
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 Kopar-gaon 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.

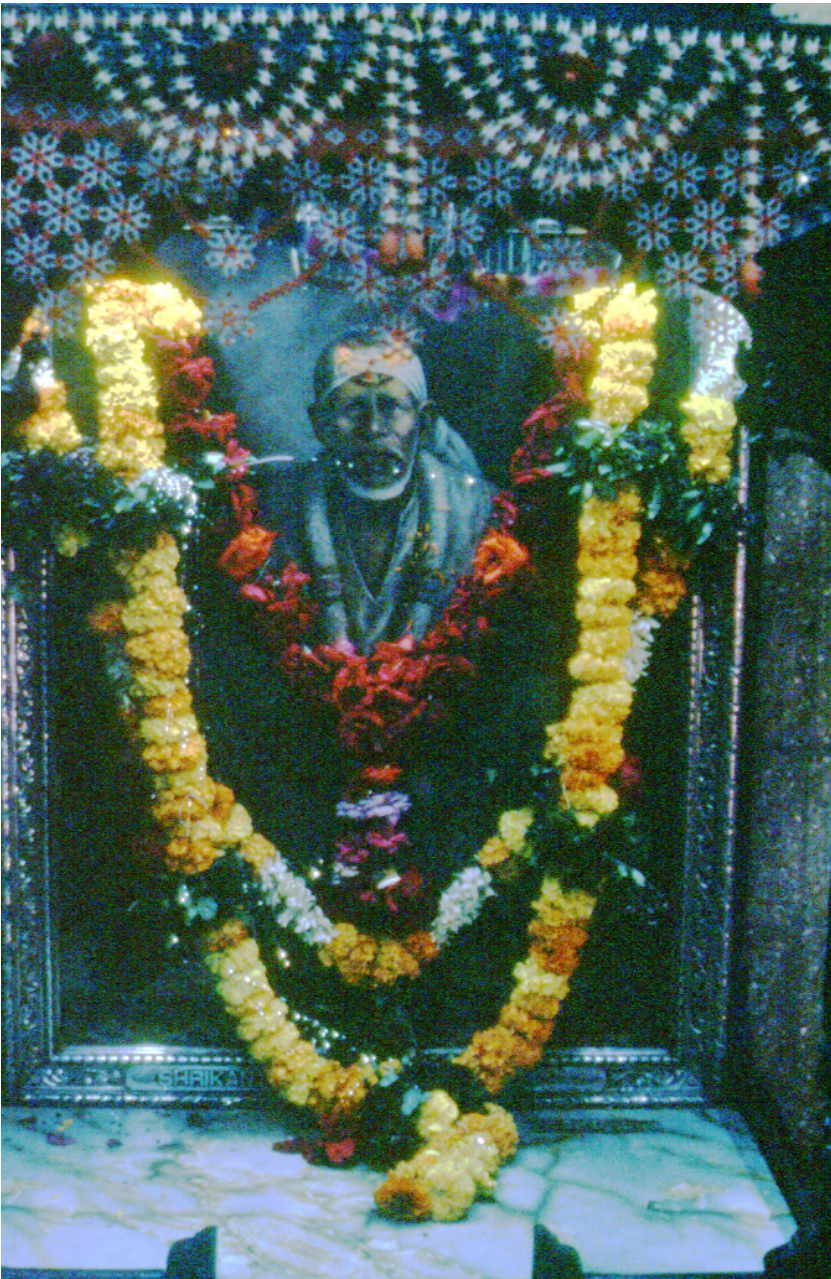


Figure 12 Oil portrait of Sai Baba inside the *masjid*, painted by Shyamrao Jaykar around 1913. It is reported that the saint liked this oil painting very much, embraced it, and said that it would live after him

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 Kusumji
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 *pitāambar*

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.

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. 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.²² 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 Upāsnī 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 Shirdī 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.

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 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*.
- 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 *sāṅgīt*,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.



Figure 18
Darshan of Sati Godavari Mata, Sakuri

- 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.
- 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.

37 Sacrifice, a synonym of *yajña*.



Figure 19 Entrance to the Śrī Upāsni Kanyākumārī Sthān, Sakuri



Figure 20 The Śrī Upāsni Kanyākumārī Sthān, Sakuri

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- 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.
- 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'.

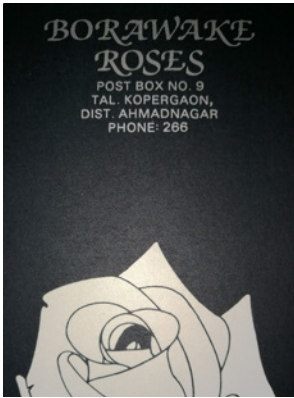


Figure 22
Business card of Appa Saheb Borawke

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-xeev3Mo>.

- 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.