give conferences, etcetera, but all this will be of no use at all. In the spiritual realm, what really counts is personal experience, one has to put the teachings into practice. Into experience. Spirituality must live in your life. It has nothing to do with talking. Do you follow me? Thus, Mataji says that one has to develop these human values; this is true spirituality. It's not just doing *japa* or performing *ārti*. Nor does it mean to pray or train oneself in various kinds and methods of *sādhanā*. Many people are led astray on this subject... They think they are doing great things, but this is not enough. Rather, the practice of these disciplines

should develop and nurture those inner values. In the spiritual path what is required is broadness of vision, broadness of mind, and broadness of heart. Without these qualities, no God-realization or spiritual advancement is possible. People must learn to keep away from demonic qualities. Spiritual practices are worthless if not conducive to an inner transformation. You see, what I want to underline is the fact that man is made up of a divine principle, a human principle, and an animal principle. Thus, each *sāadhanā* has as its goal the elimination and the overcoming of the inferior principles, so as to reach the divine one. The basic qualities, animal and human, must be removed spontaneously.

Q Gradually?

A Yes. From one's own soul. When the opacity of gold is removed, then it shines in all of its brilliance. Similarly, each one of us is made up, in differing proportions, of *rajo guṇa*, *tamo guṇa*, and *sattva guṇa*.³⁷ Thus, to be short, I shall say that one needs to remove the *rajo guṇa* and the *tamo guṇa*. When the *sattva guṇa* alone remains, then one becomes a divine man, an exceptional man... Do you follow me? Thus, I'm saying that spiritual practices are indeed necessary, but if the people who come here to practice *japa* and *sāadhanā* end up torturing people, or having jealousy or hatred for one another, everything loses its meaning. Thus, Mataji says that there are people who, because they come here for many years, think they are saintly. Concerning these individuals, she says: "Rather than defining them devotees, I would call them hypocrites". Mataji uses these terms rarely, but these are the facts... This means that people can go astray on the path. Or that they can lead astray others by thinking they are good devotees, just because they go visit a saint, or live close to him, practicing *japa*... But what really counts is the change in one's heart. This only counts. There must be divine love, love which embraces the whole universe, for all different kinds of animals, beasts... not just for human beings. This is the mark of true, inner progress.

Q Could you explain to me why all the *kanyās* wear yellow robes? Does the color yellow bear a particular symbolic meaning?

A This is their uniform. The color is the color of spirituality, of *vairāgya*.³⁸ This is their uniform particularly at this moment, when the *pūjā* is celebrated. In this way, they are distinguishable from householders and other women... Without putting on those yellow *sārīs*, they could not perform any kind of *yajña* nor *pūjās*, as for example the Satyanārāyaṇa *pūjā*³⁹ or any other *pūjā*. In Marāṭhī, these *sārīs* are called *deśnivastra*, silken garments, which are used by Brahmins. These robes are never used for worldly pursuits. The guiding idea which inspires the wearing of these robes is the following: the preservation of sanctity. For this

³⁷ According to Sāṃkhya philosophy, the three constituents of nature (*prakṛti*): obscurity/ignorance and inertia (*tamas*), activity and passion (*rajas*), luminosity/knowledge and goodness (*sattva*).

³⁸ Lit. 'loss of color, growing pale'. It comes to mean dispassion, detachment, indifference to worldly objects and desires.

³⁹ A popular rite performed when some new undertaking is begun or to insure good fortune in the coming year. Satyanārāyaṇa is a form of Viṣṇu as the embodiment of truth.

reason, they are kept separate from other clothes and are employed only at ritual times, so as to preserve purity...

Q What happens when a girl becomes a *kanyā*? Must she undergo a period of novitiate?

A It happens all in a very spontaneous and natural way. Indeed, you raise an important question. See, the *kanyās* are not accepted too readily... I shall explain this. There were many families which used to come to Sakuri for years... to the *ashram* of Upasni Baba. They would come for thirty, even forty years in a row... So, their daughters would come along with them, and would remain here for several days. Thus, very naturally, by a law of transmission, these girls would inherit divine qualities, of *bhakti* and devotion. Sometimes, when they came to visit together with their families, the girls would express the wish of remaining here with the other *kanyās*. Their inner desire would then be further kindled. At this point, one of the novices, by seeing the lifestyle of the rest of the *kanyās*, their habits, etcetera could start to think of living here permanently, like the others. But, even in this case, the girl is not accepted immediately. When she tells Mataji about her wish to stay, Mataji will talk to her parents and might say: "Let her remain here, but only for a period of time". Thus, she is not immediately taken as a *kanyā* nor is she initiated. Mataji will say: "Remain here for just a period of time". This probation period usually lasts three or four years.

Q Does the girl wear a particular robe during this time?

A No. Unless she becomes a *kanyā*, she will not wear their robes. These four years represent the probation period for the girl. Not less than three, four years. During this time, she will come to understand in her heart if she feels fit to live like that for the rest of her life. The ascetic life is full of difficulties if compared to family life. See, there are no comforts in such a life. There are fasts, and one undergoes physical and mental strains. Here, from dawn to dusk, one must remember God's name, practice *nāmasmaraṇ*. One needs to be constantly fixed in the divine awareness. This means that it is necessary to totally forget the world... It's a life of contemplation, of meditation, of practice of *japa*. In every way and in every form, one is concentrating himself on the Supreme. Thus, one must forget about himself and the world, about himself and his own body. Not everyone can do this. So, in this probation period, the girl will come to realize by herself if she has the resources and the desire to continue leading such a life... If then Mataji thinks it right to give her initiation, then she will initiate her and will accept her as her *kanyā* and disciple. Not otherwise. Thus, this is a very natural and gradual process... Moreover, it might happen that a *kanyā* does not feel like continuing the monastic life anymore. In this case, she can think about it for several days, and then autonomously decide to go back into the world.

Q Thus, there is total freedom in this choice?

A Yes. It's not necessary for all the girls to be here... See, Upasni Baba used to say: "Not all girls must necessarily become householders, just as not all girls must feel drawn to abandon the world". Thus, only a few of them end up living here. They represent a model and an inspiration to the others and to all the people who come visit this place. The girls who come here often derive inspiration from seeing them. Then, an inner transformation occurs. See, spirituality, Vedānta phi-

losophy, God-realization are not limited in space and time... According to the spiritual qualities of a person, they are utilized in worldly activities. This is what really counts.

- Q When a girl becomes a *kanyā*, after the four-year probation period, does she have special meetings with Mataji at certain hours of the day? Or, rather, Mataji often talks to them freely...?
- A As in college education one must undergo a curricula with BA, MA, etcetera, when a *kanyā* is ordained, she is in her initial stage of spiritual development. Here also, one must undergo a training, that is, go through stages of development. Besides the practice of *japa* and meditation, the *kanyā* must study Sanskrit and the *Vedas*. Then, gradually, she will go more and more in depth... This is necessary so as to guarantee the best training... After three or four years, the *kanyā*, as a good student reaching maturity, will evolve and develop herself. There is then the issue of the relationship of the *kanyās* with Mataji. All of them are Mataji's disciples. Mataji gives *darshan* every morning at 10 a.m. to everyone who is present in the *ashram*. Besides this, in the afternoon there is a period of about half an hour in which all the *kanyās* go to Mataji's room and stay in her company.
- Q Thus, if a *kanyā* has a problem she can talk about it with Mataji?
- A Yes, she talks about it with Mataji. At the afternoon meeting, or afterward, or whenever she wishes to do so... When she wants to see Mataji, she can go directly to see her. Things are arranged thus. Anyway, there is always a meeting of all the *kanyās* with Mataji in the afternoon. Usually, they talk about issues concerning God-realization, or about good books, or about saints... Moreover, since Mataji is the *guru*,⁴⁰ the *kanyās* want to know things which concern the *guru*. This is the way they pass their time.
- Q How many *kanyās* reside here at present?
- A Now there are about sixty *kanyās*. Upasni Maharaj initiated twenty-five, and Mataji in a forty-year period has initiated about thirty-five. Thus, in total they are about sixty.
- Q Do they live here all the time or do they travel as well?
- A They reside here permanently since it is here where their inspiration abides. It is precisely because they all reside here that the institution is kept alive. However, it occasionally happens that the *kanyās* may go somewhere to celebrate *yajñas* or other religious functions along with Mataji.
- Q Nearby or even far away from here?
- A Outside Sakuri. Up till now, Mataji has celebrated *yajñas* at Hyderabad, Nagpur, Surat, Bombay, Benares and in all the most important places in India.
- Q Thus Mataji travels?
- A Yes. And of course the *kanyās* accompany Mataji. Mataji is always accompanied by the *kanyās*. Sometimes for celebrating *yajñas*, other times because Mataji is invited by devotees to visit their towns. Then, devotees take care of all the arrangements so as to greet her properly; especially the older devotees... In this way, the whole place is benefited by Mataji's *darshan* and the people who cannot come to Sakuri are blessed by Mataji's *darshan*. Do you follow me?

40 The appropriate term would be *gurvī*, the feminine of *guru*.

- Q At what time do the *kanyās* get up in the morning?
- A At about 4:30. Yes, because the *ārtī* starts at 5.
- Q Could you describe a *kanyā*'s typical day, from dawn to dusk?
- A See, here the day starts at about 5 a.m. There is the *jhoprḍī* at the main temple. *Jhoprḍī* means hut; inside the temple is the *samādhi* of Upasni Maharaj. Here in Sakuri there are several temples. There is Upasni Maharaj mother's temple, the Kanyākumārī temple, Upasni Baba's *samādhi*... All these, together with the *pūjā* and the worship, are taken care of by the *kanyās* during the day. All the *pūjās* are celebrated by the *kanyās*. Then there are several other temples: the Datta temple, the Śani temple... Outside this *jhoprḍī*, there are the Khaṇḍobā temple, the Gaṇeś temple, the Mārutī temple. The *pūjās* in these temples are celebrated by Brahmins. But here we have one main temple and the *jhoprḍī*. The day begins at 5 in the morning with the performance of *ārtī*. It is celebrated following the local tradition; first inside the temple and then at the *jhoprḍī*. After this *ārtī*, which is called *kākaḍ ārtī* and which varies in time according to the season, the *abhiṣeka* to the *samādhi* of Upasni Maharaj is performed. This goes on up to 8, 8:30 a.m. At 9, the *kanyās* sing *bhajans* in the hall, at Upasni Maharaj's *samādhi*. *Bhajans* continue up to 9:30 a.m. Then another *ārtī* at Upasni Maharaj's *samādhi* follows. After this, excerpts from Upasni Maharaj's talks are read. As a matter of fact, when Upasni Maharaj was alive, there was a time during which he would talk even for several hours with no pause. His discourses are known as *Upāsni-Vāk-Sudhā*,⁴¹ and each one of them is about five, seven pages long. I would like to add that Upasni Maharaj's saintly literature amounts to about five thousand pages all together. Actually, my PhD thesis is based on Upasni Maharaj's discourses... His talks concern God-realization, ethics, spirituality, Vedānta. Also, some discourses concern education and family-planning. Just imagine what it was like to preach birth control here in India... He was one of the first to come up with this idea, about sixty years before the law became operative. Thus, he also concerned himself with social issues. However, his main emphasis was on topics such as the *guru*, God-realization, *japa*, *tapas*⁴²... He was a man of God, and these were his principal themes of discussion. Sometimes, however, it happened that people would ask him about social problems, and then he would express his views. So, there are these lectures which take place up to around 10 a.m., for ten, fifteen minutes. At 10, Godavari Mata comes and grants her *darshan*. At that time, visitors arrange themselves in lines so as to see her. This lasts about thirty minutes. Then, there is an *ārtī* at the temple and also at the *jhoprḍī* which starts at 11 and which ends around 12, 12:30. The evening *ārtī* is first celebrated inside the temple at dusk. This is performed between 7 and 8 p.m. Then it's dinner time, from 8 to 9 p.m. At that time, the *diṇḍī*⁴³ begins. *Diṇḍī* means that the *kanyās* come out in procession and recite *bhajans*. When they finally reach the *jhoprḍī*, the main place, then the night *ārtī* is celebrated. This final *ārtī* is over around 10:30 p.m. This is the usu-

41 Lit. 'Upasni's nectar-speech'.

42 Lit. 'heat'. Ascetic practices, that is, the warmth generated by such austerities.

43 A group led by a leader, participating in a pilgrimage or procession.

al schedule of activities. Besides this, from 6 to 7 p.m. the *kanyās* sing *bhajans* and then a lecture follows. It is a *kanyā* who does this *pravacana*.⁴⁴ It is similar to what a student does when he takes a philosophical text like the *Bhāgavata Purāna*, the *Rāmāyaṇ* or the *Yogavāsīṣṭha* and then gives a presentation concerning that text... In this speech, the *kanyā* explains, from her point of view, the philosophical thought that characterizes the text, the ideas which are expounded in the passages she has chosen to comment upon.

Q Could you explain what constitutes the uniqueness of this Sakuri *ashram*?

A See, when you go visit saintly people, *bhakti*, *nāmasmaran*, the reading of sacred texts, meditation, *bhajans*, all these are common things, you find them in every *ashram*. However, every institution and each individual has its own peculiarities, its own special characteristics. Thus, here in Sakuri, Upasni Baba's foremost contribution to Hinduism or more generally to world philosophy is that of having created a religious institution for women only, and of having established the practice of *yajñas*.

Q Also, allowing Vedic recitation to women is quite exceptional, isn't it?

A This concerns the practice of *yajñas*. The fact is that in India there are very few institutions which are open to women aspiring to lead a spiritual life. As you know, in the West there are many nunneries, and actually I have read that these institutions first arose in the West. In India there are very few. This is one of them, and also one of the best organized. For example, the Ramakrishna Mission⁴⁵ has some, and there are others founded by Anandamayi Ma...⁴⁶ Still, the Sakuri *ashram* is beyond doubt one of the best. *Kanyās* and *brahmacāriṇīs*⁴⁷ come here from all over India, they don't come only from the Nagar District⁴⁸ or Maharashtra. They belong to all castes and creeds; it's their spiritual anguish which brings them.

Q Do they really come here from all over India?

A Yes. All day long they are busy with *bhajans*, *ārtīs*, various *sāadhanās*, etcetera. Their mind is constantly fixed on God. This is their curricula here. The practice of *yajña* also constitutes something which is unique to this place. This is the only place in India where you can find women who are skilled in *yajñas*' celebrations and in the chanting of Vedic hymns. There are seven *yajña* celebrations during the year. Sometimes people question the right of women to celebrate them, since they

⁴⁴ Oral instruction, exposition and interpretation of a text.

⁴⁵ Started in 1897 by Swami Vivekananda, the Ramakrishna Mission, with orders of both monks and nuns, had and still has as its main tasks the teaching of social reform, the performance of works of education and social service, and the preaching of a Vedāntic universalism. The Ramakrishna Mission is a well-organized community, maintaining numerous colleges, high schools, hostels and hospitals and publishing an impressive amount of religious literature.

⁴⁶ Alias Nirmala Sundari, lit. 'immaculate beauty', she was born in 1896 in Kheora, East Bengal, from devout *vaiṣṇava* parents. Many women renunciants were drawn to her *ashram*, where they received training as disciples of 'the Mother'. Anandamayi Ma was a holy woman outside of any formal tradition, her spiritual status being based almost entirely on her ecstatic states. Contrary to Sati Godavari's case, she had no *guru*, initiated herself, and learned rituals from 'invisible voices'.

⁴⁷ Women living a celibate life. *Brahmacarya* is the first stage in the life of a high caste Hindu, i.e. of a 'twice-born' (*dvija*) man.

⁴⁸ The Ahmednagar District.

don't see this happen in any other place. Indeed, it's only after many centuries that women have regained this right, thanks to Upasni Baba. This is why we say that Upasni Baba was a revolutionary. Do you follow me? This feature constitutes the uniqueness of this monastic institution. The *kanyās* are all well-versed in Vedic knowledge. Some of them are Gaṇapati,⁴⁹ which means they have knowledge of the subject at its highest level. To witness a *yāg* is an experience in itself. See, my words are really inadequate to explain how the *kanyās* perform them...

Q How long will this October *yajña* last?

A This *yajña* began the first day of Navarātri and continues for about a week, eight days. The time period of each *yajña* is fixed in accordance to the *Śāstras*, as the Scriptures say. Thus, one *yajña* can last four days and another one fifteen... It depends. For example, the Sūrya *yāg* begins on the first of January and ends on the fifteenth. All in accordance to the *Śāstras*. At this point, I deeply thank Shri S.N. Tipnis for all his valuable information and his help.

Shri S.N. Tipnis says:

I should thank you, for having gone through various difficulties, for having come to India to gather information on these topics, spending time and money...

Shri S.N. Tipnis adds:

It seems fairly certain that Mataji's birth was blessed by Gajanan Maharaj's grace, which was granted to her parents. Apparently, Gajanan Maharaj told them that "he would have a great soul be born in their family". This soul is Mataji.

I Thus, there seems to be a connection between Gajanan Maharaj, Godavari Mataji, and Shirdi Sai Baba...

A Mataji's father could not have children, so Mataji's grandfather was very worried about this. For this reason, Mataji's grandfather used to go see Gajanan Maharaj; he was a great devotee of his. Once, Gajanan Maharaj told him: "Why do you worry? I shall give you what other saints would never grant you. I myself will be born in your family". Then, Mataji's grandfather asked him: "How shall I know that you will be born in my family?". Then Gajanan Maharaj told him that the birth would be characterized by special signs and events, and he described these to him. When Godavari Mataji was born, her grandfather saw these signs described by Gajanan Maharaj happen. Thus, he was convinced that it was he, Gajanan Maharaj, who had come back on earth again. Often, Gajanan Maharaj had on his lips the words Gaṅgā and Godā,⁵⁰ since these are the names of the sacred rivers of India. Thus, remembering Gajanan Maharaj and his words, his *prasād*, the grandfather gave her the name of Godavari. This is the story concerning her name...

⁴⁹ Another name of Gaṇeśa meaning 'lord of the *gaṇas*', i.e. of the troops, especially those attendant upon Śiva. Gaṇapati is the lord of wisdom.

⁵⁰ The Ganges and the Godāvāri, the sacred river of Maharashtra passing by Sakuri.

- Q Thus, it was due to Gajanan Maharaj's grace if Sati Godavari Mataji was born?
- A Yes, and she also received the blessings of many other Indian saints. For example when, still a child, she would go visit some holy men with her parents... Finally, when she arrived in Sakuri for the first time, Upasni Baba told her: "You yourself shall have to take care of all this one day". Thus, you see, Gajanan Maharaj's words are related to Upasni Baba's own words...
- Q Do you believe there exists a full connection?
- A Yes.
- Q Thus, we would have a strong tie between Shegaon, Gajanan Maharaj, Shirdi, Sai Baba, Upasni Maharaj, Mataji...?
- A I would like to remember the two most important facts. The first, when Gajanan Maharaj said: "I will myself incarnate". The second one, when Upasni Baba was here in the early days, in 1922-23, or maybe 1924. To one of his closest disciples, Mister Borawke, Upasni used to say: "A *yogī* is coming in my womb". In saying these words, Upasni Baba would put his hand on his stomach, repeating: "A great *yogī* is coming in my womb". That *yogī* was Gajanan Maharaj. You see then how the words relate to each other...
- Q Did he refer to Sati Godavari Mataji?
- A See, the meaning is allegorical. Gajanan Maharaj had said that he would come, that he would incarnate in that family, and Upasni Baba said: "The *yogī* has come...". He didn't mention his name. This meant that he, Gajanan Maharaj, had come. Do you follow?
- Q You mean to say that there is total identity between Gajanan Maharaj and Sati Godavari Mataji, that they are the same person?
- A Yes. These words of Upasni Maharaj confirm it. It was an allegorical speech. The words 'in my womb' mean that he would come to Sakuri in Mataji's form. And actually after a few days Godavari Mata came, and settled in Sakuri. Can you see how Upasni Maharaj's and Gajanan Maharaj's words relate to each other, and together explain themselves? And Upasni Baba first words to her were: "You shall have to take care of all this...". She was the only person to whom he ever said anything like this. And his words were the gospel truth. And now we can all see Godavari Mata's greatness, having followers all over the world... As if Upasni Maharaj and Gajanan Maharaj's words had come to fruition.
- I Thank you very much.



Figure 50 The *kanyās* performing a *yajña* at the Śrī Upāsni Kanyākumārī Sthān, Sakuri

Figure 51 The *kanyās* circumambulating the temple's hall and singing *mantras* at the Śrī Upāsni Kanyākumārī Sthān, Sakuri



Figure 52 A *kanyā* conducting a *pūjā* at the Śrī Upāsni Kanyākumārī Sthān, Sakuri

In Shirdi, in the Leṇḍī gardens, 6:45 p.m.

Third, brief conversation with Swami Shekhar Rao.

Swami Shekhar Rao says:

All that I previously told you I said as if in Baba's presence and it's the absolute truth. That's all I want to say, thanks.

Q You mean to say what you have told me in the previous interviews?

A Yes, everything that I have said I have said as if being in Baba's presence and it's the truth.

Q Well, I was sure of that. Have you had any trouble in translating so far?

A Everything here goes as it should. Don't bother with me, everything depends upon Baba's will. I am in front of him, and if I am here at all it's his will. Baba knows and Baba will do. That's all. Thank you.

Swami Shekhar Rao next offers some information on the Dixit *vāḍā*:

We are in the gardens in front of the temple, which in Sai Baba's times didn't exist. It was built later. On the left of the temple, you can see an old white building with some tiles: this was the Dixit *vāḍā*, the first edifice built in order to lodge pilgrims who came to Shirdi to have Baba's *darshan*.⁵¹ Nowadays, the Dixit *vāḍā* is no longer used as a guest house. After Baba's *samādhi*, it was used as a *bhojānghar* and today it has been turned into a tea canteen. During Sai Baba's days, when Mister Dixit came to Shirdi, he would stay on the upper floor of the *vāḍā*, where that yellow colored house is, the tallest one [he indicates it to me].

Q So this was the first *vāḍā* to be built?

A Yes, yes. In Baba's time only this *vāḍā* existed. Later many other *vāḍās* were built, such as the Buti *vāḍā*, etcetera.

I Thanks.

⁵¹ In fact, the first *vāḍā* to be built was the Sathe *vāḍā*, which was built by Rao Bahadur Hari Vinayak Sathe in 1908 as per Sai Baba's explicit request. The Dixit *vāḍā* was built three years later by Hari Sitaram Dixit, also known as Kakasaheb Dixit. Both R.B.H.V. Sathe and H.S. Dixit were prominent Sai Baba devotees. On these *vāḍās*, see Satpathy, *New Findings on Shirdi Sai Baba*, 72-100.

Oral Testimonies on Sai Baba

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

Antonio Rigopoulos

7 **Shirdi-Kopargaon-Shirdi** **Monday, October 21, 1985**

Excerpts From My Diary

7:30 a.m. Early this morning I took part in the procession from the Gurusthān to the *masjid*. I didn't find it particularly engaging. But then I went to the *cāvaḍī* and while I was casually sitting at the *cāvaḍī*'s entrance, looking at the *raṅgolīs*, the auspicious signs that some young women were skilfully drawing on the ground, a stray dog caught my attention. He was full of pustules and eczemas, of fleas, and was in a really bad shape. Then it suddenly flashed on me that that dog *was* Sai Baba. It was something stronger than a simple thought, like an insight or a sudden flash of awareness that I find hard to put into words. I really felt that he was that dog and that he was standing in front of me in that very form: it had the force of an incontrovertible truth. It was a strange and startling experience indeed. Sai Baba was that dog: the lowest, the despised, the most neglected creature. The dog had sweet and penetrating eyes, which called for sympathy and attention. I felt I finally understood something: not intellectually, i.e. with the head, but emotionally, i.e. with the heart. *There* was Sai Baba, truly and fully. It came like a revelation and I shed a few tears; couldn't help it. It was just so overwhelming. So this is the way my day starts. I have taped the music, that is, the *ārtīs* which were sung during the procession. Now it's time to have some breakfast.

12:30 p.m. Sent my telegrams, one to Venice and the other one to H.J. Agrawal in Khamgaon. At the post office they told me they should receive them within next Thursday. Together with Swami Shekhar Rao, I then went to the bank in Kopargaon and at last I was able to change my one hundred and forty dollars into rupees. The guy at the bank was so terribly slow, it really took forever. Anyway, everything went well and I now have about one thou-



Figure 53 Meher Baba's five perfect masters: Sai Baba, Babajan, Tajuddin Baba, Narayan Maharaj and Upasni Baba

sand and eight hundred rupees with me which makes me feel safer. We got back to Shirdi and in a short while I'll go have lunch at the hotel's restaurant. At 5 p.m. I have an appointment to interview one Homi Baba who I'm told has been living here for about fifteen years.

7:35 p.m. Spoke just very briefly with Homi Baba. Right now he is too busy to talk to me so I may be able to interview him some other day. He has what I would call a small *ashram* here in Shirdi and apparently he met Meher Baba. He is a Parsi and definitely imitates Sai Baba in his attire: he wears a white robe and a white cloth tied around his head. He is quite a bizarre, unpredictable character; he is somewhat gruff but at the same time can be very kind. This at least is the impression I got. Many Parsi devotees go pay their respects to him when they arrive here. According to Swami Shekhar Rao, Homi Baba comes from a very rich family.

I then had a nice interview with one Deshpande Saheb, a devotee of Meher Baba. He used to be his personal photographer. He has been living in Shirdi for one year now. He was close to Meher Baba since 1958, living with him. The conversation was very pleasant though not too long, i.e. it lasted about twenty to thirty minutes. As a gift, he gave me three photos of Meher Baba which he himself took. He also gave me a nice photo of Meher Baba together with Sati Godavari Mataji and another picture of Avatar Shree Meher Baba surrounded by the five *gurus* who would have led him toward enlightenment: Sai Baba of Shirdi (placed at the top), Sadguru Babajan of Pune, Tajuddin Baba of Nagpur, Narayan Maharaj of Kedgaon, and Sadguru Upasni Baba of Sakuri (in clockwise order).

We later went to the Sansthān. Tomorrow morning, after 11 a.m., I should have the much awaited interview with the Sansthān's manager. We'll see. This evening I will participate in the palanquin (*pālkhī*) procession. Tomorrow will be the big day of the *samādhi* celebrations. By now the crowds have increased a lot; I think there must be around five or six thousand people. And tomorrow will certainly be the most crowded day being the holiest day of the year. All in all, this was another fruitful day. I also recorded the singing of all *ārtīs*.

9:40 p.m., in my room. Participated in the *pālkhī* procession which started from the Dvārakāmāi. There was an intense spiritual atmosphere. The *masjid* is truly a sacred place and one can feel the holy presence. I pictured in my mind Sai Baba when at night in front of the fire of the *dhunī* repeated 'Allāh Mālik' or when during the day held his *darbār* and met visitors giving them blessings, telling them stories and asking for *dakṣiṇā*. His portrait, an oil painting, is beautiful: he looks alive and his eyes are most powerful and penetrating. During the procession I met with a woman devotee of Sai Baba and Sri Narayan Baba and had a nice talk with her. She told me I will be able to meet Sri Narayan Baba if I go to his *ashram* in Panvel, a suburb of Bombay. She very much encouraged me to go see him. She is a nice person, with a charming smile. I'll see if I can make it. This is all for today. I am exhausted and go straight to bed.



Figure 54 Preparing the *palkhi* for the evening procession



Figure 55 The seat of the *palkhi*



Figures 56-57 The evening *palkhi* procession at the *masjid*





Figures 58-61 The evening *palkhi* procession leaves the *masjid*



Figures 62-63 The evening *palkhi* procession in the street just outside the *masjid*

Interviews of the day

In Shirdi, near Homi Baba's *ashram*, 5:30 p.m.

Impressions after a brief visit to Homi Baba, a Parsi holy man. These comments were recorded soon after my visit.

Homi Baba recites a *mantra* or a prayer in front of a Sai Baba image while surrounded by many devotees, most of them Parsi.

My interpreter Swami Shekhar Rao tells me that Homi Baba was a disciple of Meher Baba, or at least that he met with Meher Baba in the past. This, however, will later be denied by Homi Baba.

It is eleven years now that Homi Baba lives in Shirdi, dressing in the same way as Sai Baba used to dress.

He has a small *ashram* and Parsi devotees of Sai Baba always come to pay their respects to Homi Baba. I think their presence in Shirdi is a testimony of Sai Baba's universalist spirit.

Homi Baba strikes me as being an odd character; his ways are strange and rough. In particular, a bizarre feature of his deserves mention: he gives *darshan* to people by pulling up his shirt, claiming that the hair on his chest, in the region of the heart, has arranged itself so as to 'create' an image of Sai Baba sitting in his cross-legged posture. Lots of people come to Homi Baba to witness this performance of his. Unfortunately, I was unable to detect Sai Baba's outline in his hairy chest.

Today he could not receive us being busy with the preparations for Sai Baba's *samādhī* anniversary. I will try to speak to him in a few days.

In Shirdi, Shri Deshpande Saheb's house, 6:15 p.m.

Conversation with Shri Deshpande Saheb, professional photographer, devotee of the Parsi saint Meher Baba (1894-1969).

Shri Deshpande Saheb says:

My name is Deshpande, and it's twenty-five years that I am a Meher Baba devotee. I come from Ahmednagar. The first photo of Baba is of 1933. You know, Meher Baba is great... I am a devotee of his. He has many followers: Americans, Indians, etcetera. On January 31 there will be a big function in Meherabad,¹ near Ahmednagar.

Q Did you ever see Meher Baba?

A Yes, I saw him. I used to take photos of him. He was a very powerful man [he shows me some black and white photos of Meher Baba which he made, both in small and large formats].

Q Could you tell me what, in your opinion, is the most relevant teaching Meher Baba gave his disciples?

A Meher Baba told everybody to behave with love, *bhakti-prema*, with devotion.

Q What is the link connecting Meher Baba to Shirdi Sai Baba?

A The connection is that Sai Baba was Meher Baba's *guru*. Even Upasni Maharaj was his *guru*. The five Sadgurus were all *gurus* of Meher Baba... These were: Sai Baba, Upasni Maharaj, Babajan of Pune, Tajuddin Baba of Nagpur, and Narayan Maharaj.²

Q Could you tell me something about your personal experiences with Meher Baba?

A My daughter was very ill, and the doctor said there was no more hope to save her. Then I prayed to Meher Baba, and after an hour my daughter felt better, she was cured... This was my experience with Baba.

Q Did you live near his *ashram*?

A Yes, in Arangaon, which is very close to Meherabad.

Q How long did you live there?

A From 1970. Arangaon is close to Ahmednagar.

Q What was Meher Baba's personality like?

T He had long hair and white complexion...

Q I mean his character... did he often get angry, was he loving?

A No, no anger. Love only. Never angry, always loving toward all.

Q I know that Meher Baba kept silent for a long period of time. Could you tell me something about it?

T Meher Baba took up the vow of silence, that is *maunam*, from 1930 till his death, till the time of his *samādhi* in 1969.

Q Thus he did not speak anymore starting from 1930?

T Yes, right. He only wrote.

Q What's the significance of this period of silence?

T Meher Baba told his devotees that his *guru* had told him to do so.

¹ The *ashram* established by Meher Baba in 1923 near the village of Arangaon. For a brief sketch of Meher Baba, see Rigopoulos, *The Life and Teachings of Sai Baba of Shirdi*, 208-10. For an in-depth study on his life and teachings, see Shepherd, *Meher Baba, an Iranian Liberal*.

² On these and other perfect masters with whom Sai Baba is believed to be linked, see Satpathy, *Shirdi Sai Baba and Other Perfect Masters*.



Figure 64
Shri Deshpande Saheb,
Meher Baba's photographer

- Q Who of the five previously mentioned?
- T Upasni Maharaj.
- Q I know that Meher Baba went to America. What was his impact in the West?
- T There are Meher Baba centers in California and also in New York, I believe.

Shri Deshpande Saheb says:

There are many followers of Meher Baba in the United States.

- Q When did Baba come back to India from the States?
- T After a year...
- Q Which year?
- T He left for America in 1953 and came back to India in 1954.
- Q When he came back, where did he go?
- T He went back to Pune.
- Q How was the daily life at Meher Baba's *ashram*?
- T It started at 5 a.m. with an *ārtī* and prayer. Then, at 10:30 there was the *darshan* of Baba. Everybody wanted to ask things to Baba; people would give him letters, and he would answer them by writing back, since he didn't speak.
- Q What took place in the afternoon?

- T There were *bhajan* programs, songs... There was lots of music, and Baba himself often used to sing.
- Q Did he give a second *darshan* in the afternoon?
- T No; only once, in the morning. Baba never took any money, any *dakṣiṇā* from devotees. Many devotees made donations to Meher Baba, however, and thanks to these donations he created hospitals, and lots of *sevā* centers... He fed the poor by serving them rice. Once, about a thousand people were fed at Arangaon for several days.
- Q Thus service, *sevā*, was considered to be very important by Meher Baba?
- A Yes; *sevā* only counts.
- Q *Sevā* and love?
- A *Sevā* and love, for Meher Baba. His *ashram* is still active today.
- Q Are there many devotees of Meher Baba in India?
- A In Maharashtra there are about seventy-five thousand, and in the whole of India there are around five hundred thousand or a million followers.
- Q Now you live here in Shirdi, with Sai Baba. Do you think there exists a strong connection between Meher Baba and Shirdi Sai?
- A Yes. Sai Baba and Meher Baba are in a *guru-śiṣya* connection.
- Q *Guruparamparā*?³
- A Yes, *guruparamparā*.
- Q Thus, you perceive them as being one, the same person so to speak?
- A Yes, same...
- Q When did Meher Baba take *samādhi*?
- T He took *samādhi* in 1969.
- Q And from that year you moved here in Shirdi?
- A No. I have been living in Shirdi only since last year. Before, I was in the places where Meher Baba was.
- Q Thus, you transferred only recently?
- T Yes, recently.
- Q So you were Meher Baba's photographer?
- A Yes, I was Baba's photographer.
- Q Did he call you when he needed you?
- A Yes, yes. Baba would call me at any time, for whatever service or ritual function, out of love for the devotees... and I would take pictures. I have here about five thousand negatives of Meher Baba; lots...
- T Mister Deshpande would like to give you some photos, Mister Tony...
- Q How was Meher Baba? I mean, was he very serious or rather a joyous type of person?
- A He was peaceful, he had a peaceful mind, *saṃtoṣa*,⁴ and a smiling face.
- Q So he would not get angry at people?
- T No, he would not get angry... he loved everybody and smiled at everybody.
- Q Did he use to embrace his devotees?
- A Yes, yes. Children, old people... he would embrace them all.
- T As a sign of love.

³ Tradition or lineage of teachers.

⁴ Lit. 'contentedness'.



Figure 65 Meher Baba and Sati Godavari Mata (right) during one of her visits to Meher Baba's *ashram* (photo by Shri Deshpande Saheb)

I In Bombay I have found many books in English on Meher Baba and I know that there are many Meher Baba devotees in the United States. I hoped to have this opportunity of speaking with someone who had personally known Meher Baba, since I know that he was here in Shirdi as a disciple of Upasni Maharaj for some time. Sai Baba apparently asked him to go to Upasni Maharaj and become his *śiṣya*...

A Yes.

I He also declared himself to be an *avatāra*...

A Yes.

T You see, in his studio Mister Deshpande has a big picture of Meher Baba. Have you seen it?

Q Was he really very powerful? Did he make many miracles?

T Yes, yes. Many miracles, so Mister Deshpande says. But I haven't seen them... Deshpande Saheb says that in 1957 Meher Baba came to Sakuri and met with Godavari Mayi.⁵

Q In 1957?

T Yes.

Q Twenty-eight years ago?

T Yes [Shri Deshpande Saheb shows us the photos of that meeting].

Q [looking at other photos] Meher Baba looks quite young in these pictures. Did you make all these?

⁵ Lit. 'Mother Godavari'.



Figure 66 Meher Baba giving *darshan* to devotees (photo by Shri Deshpande Saheb)

A Yes.

Q Did Meher Baba smoke?

T No, not at all. He didn't smoke neither the *cilīm* nor cigarettes, and he didn't even chew betel nut... nothing.

Q Was he a vegetarian?

T No. He would take both vegetarian food as well as non-vegetarian. Mister Deshpande met Meher Baba the first time in 1958. Before this date, his father worked for Meher Baba.

Q Thus your whole family is linked up with Meher Baba?

A Yes.

T Even his father used to take photos of Meher Baba; he would do what Baba told him to do, particularly during ritual functions. Then, in 1958, Mister Deshpande Saheb himself started taking photographs. So he says...

I Thank you very much.

At the end of our conversation, Shri Deshpande Saheb shows me various other photos and lets me choose three to keep for myself.

8 **Shirdi**

Tuesday, October 22, 1985.

Mahāsamādhi Celebrations

Excerpts From My Diary

8 a.m. Woke up at 5:30 a.m. It is quite chilly here in the early morning. Participated in the solemn procession and in the *abhiṣeka*, the consecration and bathing of Sai Baba's *mūrti*, the marble statue inside the Samādhi Mandir. I took several photos. Despite the huge crowds and long queues, I could feel the people's intense devotion on this special occasion. Remarkably, I haven't seen a single Westerner around. My presence is clearly regarded as something strange or unusual and indeed many Indians look at me with a mix of curiosity and surprise.

Later, I had a short conversation with Baldev Girme reporting information on Abdul Baba which he got from the custodian of Abdul Baba's tomb in Shirdi. Even this little information may turn out to be precious. I offered *udī*, the sacred ash, at the margosa or *nīm* tree where the *samādhi* of Sai Baba's *guru* is supposedly located. Must come here and offer it again next Thursday or Friday evening, before leaving Shirdi (all evils and ailments are said to be cured by burning incense here on Thursdays and Fridays). Today is undoubtedly the holiest day for all Sai Baba devotees.

1 p.m. This morning around 10 I had a great blessing: I was allowed to have Sai Baba's *darshan* in the Samādhi Mandir and to go up to his tomb! It was an incredible honor to be allowed to go up to the *samādhi*, place some garlands on it, and also touch it. A rare grace indeed which was made possible thanks to Appa Saheb Borawke, whom I was permitted to accompany up to the *samādhi* for his daily offering of fresh, beautiful roses. Baldev Girme was also with us. Later, I took some photos of Appa Saheb Borawke and also of Shri Deshpande Saheb, Meher Baba's photographer.

I was able to speak for quite a long time with a trustee of the Sansthān, Prakash V. Karkhanis from Bombay, a chartered accountant who is an acute and brilliant young man. I could not record our conversation, however. We



Figure 67 The Samādhī Mandir

Figure 68 The queue of devotees going to the Samādhī Mandir



Figure 69
The queue of devotees going
to the Samādhi Mandir

Figure 70
Sai Baba's *murti* in the Samādhi Mandir.
A temple priest offers flowers to it while
a devotee prostrates himself at its feet



Figure 71
Sai Baba's *mūrti* in the Samādhī Mandir.
A woman devotee prostrates at its feet

Figure 72
Sai Baba's tomb in the Samādhī Mandir,
located just below the *mūrti*



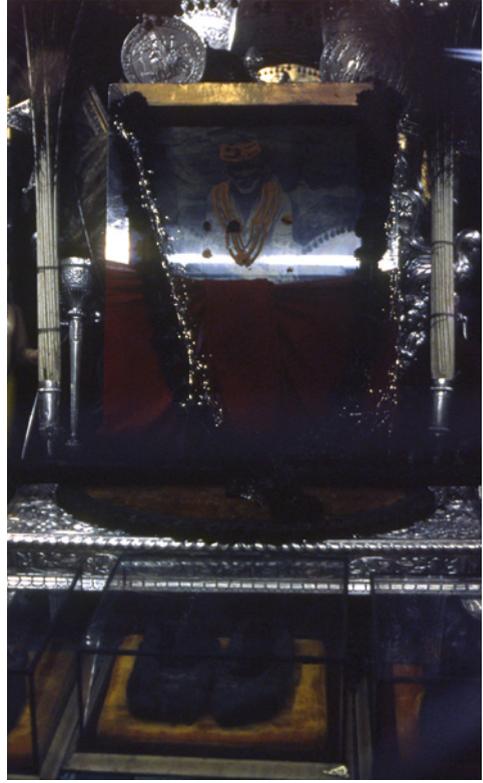


Figure 73 Sai Baba's tomb in the Samādhī Mandir, located just below the *mūrti*

Figure 74 Display of Sai Baba's image and other sacred items in the Samādhī Mandir

Figure 75 Inside the Samādhī Mandir. Scenes of Sai Baba's life are represented on its sides (upper floor level)

SHRI SAI BABA SANSTHAN, SHIRDI

Previously administration of Shri Sai Baba Sansthan was carried out by the Court Receiver under the order of the Bombay City Civil Court, Bombay. Now the Board of management and Executive Officer have been appointed for the same. The Sansthan Administration is now with the Board of Management and Executive Officer with effect from 16 the Aug. 1984.

Their names are as under:

1. Shri P.K. Sawant	Bombay	Chairman
2. Shri T.R. Borawake	Shirdi	Trustee
3. Shri S.B. Darp	Pune	"
4. Shri S.S. Dhanu	Bombay	"
5. Shri S.M. Jadhav	Lonavala	"
6. Shri M.N. Jain	Secunderabad	"
7. Shri K.H. Kakre	Ahmednagar	"
8. Shri Dr. M.K. Kirtikar	Bombay	"
9. Shri P.V. Karkhanis	Bombay	"
10. Shri K.R. Koli	Thane	"
11. Shri V.M. Korhalkar	Kopergaon	"
12. Shri G.B. Kote	Shirdi	"
13. Shri B.V. Khambekar	Kopergaon	"
14. Shri V.B. Kher	Bombay	"
15. Shri N.C. Mody	Bombay	"
16. Shri J.P. Sawe	Bombay	"
17. Shri S.V. Sawant	Bombay	"
18. Shri J.R. Shah	Bombay	"
19. Shri S.R. Shinde	Bombay	"
20. Shri G.T. Shelke	Shirdi	"
21. Miss R.G. Dighe	Bombay	Lady
		Representative
22. Shri V.S. Apte	Bombay	Employee's
		Representative.
		Executive
23. Shri R.D. Banne		Officer.

Figure 76
The chairman and trustees
of the Shri Sai Baba Sansthān in 1985

discussed in English about Indian culture and the primacy it gives to silence and the unspoken, of the dangers of Westernization as a test for India – according to him, India will pass such test after the sacrifice of a generation – of divine *śakti* that incarnates from age to age, and of Sai Baba and his teachings (a nonverbal instruction, implying surrender or *śaraṇāgati*, pure devotion and religious tolerance, universalism). He emphasized Sai Baba's use of symbols, which were so mysterious, and he mentioned his frequent wraths. With regard to Sai Baba's behavior, he tended to offer a psychological interpretation. He told me that to concentrate on the issue of Sai Baba's origins is futile and absurd. He said that one must rather follow his own conscience and not go after names and forms (*nāma-rūpa*). Moreover, he spoke of sacrifice as that which unites all Indians, despite their many differences due to language, customs, area of provenance, etcetera. He argued that self-sacrifice is innate in Indian culture and that it is only through it that one achieves full joy, *ānanda*.

Had to be careful to what I said. I sensed a certain air of superiority in Prakash Karkhanis' tone and words, a sort of challenge directed to me since in his eyes I represent the evil and ignorant West. But of course I understand his attitude and feelings. Indians have very good reasons for being upset with Westerners. And I know that my position must always be that of an open listener, without prejudice. I must listen with utmost care, keeping my 'windows,' i.e. my ears, wide open. It was a fine conversation on some basic concepts and on how one should approach Indian culture which I think was enriching for both of us.

Mr. Karkhanis also spoke of the Shirdi Sansthān and its need of a trust. He confirmed to me that at present there are twenty-two members plus a Manager or Executive Officer that depend upon the Bombay City Civil Court. The Chairman of the Sansthān is Shri P.K. Sawant from Bombay, whereas the Executive Officer is Shri R.D. Banne. He underlined that there is an interchange and mutual collaboration between the various members and organs of the Sansthān and that the organization has only charitable aims.

Must certainly come back to the Sansthān, also for purchasing old copies of the *Sai Leela* magazine. This afternoon, around 5, I should go see Balaji Pilaji Gurav for another interview. And tomorrow at 6 p.m. I should go visit Appa Saheb Borawke's son at his home.

Baldev Girme reported to me some other anecdotes that Uddhao Madhavrao Deshpande told him about Sai Baba. For instance, when Sai Baba cooked at the *masjid*, he would often thrust his own hand in the boiling pot in order to mix and stir its contents, never using any ladle, and suffered no consequences, i.e. he never burned himself.

This morning I also visited the local Lakṣmī temple which happens to be very close to my hotel. Apparently it was at this spot that Sai Baba cured one Bala Ganpat Shimpi from malarial fever by ordering him to feed a black dog.¹

Had a good lunch. Unfortunately, I have a lot of mosquito bites especially on my arms. Lots of mosquito come out at night. But for the rest I'm ok. Now I must take a good shower and prepare myself for this afternoon.

6:10 p.m. I interviewed Balaji Pilaji Gurav for the second time. We had a nice conversation, not too long. It's enough for today. This evening at 9 I will again participate in the *pālkhī* procession.

Tomorrow I'll have to wake up very early in order to attend the various functions and the *kākaḍ ārtī*, which starts at 5:15 a.m. In the morning I will try to interview the Swami who is the custodian of the local Mārutī temple, who has been living here for the past fifteen years. Then in the afternoon we shall again try to meet with Homi Baba. At 6 p.m. Baldev Girme will come to pick me up with his car and take me to the home of Appa Saheb Borawke's son.

For what concerns the recording of interviews I think I'm almost done. I've seen all the important people here in Shirdi. Anyway, will try to see if I can arrange some extra meetings. Up until now I have collected about eight, nine hours of recordings, which are a lot. I'm satisfied with the results.

¹ See Dabholkar, *Shri Sai Satcharita: The Life and Teachings of Shirdi Sai Baba*, 205-6 (ch. 13, vv. 88-97).

Interviews of the day

In Shirdi, near to Abdul Baba's tomb, 7:30 a.m.

Conversation with Shri Baldev Girme, reporting information on Abdul Baba which he got from the custodian of Abdul Baba's *samādhi* in Shirdi.

Baldev Girme says:

Abdul Baba was a great devotee of Sai Baba. He was a married man. After his marriage, his wife bore a son but before he was born he left home. He travelled, visiting many places in India, holy places. It was Tajuddin Baba who directed him to come to Sai Baba of Shirdi. It was only Tajuddin Baba who told Abdul Baba he should become a disciple of Sai Baba. "He is the Omnipotent", Tajuddin Baba told him, "He is Allāh". Till the end, Abdul Baba was with Sai Baba. With regard to Abdul Baba's life, there are several reports in various books you can read; they are written with sufficient reliability. Abdul Baba took *samādhi* on April 2, 1954.

Q What was Abdul Baba's first experience with Sai Baba when he first came to Shirdi?

A Abdul Baba surrendered himself completely to Sai Baba, for about thirty years. During Sai Baba's lifetime, until 1918, Abdul Baba did about thirty years of *sevā* at the feet of Sai Baba.

Q Thus he was very old when he died?

A Yes, he was very old when he died. That means that, even after Sai Baba's death, he dedicated himself completely to him, until 1954.

Q He lived here then?

A Yes, he lived here.

Q Was this *samādhi* built soon after his death?

A Yes, soon after his death. The expense for this was paid by a Parsi lady, her name is Bharucha, and also Mister Appa Saheb Borawke, alias Tukaram Raghujiv Borawke, contributed to it. If you were to ask anybody in Shirdi where Appa Borawke lives, I'm sure all would be able to give you information on him. He is commonly known as Appa. Appa himself spent lots of money, especially for the building of the upper part of the *samādhi*.

Q Was Abdul Baba a sort of guide or leader for the Muslims resident here, or the ones who came here to visit?

A Abdul Baba used to read from the Koran, in Sai Baba's presence. But one cannot say that the Muslims alone followed him. For instance, Appa is not a Muslim; Appa is a Hindu but he was also a follower of Abdul Baba.

Q Could we then say that Abdul Baba was a very close devotee of Sai Baba?

A Exactly. He was very close to Sai Baba.

Q And he was a man totally abandoned to him?

A Yes, yes. He was indeed a man totally abandoned to Sai Baba.

I Thanks a lot for your information.

In Shirdi, Shri Balaji Pilaji Gurav's house, 5 p.m.

Second conversation with Shri Balaji Pilaji Gurav, who settled in Shirdi in 1912.

- Q Do you know of any other old devotees of Baba, who knew him when he was alive?
- A There were some others, but they have died recently.
- Q Do you remember any of the names?
- A One was called Nivarki Baba. Then there was Rasane,² who died about three months ago.
- Q Was he very old?
- A Yes, very old. He was eighty-five or eighty-seven. I have also seen Rasane Kaka...³ myself.
- Q But are there anymore alive?
- A No, there aren't others.
- Q Could you tell us a story about Sai Baba? Something you would like to remember and which you did not tell us the last time. I'm not asking you anything specifically... just if you could freely talk about Sai Baba.
- A Once it happened that some villagers from Nandi went to Shegaon to meet with Gajanan Maharaj. Gajanan Maharaj gave them a coconut, telling them to bring it to Sai Baba. Gajanan Maharaj said: "My brother is there, in Shirdi. Bring him this coconut". On the way to Shirdi, however, one of the villagers broke the coconut and ate it. Then, when they arrived in Shirdi, Sai Baba himself immediately asked them before they could open their mouths: "Where is the coconut which my brother sends me?". Only at these words of Baba did the villagers remember what they had done with the coconut. Thus, Baba got angry with them. So, after Baba had asked: "Where is the coconut of my brother?", those pilgrims went to buy another coconut at one of the village stores. Baba, however, said that he would not accept it in lieu of the other. He said: "That coconut was very different from this one". Then Baba remained silent. Thus, Baba gave proof of knowing all the antecedents of Gajanan Maharaj's coconut, showing his *antarjñān*.⁴
- Q So he didn't accept the other coconut?
- T No, he didn't.⁵
- Q Did Sai Baba ever ask you to give him *dakṣiṇā*?
- A Baba would give me, Pilaji Gurav, *dakṣiṇā*.
- Q Ah, so Sai Baba would give you money?
- T Yes, Baba himself would give him money.

Balaji Pilaji:

Daily I received two *āṇās*⁶ from Baba. Every day.

² Dattatreya Damodar Rasane alias Nana Saheb Rasane, son of Damodar (Anna) Savalram Rasane.

³ D.D. Rasane's uncle.

⁴ Lit. 'inner knowledge', omniscience.

⁵ This story call to mind a similar one, in which the orthodox Brahmin Vasudevananda Sarasvati (1854-1914), also known as Tembe Swami, had asked one Pundalikrao to present a coconut to Sai Baba on his behalf; see Dabholkar, *Shri Sai Satcharita: The Life and Teachings of Shirdi Sai Baba*, 844-9 (ch. 51, vv. 125-83).

⁶ An *āṇā* (*anna*) was a currency unit used in British India, equal to one sixteenth of a rupee.



Figure 77 Coin that Sai Baba donated to Balaji Pilaji Gurav and which the latter treasured as a relic

† There were many people who daily received *dakṣiṇā* from Baba: two *āṇās*, four *āṇās*, fifteen rupees, twenty rupees, etcetera.

Balaji Pilaji [showing some coins which he has kept as relics]:
I have spent all other coins for my necessities. These are the only ones I have left.

Q Did you ever see Baba getting angry at someone?

A Sai Baba got angry and would give punishments if somebody made mistakes.

Q Did this happen often?

A Not often, sometimes.

Q Could you tell me anything about Upasni Maharaj? Did you ever had occasion of speaking to him?

A In 1912, when my family took up residence in Shirdi, that same year Upasni Maharaj also came to Shirdi. In 1912.

Q And what happened?

A Upasni Maharaj was also a devotee of Baba. Like Shyamaji, myself, and others. Kaka Saheb Dixit used to offer free meals to all devotees and pilgrims during the first three days of their presence in the village. For three days, not more. Upasni Maharaj stayed here six months with Baba. So then, one day, Kaka Saheb Dixit asked Shyamaji, who supervised food distribution...

- Q Are you saying that Shyama was the one who decided about distributing the food among the people?
 T He acted as a kind of supervisor.

Balaji Pilaji continues:

Kaka Saheb Dixit told Upasni Maharaj that the situation was not right. He said: "You have been here for six months now. You may well leave". So he told him.

- Q Do you mean to say that he stayed in Shirdi for six months without ever paying for the food he was given?
 T Yes. Kaka Saheb Dixit offered this service in those days. He would serve food to devotees.

Balaji Pilaji:

Then Upasni Maharaj went to Baba and said: "Baba it has happened thus, they are not giving me food anymore. What should I do?". Then Baba told him: "Don't worry about this. Wait". From that day Baba sent Upasni Maharaj to the Khaṇḍobā temple, asking him to remain there and live there. Baba told him: "In two, three years you will become like me". So said Sai Baba to Upasni Maharaj.

- Q He meant a great *guru* like him?
 T Yes, so did Sai Baba say to Upasni Maharaj.
 Q And what about the food problem, how did he manage to get his food?
 A When Upasni Maharaj went to Khaṇḍobā's temple, he left all that he had, all his possessions.
 Q What do you mean?
 T It means that all that he had, that is, clothes, possessions, etcetera, was abandoned by him.
 Q Did he remain naked?
 T Yes, naked.

Balaji Pilaji:

At Khaṇḍobā's temple someone said: "This fellow has gone crazy, wandering around naked". People told him: "This is not good: put on something".

- Q What about the food, how did he manage if nobody gave him any?
 A There were two ladies there, Sardabai and Durgabai. They brought food to Upasni Baba.
 Q Thus these two ladies would bring food to Upasni Maharaj at Khaṇḍobā's temple. Could you please repeat their names?
 A Sardabai and Durgabai.
 Q Did Sai Baba ever speak in parables, did he ever tell stories?
 A Baba would tell stories to people on various subjects. Baba would always speak in Marāṭhī or in Hindī. He would use both these languages, as others did. He would tell stories daily.
 I Thus he would narrate stories daily...
 T Yes, yes.
 Q Could you tell me one?
 A No. I have forgot.

- Q Did you ever see Baba practicing yogic exercises? Did he practice any *āsanas*⁷ here in Shirdi?
- A I have already told you in the first interview... Of that *mahātmā* who came here from Haridvar and was staying at the Māruti temple and who discussed *yoga* with Sai Baba, etcetera.⁸
- Q Is it true that Sai Baba would often sit in this posture inside the Dvārakāmāi [I imitate his cross-legged posture]?
- A Not always. Only sometimes he would sit like that.
- I Only sometimes...
- T Yes.
- I I ask this question since Baba, in most pictures, is portrayed in this posture.
- T Yes, but only at times he would sit that way.
- Q Was he used to keep other particular postures?
- T No. He would sit in an ordinary manner. Just like us now.
- Q Perhaps in *padmāsana*?⁹
- T No, no, nothing... Like us now, cross-legged.

Balaji Pilaji:

Baba did not keep any particular *āsana*. He would not do *āsanas* in front of people nor at other times.

- Q Thus, he wouldn't always sit in that particular posture?
- T No. Just sometimes, when he sat on the stone which is in the *masjid*: then only would he sit that way.
- Q Could you tell me something about Sri Narayan Baba?
- A Sri Narayan Baba has been coming to Shirdi since 1960. He behaves like all other devotees... He comes and goes.
- Q Thus he is like any ordinary devotee?
- A I can tell you about Ram Baba. He is about one hundred and thirty years old, but although he is so old he wasn't here during Sai Baba's times.
- Q Oh, so he wasn't here during Sai Baba's lifetime?
- T No, so says Pilaji Gurav. In subsequent years, however, he was always coming and going from Shirdi.
- Q Ram Baba used to come and go from Shirdi after Sai Baba's *samādhī*?
- T Yes, right.
- Q Not before?
- T No.

Balaji Pilaji:

Not before. Only after Baba's *samādhī*.

I It's strange...

T Yes.¹⁰

⁷ Yogic postures.

⁸ On Sai Baba and yoga, see Rigopoulos, "Sāi Bābā of Śirḍī and Yoga Powers".

⁹ Lit. 'lotus posture'. Sitting with the legs crossed and the heels placed on the thighs.

¹⁰ In fact, Ram Baba was in Shirdi at least once in Sai Baba's times, i.e. on February 22, 1914, as narrated in chapter 23 of the *Shri Sai Satcharita* (vv. 12-20); Dabholkar, *Shri Sai Satcharita: The Life and Teachings of Shirdi Sai Baba*, 373.

Q Have you ever heard of Basheer Baba and Meher Baba?

A I have seen Basheer Baba only once here in Shirdi.

Q Only once?

T Only once. He stayed here for about ten days. In Shirdi. He also did some *yajñas*.

Balaji Pilaji:

Basheer Baba said he was about fifty-five years old when he came to Shirdi. After that time, I haven't seen him anymore.

Q Do you consider Basheer Baba also as just an ordinary devotee?

T Yes, he is just a devotee. Now he is dead, so we have heard.

Balaji Pilaji:

One Swami from Ganeshpuri, Muktananda by name, also used to come here to Shirdi. But not at the time when Baba was alive. He came after Baba's *samādhī*.

Q Did he visit Shirdi often?

T Yes, often. He would then go back to Ganeshpuri.

I Thank you.

Oral Testimonies on Sai Baba

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

Antonio Rigopoulos

9 Shirdi Wednesday, October 23, 1985

Excerpts From My Diary

12:35 p.m., at my hotel room. It was an excellent morning. I was able to interview another old man who knew Sai Baba. His name is Shri Pandharinath Bhagavant Gonkar and he was just twelve years old when Sai Baba took *samādhi*. This is the sixth old man that we have been able to identify who met Sai Baba in the old days! We had a pleasant conversation. Afterward, I and Swami Shekhar Rao went to visit the keeper of the Māruti or Hanumān temple, whose name is Shri Ramdas Vithobaji Hajare. He is fifty-five years old and has been living here for the past fifteen years. It was a fine conversation during which he told us how he was called to Shirdi. I then interviewed for the second time Uddhao Madhavrao Deshpande, Shyama's son. This was an excellent interview; it lasted more than half an hour during which he narrated various incidents and anecdotes. I thus started recording my sixth mini-cassette, having recorded more than nine hours of interviews. Though it really took a lot of work, these hard-earned tapes are most precious and indeed priceless given their special contents.

I then participated in the final ceremonies of Puṇyatithi. Some very nice *kīrtans* in Kṛṣṇa's praise were sung, followed by dances and acrobatic feats. The atmosphere was very joyous and fraternal. Then, at noon sharp, the festival was officially brought to a close with the symbolic breaking of a pot containing curds, sweets, and other things by means of a long, red stick. A beautiful flower garland was hung inside the Samādhi Mandir. I took a few photos. This was a wonderful ceremony and a huge crowd attended it. Now the crowds should diminish, given that many devotees are expected to leave after Puṇyatithi.

Swami Shekhar Rao thinks that during the last three days about fifty thousand people came to Shirdi for attending the solemn celebrations. According to him, an average of two thousand people come to Shirdi on any

ordinary day. It's quite a sustained influx of pilgrims and I'm inclined to believe him given his long experience as a resident. The weather is always nice and sunny; it is hot but the heat is bearable. I'm quite tired due to the intense rhythm of the work and our constant moving around but I'm very pleased with the results. In a short while I'll go down to the restaurant and have lunch. I'll then have a rest until 4 p.m.

5:20 p.m. We tried to interview Homi Baba but couldn't meet him because there were too many people at his place, it was really so busy. Will give it another try tomorrow around 8 a.m. Homi Baba is bizarre. He claims that Sai Baba's image is discernible on his chest's hair, in the seat of the heart, and thus he shows his chest to everyone as if he is giving a *darshan* of sorts. I couldn't 'see' it frankly. In a short while we should go pay a visit to Appa Saheb Borawke's son at his house.

11:15 p.m., at my hotel room. Together with Baldev Girme, we had a very pleasant and instructive evening at the house of Vasant Shankar Borawke, Appa Saheb Borawke's son. It looks like Appa does not like the Sakuri *ashram* very much but the reason is unclear. They showed us various slides of their trips to Delhi, Shimla, and Kashmir. Had a good dinner. The house is beautiful, very big, and they look like a nice and happy family. They are certainly quite rich, being landowners. In this area their main cultivation is that of sugarcane. I told them about me and my research, and the atmosphere was cheerful and relaxed. They were all pleased to meet me and curious to know about my interest in Sai Baba and Indian religion. Got back to my hotel room around 11 p.m. I'm really exhausted and go straight to bed.

Interviews of the day

In Shirdi, Shri Pandharinath Bhagavant Gonkar's house, 8:15 a.m.

Conversation with Shri Pandharinath Bhagavant Gonkar. He was twelve years old when Sai Baba passed away.

Q What do you remember of the time when Baba took *samādhi*?

T He used to see Baba every day...

Pandharinath Bhagavant Gonkar:

Baba used to give me *prasād* only. Not money or other things.

Q Did you ever have the chance of speaking to Baba? Did Baba ever tell you anything?

A When I went to the *masjid* to meet Baba, Baba gave me *prasād* and told me to sit in the *masjid* for a while.

Q He told you this only? To sit?

T Yes, to sit... Baba was very loving with him. Baba would say to Mister Gonkar to sit down and rest in the *masjid* for a while.

Q What did Baba use to do in those days? What was his daily routine?

A I was very young at the time, so I went to the *masjid* only every once in a while. I would meet Baba and then go back.

Q Do you remember anything in particular which you think would be of importance about Baba?

A No. Baba would only give me *prasād*. Nothing else.

Q How did Baba use to bless people? By imposing his hands?

A Yes, he would impose his hands. He would give *āsīrvād*, blessings. When blessing, Baba would say the words: "*Allāh barā karegā*", meaning 'God will do everything to help you'.

Q "*Allāh rakhegā*...?"

T "*Allāh barā karegā*". It means: 'God will do', 'He will help'.

Q In which language did Baba speak?

A Urdu and Marāṭhī.

Q Did he speak Hindī also?

T Yes, even Hindī.

Q Thus he could speak Urdu, Marāṭhī, and Hindī?

T Yes. Urdu, Marāṭhī, and Hindī. So Baba would speak to the people.

Q What happened soon after Sai Baba's *samādhi*?

A I don't remember, I was too young.

T He is only eighty years old...

Q Did you ever see Baba getting angry?

A Sometimes, if devotees made mistakes, only then did Baba get angry and also punish, beat [laughs]. He did so even to have fun, as a game. He didn't want to hurt.

Q Did Baba ever give you *udī*?

A Yes. Sometimes he gave me *udī*.

Q What's the power of *udī*?

A [laughing] As soon as Baba gave the *udī*, one would put it on the forehead, and then he would also eat some of it. Usually the *udī* was taken with water. So Baba used to bless. I've seen with my own eyes Baba giving daily fifty rupees to Tatyā Kote Patil.

- Q Fifty rupees?
- T Fifty rupees, to Tatya Kote Patil. Daily...
- Q Do you know anything about Upasni Maharaj?
- A I saw Upasni Baba stay here in Shirdi for about two years. Then Baba got angry with him, and sent him to Sakuri to live.
- Q Baba got angry with him?
- T Yes, he got angry with Upasni Maharaj and thus sent him to Sakuri.
- I I don't understand this. Everybody up till now has told me that Upasni Maharaj was a great *guru*...
- T I have heard that Upasni Baba did something here in Shirdi which wasn't good, so villagers developed a bad opinion about him. They went to Sai Baba and told him that Upasni Baba did this and that, and said he shouldn't remain any longer in Shirdi. "Otherwise we will teach him a lesson", so they said. Only then did Sai Baba send Upasni Maharaj to Sakuri.
- Q Can you tell me anything about Meher Baba?
- T No, he doesn't know anything about him.
- Q What about Basheer Baba or Narayan Baba?
- T No, he knows nothing about them.
- Q What did Baba do when he was inside the *masjid*? Did he contemplate the fire of the *dhūnī*, talk with people? What do you remember?
- A At that time I was only ten or twelve years old and so I don't remember much. Anyway, Baba used to sit near the fire of the *dhūnī*, reciting the names of God, or saying "Allāh Mālik" to himself. There were also many people who met with Baba.
- Q Were there many dogs, cats, and birds entering the *masjid*?
- A At that time there were several dogs, with Baba. Baba would give them food. Every time, at each meal, they would take food with Baba.
- Q What was the reason that brought you here to visit Shirdi Sai Baba?
- T But he is a villager of Shirdi...
- Q Oh, you are a Shirdi villager!
- A Yes.
- Q Do you remember any story about Baba?
- T He was too small at the time, thus he doesn't remember much.
- Q So then, four or five years after Baba's *samādhi*, who was responsible here for organizing things?
- A After Baba's *samādhi*, Tatya Kote Patil, Bayajibai, Lakshmibai Shinde and two other people were in charge of the upkeep of the *samādhi*.
- Q Thus these were the people who first got control of the situation.
- T Yes.
- Q At that time were there many devotees coming from outside Shirdi?
- A In those days, some devotees from outside came to have *darshan* of Baba and then they would return home.
- Q Were they coming from nearby villages?
- A Yes, from nearby villages but also from Bombay, from Gujarat, from Madras, from Nagpur...
- Q From lots of places then?
- T Yes, from lots of places. Many came from Madras, Nagpur, and especially Bombay. Now Mister Pandharinath Bhagavant Gonkar is tired, it's enough for today.
- I Thank you so much for your time and kindness.



Figure 78 Shri Pandharinath Bhagavant Gonkar

In Shirdi, in the Mārūtī temple, 10 a.m.

Conversation with Shri Ramdas Vithobaji Hajare, fifty-five years old, keeper of the Mārūtī¹ temple.

- Q How long have you been living in Shirdi?
 A It's fifteen years now.
 Q How did you happen to come here?
 T He is like a saint...
 A I came from Yeotmal. I came to Shirdi as a monk, to live here. I have always aspired to a life of saintliness. First I went to Shegaon, to have Gajanan Maharaj's *darshan*, then I came here via Nasik. While I was sleeping at the Mārūtī temple in Tryambakeshvar, I had a dream and heard a voice telling me to go to Shirdi.
 Q Did this happen in a Hanumān Mandir?
 T Yes, in a Hanumān Mandir. Then he came to Shirdi.
 Q Did he remain in Shirdi for a full fifteen years, till today?
 T Yes. And here in Shirdi Mister Ramdas Baba is the keeper of the Hanumān temple and lives in it.

Shri Ramdas remembers:

When I came to Shirdi the first time I lived outside the village underneath a tree, near another Hanumān temple. Then I met Swami Avadhut Maharaj, who was my *guru*, my teacher, and due to his grace I was able to come and stay in this Mārūtī temple in Shirdi. After this, the villagers have always helped me, giving me all that I need.

- Q Do you mean food, clothing, etcetera?
 T Yes. He got food and clothing from villagers and Baba devotees... Lots of devotees come here also, to visit the Hanumān temple.
 Q What do you feel for Sai Baba?
 A When I worked at the mill near Wardha as a laborer, I once saw a photo of Baba. That was the first time I saw him. Baba communicated something to me. So I decided to come to Shirdi. I passed through Shegaon so as to visit Gajanan Maharaj, then I passed through Nasik and there, at the Mārūtī temple in Tryambakeshvar, I had that vision. From there I came directly to Shirdi.
 Q What do you think is the most important teaching of Sai Baba?
 T You know, he never met with Baba himself...
 I Of course. But as a devotee, as a renunciant, he might have something to say on this.
 A I wouldn't know how to answer. It's only because of my faith that I am now here, living in this Mārūtī temple.
 Q How have things changed in Shirdi from the time you first came here?
 A Many things have changed in these fifteen years. There has been an increase in the number of devotees coming, the pilgrims are a lot more now.
 Q Thus there are many more nowadays?

¹ The usual Marāṭhī name for Hanumān, the monkey-hero of the *Rāmāyaṇ* epic, famous for his devotion to Rām. Every village in Maharashtra has a temple dedicated to this popular deity. Sai Baba seems to have held Mārūtī in high esteem and was occasionally possessed by him. It is reported that the saint once said: "My father dedicated me to Maruti. I make gestures before his temple telling him I am his brother"; Narasimhaswami, *Sri Sai Baba's Charters and Sayings*, 9.

- T Yes, more than in the past.
- Q Could you tell me what you think will be the future of this Sai Baba movement?
- A I don't think at all about the future. What has to happen will happen.
- Q So you don't worry about the future?
- T He doesn't think about the future or about his life or anything else.
- I He lives day by day...
- T Yes. He says: "Thanks to Baba's grace". So he says.
- I He means to say that everything is due to faith, *śraddhā*...
- T Yes, it's *śraddhā*. This is what really counts.
- Q Are there any other devotees you think we should meet here in Shirdi?
- A Lots of people come here from all over India, even from the West. They come here and ask me to tell them something about my personal experiences with Baba. And I always say the same things I have told you now. That's all. I only had that dream, that vision.
- Q Was that the most important event in your life, that dream or vision you had at Tryambakeshvar?
- T Yes. Only then did he come to Shirdi. And after having come here, his *guru* met him and blessed him, allowing him to remain here.

Shri Ramdas says:

Avadhut Maharaj told me not to worry about the future, and to stay here in Shirdi. So he blessed me.

Q He simply told you to remain in Shirdi and to have faith?

T Yes.

Shri Ramdas says:

Avadhut Maharaj's *pādukās*² are here in the Mārūtī temple. His sandals are kept here. He has given them to me. I have been with him always.

Q Did by any chance Avadhut Maharaj meet with Sai Baba?

A Avadhut Maharaj is still alive today.

I Oh, he's still alive...

T Yes, he's alive. He says he's now seventy years old.

I He's young!

T Yes, young. He was perhaps only three years old when Baba took *samādhi*.

I Thus he was very little...

T He only had the experience of faith in Sai Baba.

Q Does he live in Shirdi?

A Avadhut Maharaj stayed here with me in this Mārūtī temple for two years. Then he left and went back to his place: Tryambakeshvar, near Nasik. It is one of the twelve places in India where the *vyotirlingas* are kept.

Q Is he living there now?

T Yes.

I Thank you so much for your time.

² Wooden sandals.

In Shirdi, Uddhavrao Madhavrao Deshpande's house, 11:30 a.m.

Second 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 recounts:

When Baba liked to cook, vessels were brought inside the *masjid*. There is the fire of the *dhūnī* there, you must have seen it... A fellow called Madhav Phasle poured water into the vessels and helped Baba. Then Baba would cook the food. Madhav helped Baba to wash and cut the vegetables and Baba then placed them inside the vessels. Then he would mix the vegetables with the rice. Vegetables and rice together... for cooking. Baba also used to put sugar candies inside the vessels. He himself would put his hand in the vessel for mixing the food.

Q Didn't he burn his hand that way?

A Baba wanted to mix the food this way, up and down. Baba used his own hand, no utensils.

Q And didn't he burn himself?

A No, no. Nothing happened, it remained as it was. He did the mixing for about two or three minutes in a row. Nonetheless, he didn't suffer from any burns.

Q Do you remember any other incident you would like to mention?

A One of the *faqīrs*, of the Mohammedans, was here in those days. He came from Malegaon and he used to stay in Shirdi with Baba. Daily Baba would give him fifteen rupees. And he gave from thirty to fifty rupees to Tatyā Kote Patil. Sometimes thirty rupees, thirty-five, forty, and so on. Many people received from him ten rupees, five rupees, two rupees, fifteen rupees, etcetera. In this way they received money from Baba.

Q Was there a special time for Baba's distribution of money? For instance, did he do this in the evening or at some other time of the day?

A Only in the evening would he distribute the money.

Q So in the morning he would ask for *dakṣiṇā* and in the evening he would give away the money?

A Yes. Whatever the amount of *dakṣiṇā* Baba received, he would give it away in the evening. Baba used to go out for his round of begging around 8 a.m.³ He would go to certain houses. When doing this, Baba cried: "*Mā bhākrīān*", which means: 'Mother, give me some bread'.

Q Could you repeat this expression, please?

A He would say: "*Mā bhākrīān*", or "*Mā roṭīān*" meaning: 'Mother, give me some food, a piece of bread'. When Baba went out to beg for alms, Buti Saheb and Nana Saheb Nimonkar used to go with him.

Q What would they do then?

³ In his first interview, however, Uddhao stated that "Baba used to leave the *masjid* around 8 a.m. and wandered in the jungle till about 10. Then he began to beg for food and alms".

- A They would support him and help him walk. You know, Baba would go to certain houses and they went along with him in order to help him.
- Q Have you seen this yourself?
- A Yes. I have seen it with my own eyes.
- Q I know, from having read the books, that your father Shyama had a kind of privileged relationship with Baba. He was often the man who gave a devotee the opportunity of talking with Baba. Thus, he was very close to him, perhaps the closest of all.⁴ Do you remember anything about this relationship? Is it true?
- A A family from Hyderabad once came to Shirdi to see Baba. They couldn't have issue, so they came to Baba for his blessings, in order to have children. The first time they came, Baba refused to bless them. He said: "It depends upon your faith. I can't give you grace". When the couple came out of the *masjid*, they decided to go and see Shyama, my father. The two were weeping, and explained the situation to Shyama. They pleaded: "Ask him to bless us so that we can have children". Shyama then went to Baba and insistently asked that he bless the couple 'by any way'. After two days, Baba finally agreed to give them a coconut to eat...
- Q Was that symbolic of the birth of a child?
- A Yes. For having issue.
- Q And this happened because your father interceded for them?
- A Yes, he helped them that way. Baba gave them a whole coconut, and after twelve months a child was born. After this, they came back to Shirdi again to meet with Baba.⁵
- Q Was there any particular reason that Shyama was so close to Baba?
- A No, Baba didn't give him anything.
- Q What about the statue of Gaṇapati?
- A Yes, he was given that Gaṇeśa *mūrti* alone.
- Q That only?
- A Yes, that only.
- Q Did Baba ever give money to Shyama, as a gift?
- T At that time Shyama was well-to-do. He was a landlord, I think.
- A A landlord?
- T Yes. This is the reason why Baba never gave him money or other things. This *mūrti* of Gaṇeśa is an exception.

Uddhao recounts:

I had a grandfather in Baba's times. He had some problems with his thighs, and was to be operated on by a doctor. My grandfather came to

⁴ On Shyama, Dabholkar writes: "Those who wished to have a quiet, undisturbed conversation with Baba, would always take Madhavrao with them, initially. He would then introduce the topic in soft sweet tones as to who had come, from where and for what purpose. On this introduction, Samartha [= Sai Baba] would then be induced to converse". Moreover: "It was he whom Baba liked better than anybody else; whose love for Baba defied comparison with anyone else's and whose authority too, was very great... For Madhavrao, Baba had an extraordinary affection - as if he was his own child"; *Shri Sai Satcharita: The Life and Teachings of Shirdi Sai Baba*, 492, ch. 30, vv. 51, 53. Apparently, Sai Baba once said that he had been associated with him for seventy-two generations; 600, ch. 36, v. 140. On Madhavrao Deshpande, see Narasimhaswami, *Devotees' Experiences of Sri Sai Baba*, 193-6; Shepherd, *Sai Baba of Shirdi: A Biographical Investigation*, 104-5; Chitluri, *Baba's Rinanubandh: Leelas During His Sojourn in Shirdi*, 149-62; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mCYiz_2k1XA.

⁵ A similar story is narrated in Dabholkar, *Shri Sai Satcharita: The Life and Teachings of Shirdi Sai Baba*, 599-602 (ch. 36, vv. 120-66).

Shirdi, met with Baba, told him he had to be operated on, and asked him what was to be done. Then Baba applied some leaves on his sick leg and wrapped it with a cloth. Three days after Baba's intervention he was cured from his illness, without the need of a doctor.

Q Was this a miracle of Sai?

A Yes, and I saw it in person.

Uddhao adds:

My grandfather had a daughter and wanted her to get married. Before the marriage he came to Shirdi and met with Baba, because of his health problems, as I said. It was on that occasion that Baba cured him in that way, in three days' time.

Q What about his daughter?

A She got married.

Q Did Baba celebrate the wedding?

A No, no. It was celebrated by other people.

Q Thus your grandfather came to Baba only for his leg problem and not for the wedding of his daughter?

A He came alone. He wanted to marry the girl in his own place. He came to Baba for his health problem. Baba cured him in three days and after that he returned home.

[Uddhao again tells the same story, explaining it further].

Q I read in Narasimhaswami's book *Sri Sai Baba's Charters and Sayings* that once Sai Baba explained a chapter of the *Bhagavadgītā* to your father, Shyama, which he was reciting aloud. After that, Baba told him to come every day to the *masjid* so that he would explain to him the following chapters.⁶ Do you remember this?

A It was not the *Bhagavadgītā*, it was the *Viṣṇusahasranām*.

Uddhao explains:

One other saint came here and went to stay in the Māruti temple. He had a book with him, the *Viṣṇusahasranām*. He came from Haridvar. Baba took the book from his sack while he was not present, that is, when he had gone to the bazaar. Baba then gave the book to my father Shyama, telling him to read it every day in the *masjid*. Baba said: "If you want any explanation or clarification ask me".

Q: When your father went to the *masjid* with the *Viṣṇusahasranām*, did Baba explain the meaning of the text to him, or rather did Shyama stay there reading it in silence?

A Sometimes, when Shyama wanted to understand the meaning of the *Viṣṇusahasranām* more deeply and wanted clarifications on some

⁶ Here my memory deceived me. The protagonist of the episode of Sai Baba's explanation of *Bhagavadgītā* 4.34 (a verse, not a chapter) was Nana Saheb Chandorkar and not Shyama Deshpande; see Narasimhaswami, *Sri Sai Baba's Charters and Sayings*, 63-9.

points, then he went to Baba and asked him. Baba would then answer and explain the meaning to him.

Q Baba would then explain the text?

T Yes, yes. He would explain it to him. He would clarify the meaning by saying: "It is so and so..."

Q Thus, it was a kind of teaching?

T Yes, a teaching for Shyama.⁷

Uddhao remembers:

When I was six years old my father was bitten by a snake. He was not able to reach the *masjid* alone, so the villagers went to Baba and told him what had happened. Baba said: "Come on, get him here. I will see to it". As soon as they brought Shyama to the *masjid*, Baba got angry with him, shouting: "I told you not to go to that house". Instead, Shyama had gone there and was bitten by the snake. Baba continued to shout with a loud voice for a long time. Then, after two or three hours the snake's poison came down and Shyama was cured. Baba cured him by shouting loudly, just like that.

Q Did Baba send the poison away with his shouts?

A Yes, by shouting loudly.⁸

Uddhao adds:

The little finger of Shyama's hand turned black, and remained black until he died.

Q Did it become black due to the snake's bite? Why did his little finger turn black?

T Because the snake had bitten him right in that point.

Q Did this cause him any trouble?

A Nothing. No trouble, no pain.⁹

Q Would you like to add anything else concerning Sai Baba, your father, or your own experiences?

Uddhao remembers:

Once, after my father's death, I went to Haridvar as I wanted to have *darshan* of the Himalayas and of Badrinath, Gangotri, Yamnotri, etcetera. But

⁷ For this episode, see Dabholkar, *Shri Sai Satcharita: The Life and Teachings of Shirdi Sai Baba*, 438-44 (ch. 27, vv. 63-130). Shyama's devotion toward Sai Baba was extraordinary: he used to constantly repeat his name even during sleep. As G.S. Khaparde writes in his diary entry of 8 December, 1911: "Madhavrao Deshpande was here and fell asleep. I saw with my own eyes and heard with my own ears what I only read about but never experienced. With every outgoing and indrawing breath of Madhavrao Deshpande comes the clear sound of 'Sayin Nath Maharaj, Sayin Nath Baba'. This sound is as clear as can be and when Madhavrao snores the words can be heard at a distance. This is really wonderful"; *Shirdi Diary of the Hon'ble Mr. G.S. Khaparde*, 119-20. On the remembrance/repetition of Sai Baba's name even while sleeping, see Dabholkar, *Shri Sai Satcharita: The Life and Teachings of Shirdi Sai Baba*, 155 (ch. 10, vv. 75-77). Sai Baba himself set the example by practicing the uninterrupted repetition of Allāh's name, day and night.

⁸ As in other accounts, the belief is that Sai Baba's shouts and foul language were directed toward the evil agent - in this case, the snake's poison - and that in this way he drove away all negativities.

⁹ This story is also found in the *Shri Sai Satcharita*; see Dabholkar, *Shri Sai Satcharita: The Life and Teachings of Shirdi Sai Baba*, 374-6 (ch. 23, vv. 37-66).

half way my money finished and I was left with only ten or twelve rupees. At that time, the cost for the return ticket from Haridvar to Shirdi was of about fifty or sixty rupees. Therefore, I became very upset and worried. Every day I did the *pūjā* of the photo of Baba. As I prayed to him, I asked: "What shall I do now? I am left with only ten, twelve rupees, how shall I go back to Shirdi?". Then some people arrived from the Khandesh area, near Malegaon and Jalgaon. These people asked me: "What has happened to you? Where do you come from?". I was always weeping... Then I explained my situation to them. They told me not to worry and that they would arrange all things for me. After lunch I went to rest. Around noon a man came asking about my problem. He said: "Why do you cry and despair?". I again explained the situation. Then he said: "Don't you recognize me?". I said: "No, I have never seen you before". He replied: "I am from Shirdi!". He told me the name of his family, Chadubaya, and that he came from the village of Ardhanda, near Shirdi. He was also a devotee of Baba. He asked me how much money I needed, and then gave me two hundred rupees.

Q That was a lot of money then, wasn't it?

T Yes, a lot.

Uddhao continues:

I asked for his address, where he lived. He told me his name was Baburao Chadubaya of Ardhanda, and that his family was devoted to Baba. He then gave me his address. In this way, thanks to this man and the money he lent me, I was able to return to Shirdi. Once back, I sent a postal money order of two hundred rupees to repay my debt, but after ten to fifteen days the money order was returned to me.

Q How come?

A That man was not living there, at that address. Thus the money was sent back to me.

Q Did this happen because the man was simply absent or because he didn't live there at all?

A Because he didn't exist. There was nobody in that village by that name.

Q Then who do you think that man was?

A I was never able to find out. Once a Police Inspector came to Shirdi to have *darshan* of Baba and I asked him if he knew the man or that address in Ardhanda, but he confirmed to me that the address didn't exist.

Q Was this a *līlā*¹⁰ of Baba?

A Yes. *Līlā*, *līlā*.

T Uddhao thinks it was a miracle. A *līlā*.

Q And thus he got two hundred rupees?

T Yes, two hundred rupees.

Q When did all this happen?

A In 1944.

¹⁰ Lit. 'play', 'amusement'. A divine, miraculous act.

Oral Testimonies on Sai Baba

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

Antonio Rigopoulos

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 the ostentation of the *siddhis*. For him, a true saint is one who has done

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.

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.

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. Tatya 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 Rinanubandh: 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 Samādhi 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 *bhojhanghar*..
- 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 Tatyá Kote Patil, treasured by his son Shri Uttamrao Patil



Figure 82
A small piece of the bag that Sai Baba gifted to Tatyá 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 (*pitṛ*).

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.

Oral Testimonies on Sai Baba

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

Antonio Rigopoulos

12 Shirdi-Bombay Saturday, October 26, 1985

Excerpts From My Diary

9 a.m., at my hotel room. Departure day. Early this morning I participated in the *kākaḍ ārtī* which was celebrated at 5:15 a.m. I packed all my stuff. Wrote a reference letter for my wonderful guide Swami Shekhar Rao, as he had asked me to do, emphasizing his righteousness, reliability, and exemplary conduct. Now I'll go down and have breakfast, pay my dues at the lobby, and check out. Then I'll go have *darshan* of all the important sites of Shirdi one last time and say goodbye to the people of the Sansthān.

11:30 a.m. Said goodbye to the people of the Sansthān and to everyone. It was a nice farewell. Got some more news on both Sri Narayan Baba and Basheer Baba. I visited for the last time all the sacred sites of the village: the Samādhi Mandir, the Leṇḍī gardens, the Gurusthān, the *masjid*/Dvārakāmāi, the *cāvaḍī*, the Marūti temple, and the Lakṣmī temple. I also went to the *samādhi* of Lakshmibai Tukaram Shinde and had a brief conversation with her niece. Paid all my bills and dues. I'm now left with three hundred and thirty rupees. I bought another copy of the fundamental *Shri Sai Satcharita*, which is the 'Bible' for all Sai Baba devotees. Think I have done all that I was supposed to do. I'll have lunch around noon. My bus leaves Shirdi at 1 p.m. and the arrival in Bombay is scheduled at 9 p.m. Now I will go say goodbye to my guide Swami Shekhar Rao and reward him as he deserves.¹ Thus ends my stay in holy Shirdi, of which I'll always treasure unforgettable memories.

¹ When we said goodbye, Swami Shekhar Rao was so kind that he insisted on offering me a book which was among his few, most cherished possessions: the *Sāi Gītā* (*The Song of One, Immortal Life*).

Interviews of the day

In Shirdi, Sansthān headquarters, 9:45 a.m.

Information about Basheer Baba and Sri Narayan Baba furnished by members of the Shirdi Sansthān.

Basheer Baba died two or three years ago, in 1982 or 1983, we don't remember exactly. This is certain, because he was about to make a visit to Shirdi, coming from Hyderabad, as he often did. He died a few days before his departure. He wasn't very old; he couldn't have been more than forty-two or forty-three years old.

As to Sri Narayan Baba, we can give you this little leaflet that concerns his *yātrā*² of this year, 1985, his usual *yātrā*, since he does it every year.

These two persons are considered by us of the Sansthān as just devotees of Shirdi Sai Baba; as men who contribute, with their personalities, to diffuse the teaching, the figure, and the cult of Sai Baba in India and in the rest of the world.

As to the supposed supernatural contacts or medium relationship between them and Shirdi Baba, or even of an *avatāric* relationship of Basheer Baba with Sai Baba, we don't wish to talk about it. We maintain silence, that's all.

In Shirdi, Lakshmibai Tukaram Shinde's house, 10:30 a.m.

Brief conversation with the niece of Lakshmibai Tukaram Shinde, custodian of the house in which Lakshmibai lived. The house has been turned into a small temple dedicated to Lakshmibai, with photos of Baba and portraits of her. Lakshmibai came from the village of Yeola, in the Nasik District of Maharashtra.

T Lakshmibai died on a Thursday, around 7 p.m.

Lakshmibai's niece:

She died in 1963. Every day Lakshmibai celebrated here, in her house, *pūjā* and *ārtī* to Baba.

T She went daily to the *masjid* and cleaned and swept it. Sometimes she served food to Baba. Lakshmibai stayed with Baba for more than twenty-five years. When Baba took *samādhi* he gave her nine rupees. First he gave her five, then another four. Each coin has a meaning.

Q What is the significance of this gift of nine rupees to Lakshmibai?

A I don't know the significance of the gift of the nine rupees. I am only her niece. [she shows me the coins].³

T Lakshmibai's body is buried here. Her *samādhi* is right in front of the house.

I Thank you.

² Pilgrimage.

³ These nine coins are believed to represent the nine forms of devotion (*navāṅgāni*); see Rigopoulos, *The Life and Teachings of Sai Baba of Shirdi*, 274-84.

- OM SAI RAM -



ANNUAL SHIRDI YATRA-1985

Sat. the 16th Nov. 1985
to
Tuesday the 19th Nov. 1985

SRI BHAGAWATI SAI SAMSTHAN (REGD.)

H. Q. Plot No. 400/1, Panvel 410 206, Dist. Raigad,
Maharashtra, India Tel. 3331

CENTRES IN INDIA :- Kurla, Chembur, Thane, Khar, Bombay-
Central and New Delhi.

CENTRES ABROAD :- Las Vegas - U. S. A., New York, London
and Dubai.

The 'ANNUAL SHIRDI YATRA' organised by the Samsthan has been scheduled for Saturday the 16th November to Tuesday the 19th November 1985. An arrangement for nine special buses are made by the Samsthan for the yatra for the convenient transportation of the devotees. Devotees desirous of joining the yatra should give their names to their respective Area/Bus manager of the Samsthan on or before Sunday the 20th October along with a deposit of Rs. 100/- per head. Requisition for accommodation in the special buses after this date would not be entertained.

The deposit of Rs. 100/- includes the charges of (a) The bus fare to and fro Shirdi. (b) Accommodation at Shirdi. (c) Morning tea at 3.00 a.m.. (d) offering of Naivedya/Prasad in the temple and (e) Poor-feeding.

THE ORIGINATING AREA AND DEPARTURE TIME OF THE SPECIAL BUSES.

Bus no.	Originating Area	Area/Bus Manager	Tel. No.	Dep. Time
1.	Panvel: H. Q. Samsthan	Sri Rambhais Girda	3331	8.00 a.m.
2.	Thane, Prem Nagar Soc.	Sri Viju Navani	595379	6.15 a.m.
3.	-Do-	Sri Prakash Bhavnani	501364	6.15 a.m.
4.	Kurla (Lx Nehru Nagar Kurla Stn. East)	Sri D. R. Puthran	58 221	6.15 a.m.
5.	-Do-	Sri Kanayalal Chandwani	581795	6.15 a.m.
6.	Chambur Masiri-park	Smt Tara Katiyat	5519538	6.30 a.m.
7.	-Do-	Sri Ghanshyam G.		6.30 a.m.
8.	Khar, Upadesh bldg, 14th Road, Near Tel. exchange & Paramanand Bhandar	Sri Sham Lal Ahuja	446960	6.15 a.m.
9.	-Do-	Sri Parmanand Kewalramani	546860	6.15 a.m.



Figure 83 The depliant of Sri Narayan Baba's annual pilgrimage to Shirdi

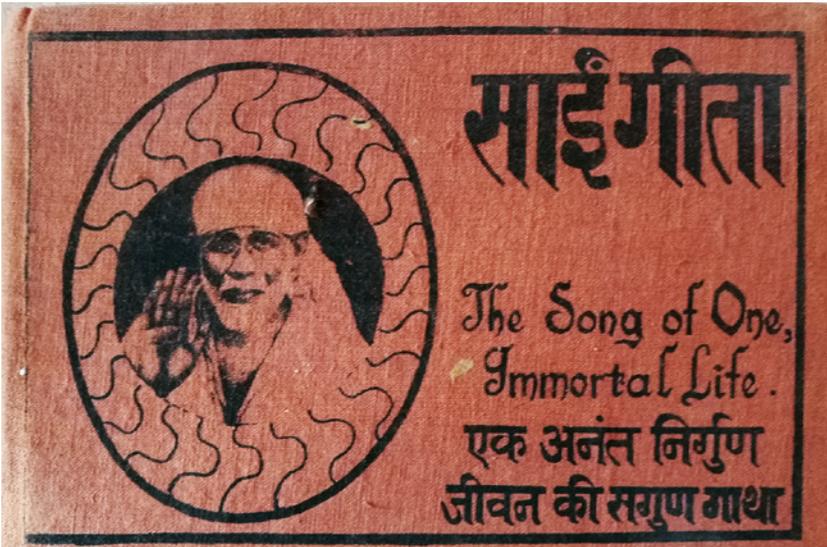


Figure 84 The book on Sai Baba gifted to me by Swami Shekhar Rao

Oral Testimonies on Sai Baba

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

Antonio Rigopoulos

13 **Bombay**
Sunday, October 27, 1985

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.

Oral Testimonies on Sai Baba

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

Antonio Rigopoulos

14 **Bombay**
Monday, October 28, 1985

Excerpts From My Diary

11:15 a.m. Had a good dinner yesterday and slept well. This morning I changed one hundred dollars into rupees. This afternoon we will go visit Swami Ram Baba: I am very eager to meet him.

10 p.m. We met with the venerable Swami Ram Baba at his home in Bandra around 8 p.m. It was a profound spiritual experience, in a way the crowning of my research work in Shirdi. He is certainly a great saint and I could feel his spiritual eminence, beyond words. At the end of our meeting I was given *prasād*. However, I could not record his talk nor take photos of him - he advised me to do 'click' in my heart! - and therefore I synthesized his words and teachings and my overall impressions of him on tape as soon as the meeting was over (I recorded my seventh mini-cassette).¹ I now go to sleep, grateful for all of today's experiences and blessings.

¹ On Swami Ram Baba, see http://saiamrithadhara.com/mahabhakthas/ram_baba.html. See also Chitluri, *Baba's Rinanubandh: Leelas During His Sojourn in Shirdi*, 179-80.

Interviews of the Day

In Bombay, Swami Ram Baba's house, 8 p.m.

Summary of a meeting with Swami Ram Baba at his Bombay apartment located in Bandra, Sheesh Mahal Building 9, Pali Hill 5-A, Demonty Road, behind Macronoells Roof Garden.

I recorded these comments soon after the meeting ended.

An extraordinary experience. Truly a saintly man. I did not record his words since he didn't allow me to do so. It would have spoiled the religious atmosphere I suppose. Anyway, it has been a highly spiritual experience. Swami Ram Baba talked for quite a long time.

Swami Ram Baba is said to be one hundred and twenty-five years old now, having been born around 1860.² However, he seems to be half his age: his skin is smooth like that of a young man. He is very tall with a white, long, flowing beard. His hair is thinning white. He wears an orange robe. He sits on a comfortable chair and is able to speak very fluently in English, and apparently he also masters several Indian languages.

He spoke for quite a long time in general terms on the subjects of spirituality, on the search for inner peace, and on various fundamental issues... As he said: "Head, heart, hands, tongue".

About Shirdi Sai Baba, he said that there are no words for describing his personal relationship with him, nor is it possible to describe Shirdi Sai Baba's greatness. He literally stated: "There are no words", thus agreeing with what most of the villagers in Shirdi told me.

Swami Ram Baba laid emphasis on the implicit, fundamental need for *bhakti*, devotion, and for total surrender, *saranāgati*, which one must have toward the teacher, toward Shirdi Sai. These are the crucial elements.

He then elaborated a bit on two other basic points: *śraddhā*, faith, and *sabūrī*, patience. He spoke of faith and patience as the two essential qualities. He also said that in his experience Sai Baba is the All, the Absolute, God. The experience which these avatāric personalities can produce in the heart of devotees is incommunicable. Swami Ram Baba said that it is only through their grace that one is capable of catching a glimpse of their splendor, of their teaching, and thus grow in one's *sādhana*. He said: "It is only because of Sai Baba or Sathya Sai Baba's grace... the grace of all these personalities". He also mentioned several other spiritual figures such as Ramana Maharshi³ and Shivananda who, according to him, had personally known Sai Baba for about ten years.

Swami Ram Baba said that the work containing the whole message and teaching of Shirdi Sai is the book of Govind Raghunath Dabholkar alias Hemadpant, the *Shri Sai Satcharita*. He also noted that it should be read in Marāṭhī, since translations will never do justice to the original which rep-

² Apparently, Swami Ram Baba died in 1989 at the age of one hundred and twenty-six. If this is correct, he would have been one hundred and twenty-two in 1985, not one hundred and twenty-five.

³ A famous South Indian *guru*, Ramana Maharshi (1879-1950) had a decisive religious experience at the age of seventeen, in which the sudden awareness of the immortality of the self (*ātman*) dispelled his fear of death. A non-dual Vedāntin, he established himself as a renouncer on the Arunachala hill near Tiruvannamalai, where he remained for the rest of his life.

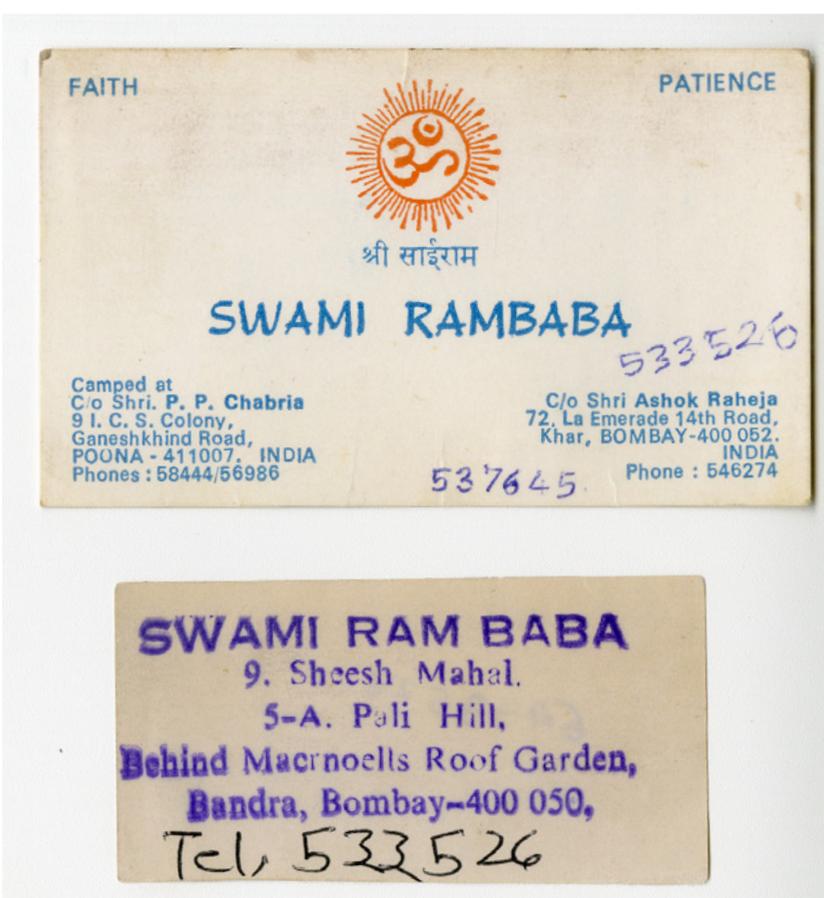


Figure 85 Swami Ram Baba's address cards

resents a kind of unique accomplishment. Speaking through this work is Shirdi Sai himself, Hemadpant being only his instrument.

Swami Ram Baba blessed me several times for my research, asking my name, and he also blessed me by touching my head and giving me *prasād* (two apples and a very tasty sugar candy, which I ate on my way back).

Swami Ram Baba has very piercing eyes, and truly, in his presence, one feels he is close to God. He didn't want to speak about his own personal experiences with Sai Baba. He simply said: "There are no words". When he said so, he closed his eyes, as if in a state of profound introspection, and would repeat: "There are no words, words would just ruin and dispel the essence". He also said that, when one goes to Shirdi, one should concentrate on this essential only, that is, on Shirdi Sai. One must look at him in the eyes as soon as he or she enters the *masjid*, without caring about the people there, the noise, and all the rest. All these things are mere distractions. Thus one must concentrate on the essential, looking at Sai Baba in the eyes, having his *darshan*, going to the *kākaḍ ārtī* at 5:15 in the morning, and concentrat-

ing one's mind on his image, on his *samādhi*. This is true experience; all other things must be left behind.

In Swami Ram Baba's apartment there were also other people, devotees of his I suppose. On the walls of the room there were many pictures of Shirdi Sai, as well as of Jesus and other Indian saints.

In his way of speaking, he showed a universalist approach. He said: "Truth is only one, and it is we who give it different names, different interpretations. In reality, it is one only".

He told us that Shirdi Sai, as all *avatāric* personalities, was someone who had renounced everything. That is, he had died to himself, had totally renounced his ego, and precisely for this reason he lived to the full. Swami Ram Baba also added: "And he is present. Shirdi Sai has not gone away, but is always present here with us. With me. Even to talk about him means to diminish his reality".

I didn't take any photographs of Swami Ram Baba. Indeed, I had asked him if I could take one but his answer was: "It is better to do 'click' in your heart, that's the appropriate place". This small incident brought to my mind an episode reported by Narasimhasvami in his *Charters and Sayings*: Sai Baba answered somewhat similarly to some boys who wanted to take a photograph of him.⁴

Swami Ram Baba also spoke about Bhagawan Shri Sathya Sai Baba since Mr. H.J. Agrawal, who accompanied me, mentioned him saying that he and his family are devoted to him. He seemed pleased to know that. He said he considers Bhagawan Shri Sathya Sai Baba as a divine incarnation, an *avatāra*, and that he is favorably impressed with the institutions he has founded. He said: "Sathya Sai Baba gives food to the poor and education, through his schools, to the minds of the youth". Moreover: "In front of Sathya Sai Baba, as with Sai Baba of Shirdi and others, one must come in an attitude of wanting to listen, so as to understand, comprehend".

Just before we left, he told us: "I give you my blessings, but since you are going to Puttaparthi, try to get the most out of the experience by being close to the Swami".

In what Ram Baba said one could feel a sense of spiritual oneness, a oneness of feelings. His main point was that the experience of Sai Baba is ineffable, and that it is only through Sai's grace that one can attain blessings, teachings, and final realization.

Speaking in more general terms, Swami Ram Baba referred to the thousands of books and messages which create more confusion than intelligence in man. He said that the mind constitutes man's greatness, and that man must learn to use it with discrimination, *viveka*, since the mind is the true computer. All other computers are pure instruments which only mind can make use of. It is the mind that took us to the moon.

Everything is science, he said. Science must not be given a negative connotation. It is man who makes it good or bad. Even defecating, eating, talking, living... everything is science. Hearing Swami Ram Baba speak of science and computers at his venerable age of one hundred and twenty-five years with such mental agility and acumen left me stupefied. Indeed, he sets a remarkable example of one living in the present, who is not imprisoned in the memories of his long past.

⁴ See Narasimhasvami, *Sri Sai Baba's Charters and Sayings*, 275 ("Photographing Baba").

Speaking of books, he said they should be 'digested' slowly and, above all, they should cost less. One who is really desirous of learning cannot afford them; on the other hand, he who is rich buys books, but then puts them on a shelf of his library and doesn't even look at them.

He spoke in general terms of the importance of attaching oneself to a teacher or to God himself, the Sadguru who lies within, of learning how to listen to his voice in silence, the inner voice.

Other devotees present at the meeting asked Swami Ram Baba how and when a person knows that he is really on the spiritual path. He replied that it is like asking a man why he is hungry. If he is hungry he eats, it is natural. And so it is on the spiritual path: there is a hunger and an urgency, an intense desire for union with God, for self-realization, for the elimination of the ego. Then it becomes natural for a man or woman to begin the search; it comes spontaneously. This urge, as Swami Ram Baba called it, seems to be a rare gift indeed.

He mentioned the *Bhagavadgītā* and the proliferation of commentaries on it, saying: "Only Kṛṣṇa really knew what he said to Arjuna". He added that Arjuna had to do his duty, to wage war, as that was his *dharma*.

I brought to Swami Ram Baba the greetings of Mr. Baldev Girme and his wife and of the cashier of The Pilgrim's Inn in Shirdi, who sent him photos and *prasād*. When I gave the gift packet to him, he kissed it and held it to his breast most reverently.

The experience of meeting and conversing with Swami Ram Baba was a great spiritual reward. When I think that this holy man was already around a hundred years old when I was born in 1962, the whole thing becomes surreal, dream-like. It was a profound teaching for me, and I shall never forget the old man with the fresh young face, and the mentality and intelligence to match.

Oral Testimonies on Sai Baba

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

Antonio Rigopoulos

15 **Bombay** Tuesday, October 29, 1985

Excerpts From My Diary

5 p.m. Tomorrow is departure day. I will leave Bombay by plane at 6:30 p.m. and reach Bangalore. On October 31 I plan to reach Puttaparthi by taxi. I think I have done all that I could possibly do here in Maharashtra. The help I had from the Agrawals was extraordinary and I can never thank them enough. Perhaps tomorrow I will try to go once more to *Chetana*, the bookstore not too far from the Gateway of India, and see if I can find some other useful books.¹ Though in order to get there one has to pass through a Chinese restaurant (!), it is a very fine bookstore, with lots of interesting stuff on Indian religions and philosophies. I would like to learn more about Dattatreya, also known as Datta, since his cult here in Maharashtra is extremely popular. Indeed, Sai Baba is regarded as an incarnation of Dattatreya by the majority of his Hindu *bhaktas*. I would also like to know more about the *Gurucaritra* (ca. 1550) which is the seminal text of the Dattasampradāya, the tradition of the followers of Datta.

10:15 p.m. This afternoon, as I had done on the first days of my sojourn here, I went to see the beautiful Babulnāth temple - in order to reach it one has to climb many steps - and then the adjacent bazaar which was crowded with people. While I was there I spotted an old Westerner and the thought

¹ I had visited this bookstore already on October 9, before leaving for Khamgaon, and had bought several books on Sai Baba, Meher Baba, and other *gurus* such as Nisargadatta Maharaj as well as on Maharashtrian religion and culture (on Viṭṭhala and the poet-saints, on Dattatreya, on Khaṇḍobā, etcetera). I also found useful information on the little-known Basheer Baba and Sri Narayan Baba in a book of Balse, *Mystics and Men of Miracles in India*, 51, 58-64, 66-7, 72, 83-5.

crossed my mind that he might have lost himself years ago in this crowd, never to be able to find his way out of the bazaar! I wondered if something similar could ever happen to me and I found myself laughing at this thought, though admittedly it was quite a nervous laughter. I then went to visit the Prince of Wales Museum, which houses some wonderful sculptures of Hindu deities as well as some Buddhist and Mughal masterpieces, and later the Hanging Gardens and the awesome Jain temple nearby.

Before dinner, I had another interesting conversation with N.J. Agrawal. We talked about Rajneesh² and his being arrested by American authorities. In the past he went twice to visit his *ashram* in Pune and noted how ninety per cent of his followers were Westerners. He said there were lots of dances and songs going on there, interspersed with the *guru's* philosophical discourses. He emphasized how Rajneesh has always had a bad reputation in India since his teachings are contrary to the Hindu tradition.

I then asked N.J. Agrawal to tell me something about himself. I was struck when he told me that he knows the *Bhagavadgītā* and twelve or thirteen *Upaniṣads* by heart, and that he recites them in the original Sanskrit every week. In order to recite the *Bhagavadgītā* and the *Upaniṣads* within each week, a devotional practice known as *saptāhapārayana*, he follows a strict schedule which keeps him busy for a few hours every day. He is a profoundly religious man and his knowledge of these sacred texts by heart is truly remarkable.³

With regard to his devotion for Bhagawan Shri Sathya Sai Baba, he told me that the *guru* once warned him that he had a brain tumor and that he should go as soon as possible to the hospital to have it removed. However, when he went to a hospital in Bombay and the doctors examined him with their sophisticated machines they could find no trace of the tumor and concluded that he was all right. So much relieved, he returned to Puttaparthi but Bhagawan Shri Sathya Sai Baba insisted saying that he had a brain tumor and that he should undergo a more thorough examination. The doctors in Bombay finally discovered that he indeed had a small brain tumor and were able to intervene right away and cure him, the tumor being at its initial stage of development. Thus, he told me, Bhagawan Shri Sathya Sai Baba saved his life. Besides this, he said that the *guru* 'materialized' for him several items, such as a beautiful ring with a green gemstone which he always wears and which he showed to me.

The entire Agrawal family is devoted to Bhagawan Shri Sathya Sai Baba and every year in December they go stay in his Prasanthi Nilayam *ashram* for two-three weeks. Every Thursday afternoon, along with many other *bhaktas*, they hold a *bhajan* session in his honor and they often go to Puttaparthi to have his *darshan*. The husband of H.J. Agrawal's daughter showed me a beautiful Śiva *liṅga* that Bhagawan Shri Sathya Sai Baba 'materialized' for his wife: within it one can discern the *guru's* own image! He told me that initially a dazzling light emanated from it which illumined their *pūjā* room. After some time, however, the light came to fade away. It is regularly worshipped and, as per the *guru's* instruction, its base is always kept soaked in

² Born a Jain, Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh (1931-1990) began his career as a teacher of philosophy but at age thirty-five became a self-appointed *guru*. His *ashram* in Pune attracted large crowds.

³ Even his younger brother H.J. Agrawal was a very pious man. When I was in Khamgaon, he fasted every day on account of the Navarātri festival, which had begun on October 14.

water since he told them that they should drink this water daily. His assurance is that this holy water will alleviate all tensions and give them *sānti*, peace. I was also given the privilege of drinking it. The husband of H.J. Agrawal's daughter then showed me a diamond ring that the *guru* 'materialized' for him - said to avert evil forces - as well as a *japamālā*, that is, a rosary, that he 'materialized' for his wife. They also treasure one of Bhagawan Shri Sathya Sai Baba's orange robes, one that he actually wore: he recently gave it to their son, who is studying in one of the *guru's* schools in Prasanthi Nilayam.

Oral Testimonies on Sai Baba

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

Antonio Rigopoulos

16 **Bombay**
Wednesday, October 30, 1985

9:40 a.m. Had a good night sleep and also a good breakfast. Today is my last day in Bombay and in Maharashtra, and at this point I can say: "Mission Accomplished". This morning I'll go take another look at the bookstore near the Gateway of India, as planned. In the early afternoon I'll leave the Agrawals for the Bombay airport. I should arrive in Bangalore around 9 p.m. and will stay at the Cauvery hotel for the night. Tomorrow, very early in the morning, around 4 a.m., I will take a taxi for Prasanthi Nilayam, Bhagawan Shri Sathya Sai Baba's *ashram* located in the village of Puttaparthi in the Anantapur District of Andhra Pradesh. I hope to get there in about a four-hour drive, in time for his morning *darshan* which is usually scheduled between 8:30 and 9.

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 Dattātreya, and he added that I should read the book *Dattātreya: 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 Dattātreya. From Dattātreya, 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 Dattātreya 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.

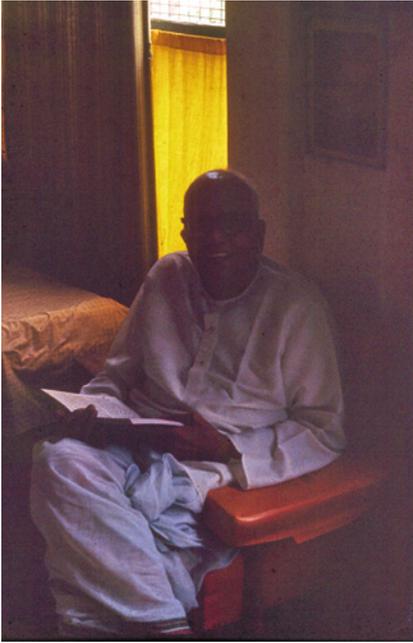


Figure 90 Prof. Narayan Kasturi in his tiny apartment in Prasanthi Nilayam, November 1985

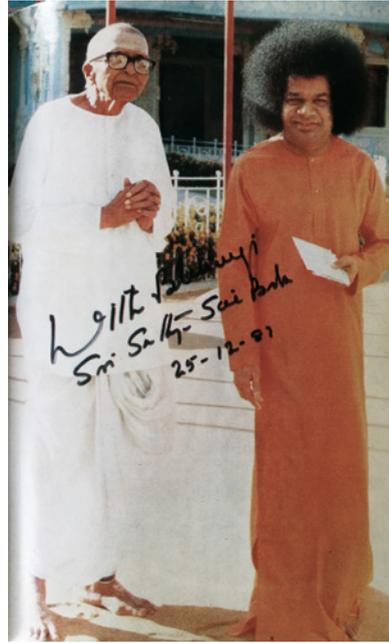


Figure 91 Prof. Narayan Kasturi with Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba in the 1980s, Prasanthi Nilayam

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 emphasize 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.

Oral Testimonies on Sai Baba

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

Antonio Rigopoulos

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A devotee offers a garland to Sai Baba's *murti* inside the Samādhī Mandir

The interviews and audio recordings comprised in this volume are the outcome of a field research to Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh which took place in October-November 1985 for the preparation of the Author's BA thesis on the life and teachings of the Indian saint Sai Baba of Shirdi (d. 1918), discussed at the Ca' Foscari University of Venice in June 1987 (*Un maestro dell'India moderna: il Sāī Bābā di Śīrdī. L'uomo, l'ambiente, gli insegnamenti*). The conversations of each day are preceded by excerpts from the Author's diary.

These testimonies record the words of various people in the village of Shirdi and other locales, among whom are the last old men who knew Sai Baba: Balaji Pilaji Gurav, Bappaji Lakshman Ratna Parke, Martanda Mhalsapati, Pandharinath Bhagavant Gonkar, Tukaram Raghujiv Borawke, and Uddhavrao Madhavrao Deshpande. While in Shirdi, the Author was also able to interview Uttamrao Patil, son of Tatyā Kote Patil, and in Mumbai he had the privilege of meeting Swami Ram Baba, who first met the saint in 1914.

Taken altogether, these conversations are primary sources for the study of Sai Baba and may help to contextualize Shirdi as a pilgrimage place in the mid-1980s.

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