

Oral Testimonies on Sai Baba

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

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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 ninety-one 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 Sivanesan Swami who stays at the *cāvaḍī* and so I immediately went to see him.

Sivanesan 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, Sivanesan 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 Sivanesan 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. Sivanesan 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

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, the *udī* that devotees had themselves taken from the *dhūnī*.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.

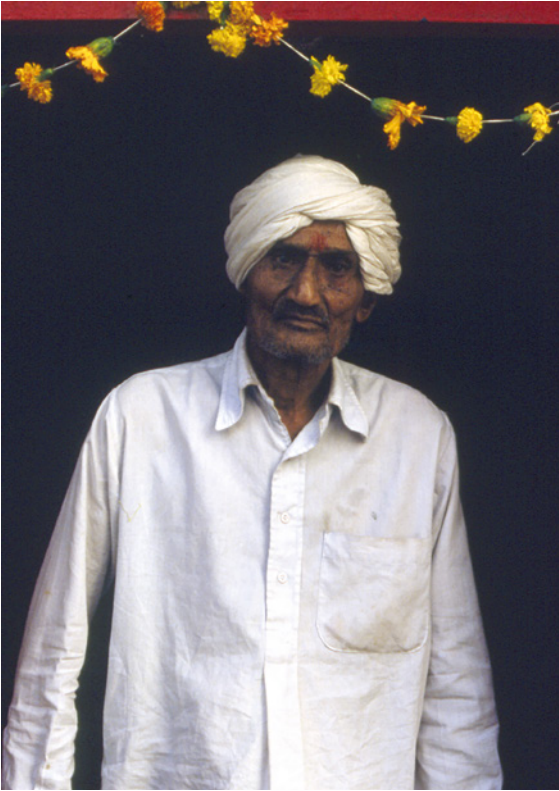


Figure 31
Bappa Baba,
son of Lakshman Ratna Parke

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 *liṅga*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.