

Oral Testimonies on Sai Baba

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

Antonio Rigopoulos

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

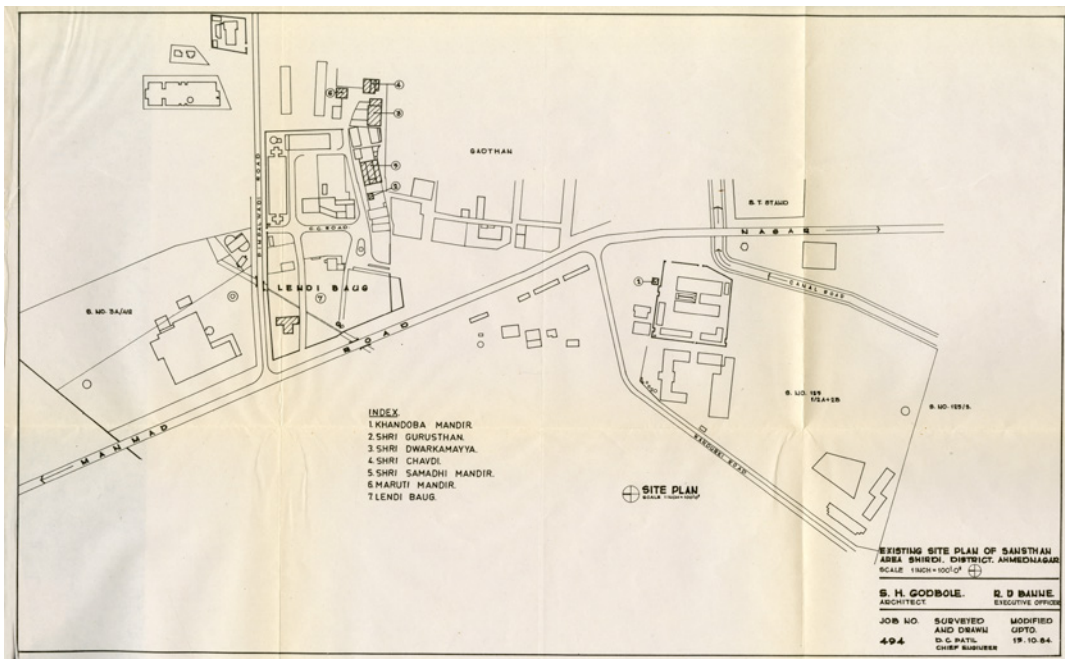
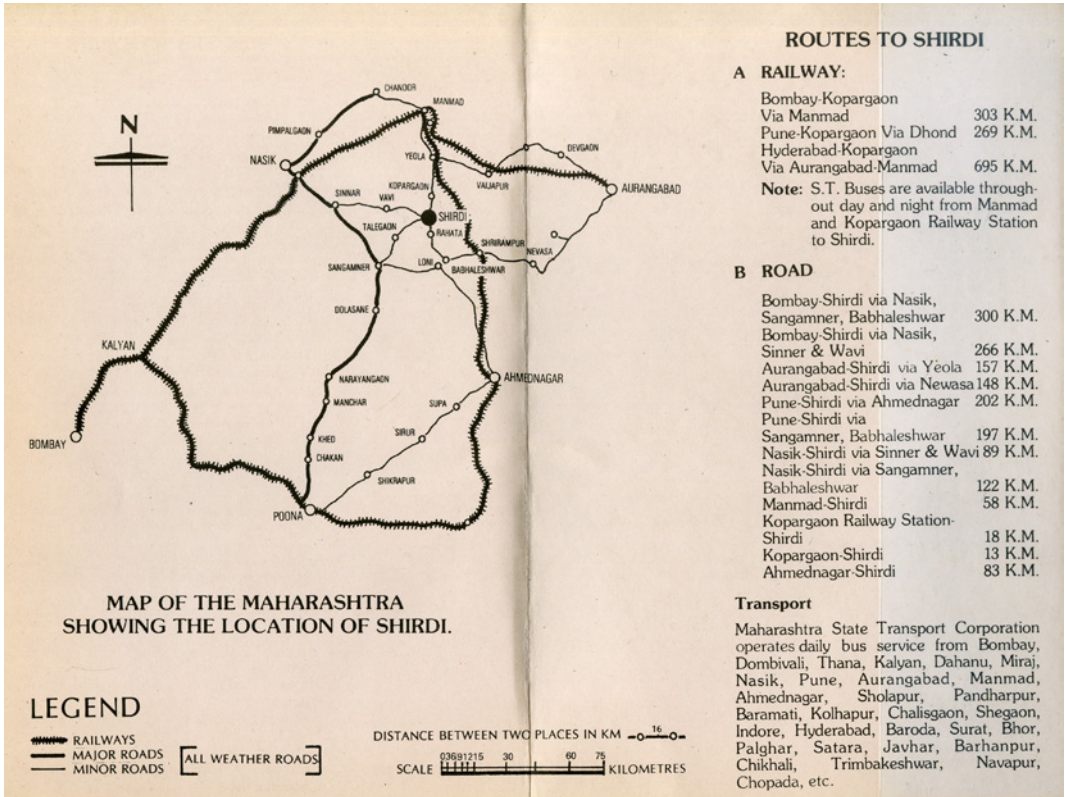


Figure 5 Map of Maharashtra showing the location of Shirdi

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.