

Oral Testimonies on Sai Baba

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

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1 Shirdi

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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 the Hanuman Vitamin Foods Ltd. Company, an edible oil refinery plant and solvent extraction, located in Akola Road. Since 1983, the Company's Director had 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 Guruji, 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 Guruji 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".

On the Hanuman Vitamin Foods Ltd. Company, see Jha "Bidyarthi" et al., "Innovation-Driven Business Case of Hanuman Vitamin".

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