

Oral Testimonies on Sai Baba

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

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

Excerpts From My Diary

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

-० श्री साईबाबा संस्थान शिर्डी -०-

**SHRI PUNYATITHI
FESTIVAL 1985**

21 Oct. to 23 Oct. 1985



- उत्सव कार्यक्रम पत्रिका -

FESTIVAL PROGRAMME

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

-० श्री साईबाबा संस्थान शिर्डी द्वारा प्रकाशित -०-

Published by-Shri Sai Baba Sansthan Shirdi

First Day		
Monday 21st oct. 1985 Ashwin shukla / 8 Shakte, 1907.		
Programme	Timing	कार्यक्रम
Kakad Arti to Shri Sai Baba	5.15 am. to 5-45	श्री श्री काकड शारती
Procession of Pothi & Portrait of Shri Sai Baba from Samadhi Mandir to Dwarkamai via Guruthan.	6.00 am. to 6.30	श्रीबा शोढोची व पोथीची निरवगुळ व श्रीद्वारकामाई स्वयंसेवा (निरवगुळ समाधी मंदीराकडून दुबध्यानमाई शरदकामाई कडे या निरवगुळ)
1) Vena will be carried by Shri S. V. Savant		१) वना मा. श्री. एच. व्ही. सावंत हे घेतील.
2) Pothi will be carried by Shri B. V. Khamkar.		२) पोथी मा. श्री. बी. व्ही. खाम्कर हे घेतील.
3) Shri Sai Babars Photo will be carried by Shri P. V. Karkhans & Shri K. H. Kakre Akhand parayana of Pothi with effect from 6-30 A. M. of 21st Octo. 1985 at 22nd 6.00 a. m.		३) श्री साईबाबा शोढो मा. श्री. पी. व्ही. कारखाने व मा. श्री. के. एच. काक्रे हे दोन बाबुदारांचे सहजने घेतील. व त्यानंतर श्वरकामाई अर्चन करायला.
Prayer mats w Shri Sai Baba & Devotional songs etc.	6.30 a. m. to 7.30 a. m.	श्रीबा संकलनात व गावण बाबुदारा कार्यक्रम
Abhishek Pooja (No Satyanarayan Pooja)	8.00 a. m.	अभिषेक पूजा (सायनायक अभिषेक)
Auction of Sacred clothes ect. of Shri Sai Baba as Prasad to devotees	4.00 to 6.00 a. m.	(सत्यनारायण पूजा होणार नाहीत) श्री मा सर्व केल्या यापोची व दुतर कस्तुची प्रसाद तिळाधाने दिकी
Noon Arti & Tirtha praad.	12.00 to 12.30 noon	माध्यह्न शारती व तीर्थप्रसाद
Adhyaya reading	3.00 to 4.00 p. m.	नित्याचे पोथी वाचण
Kirtan by Sau. Saroj Barde Bombay	4.00 to 6.00 p. m.	ह. स. व. श्री. सरोज बर्दे मुंबई यांचे किरतन
Dhooparti	6.00 to 6.30 p. m.	दु. पा र ती
Vocal Music by Shri. Anant	7.30 to 9.00 p. m. & S. Damak, Bombay	श्री अनंत एच. दामो, मुंबई यांचा गावणया कार्यक्रम
Palangun Procession of Shri Sai Baba through Village	9.15 p. m. to 11.00 p. m.	श्रीबा पालगुची गावातून निरवगुळ
Shajari	11.00 p. m. to 11-30 p. m.	शे जा र ती

Main Day		
Tuesday 22-10-85 Ashwin Shukla. To Vijaya Dashmi		
Programme	Timing	कार्यक्रम
Kakad Arti to Shri Sai Baba	5.15 to 5.45 a. m.	श्री श्री काकड शारती
Procession of Pothi & Portrait of Shri Sai Baba from Dwarkamai to Samadhi Mandir via Guruthan	6.00 a. m. to 6.30 a. m.	श्री बाबा शोढोची व पोथीची निरवगुळ शरदकामाईकडून मुबध्यानमाई समाधी-मंदीराकडे या निरवगुळीत
1) Vena will be carried by Shri S. V. Savant		१) वना मा. एच. व्ही. सावंत हे घेतील.
2) Pothi will be carried by Shri B. V. Khamkar		२) पोथी मा. श्री. बी. व्ही. खाम्कर हे घेतील.
3) Shri Sai Babas Photo Will be Carried by Shri P. V. Karkhans & Shri K. H. Kakre		३) श्री साईबाबा शोढो मा. श्री. पी. व्ही. कारखाने व मा. श्री. के. एच. काक्रे हे दोन बाबुदारांचे सहजने घेतील. व त्यानंतर श्वरकामाई अर्चन करायला.
Holy Bath of Shri Sai Baba and Devotional Songs etc.	6.30 a. m. to 7.30 a. m.	श्रीबा संकलनात व गावण बाबुदारा कार्यक्रम
Abhishek Pooja (No Satyanarayan Pooja)	8.00 a. m. to 11.00 a. m.	अभिषेक पूजा (सायनायक अभिषेक) (सत्यनारायण पूजा होणार नाहीत) श्री मा सर्व केल्या यापोची व दुतर कस्तुची प्रसाद तिळाधाने दिकी
Auction of Sacred clothes ect. of Shri Sai Baba as Prasad to devotees		श्रीबा संकलनात व गावण बाबुदारा कार्यक्रम
Bhikhan Zoli Programme	9.00 a. m.	श्रीबा शोढो शारत
Kirtan by Sau. Saroj Barde Bombay	10.30 to 12.00 a. m.	ह. स. व. श्री. सरोज बर्दे मुंबई यांचे पुबध्यानी किरतन
Noon Arti and Tirtha praad.	12.00 to 12.30 p. m.	माध्यह्न शारती व तीर्थप्रसाद
Aradhana vidhi Programme	1.00 to 2.30 p. m.	भारतगण दिकी कार्यक्रम
Adhyaya Reading	3.00 to 4.00 p. m.	नित्याचे पोथी वाचण
Sinhalangan Procession From Samadhi mandir to Shri Khandoba and back	5.00 to 6.00 p. m.	श्रीबा संकलनात व गावण समाधी मंदीरा-तून निरवगुळ श्री खंदोबाचे मंदीरा-परतून परत
Dhooparti	6.00 to 6.30 p. m.	दु. पा र ती
Rath (Chariot) Procession through Village	9.15 to 11.00 pm	श्री बाबा रथाची गावातून निरवगुळ
Artist's Programmes	11.00 to 6 a. m. [up to next day]	कलाकारांची शोढोटी (रचनिरवगुळ परत कालांतरित कार्यक्रम मुश् होईल)
Samadhi Mandir will remain open for darshan through out night		टीप- दुर्गमासाई समाधीमंदीरा-बाबु उघडे राहिले.

Last Day		
Wednesday 23rd oct. 1985 Ashwin shukla / 9 Shakte, 1907.		
Programme	Timing	कार्यक्रम
Holy Bath of Shri Sai Baba & Devotional songs etc.	6.30 a. m. to 7.30 a. m.	श्रीबा संकलनात व गावण बाबुदारा कार्यक्रम
Abhishek Pooja (No Satyanarayan Pooja)	8. to 10.30 a. m.	अभिषेक पूजा (सायनायक अभिषेक) (सत्यनारायण पूजा होणार नाहीत) श्री मा सर्व केल्या यापोची व दुतर कस्तुची प्रसाद तिळाधाने दिकी
Auction of Sacred clothes ect. of Shri Sai Baba as Prasad to devotees	8.00 to 10.00 a. m.	श्रीबा संकलनात व गावण बाबुदारा कार्यक्रम
Gopalka Kirtan and Dahihandi Programme by Sau. Saroj Barde	10.30 to 12.00 noon	ह. स. व. श्री. सरोज बर्दे यांचे काना-कीर्तन व दहीहंडी कार्यक्रम
Noon Arti & Tirtha praad.	12.00 to 12.30 noon	माध्यह्न शारती व तीर्थप्रसाद
Adhyaya reading	3.00 to 4.00 p. m.	नित्याचे पोथी वाचण
Dhooparti	6.00 to 6.30 p. m.	दु. पा र ती
Vocal Music by Kum. Kirti Shikdar	7.30 to 10.00 p. m.	कु. कीर्ती शिकदार पुणे यांचा गावणया कार्यक्रम
Shajari	10.00 p. m. to 10-30 p. m.	शे जा र ती
Drama Written Acharya Atr	10.30 to 1.30 a. m.	आचार्य अत्रे दिकीत नाटक परावाह
BAHER* by Natya Rasik Sarch Shirdi		नाटककर्ते नाटक रचनकर व शिर्डी
Festival terminates		उत्सव सांगता

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

Interviews of the day



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

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

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

Q What are your memories of Sai Baba?

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

Q What do you remember of those days?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Q Is it this yellow stick I see here?

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

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

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

Q Did you and your father both helped Sai Baba?

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

Q But what does ‘Sai’ mean?

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

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

T Yes.

Q Is it then an honorific title?

T Yes, an honor.

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

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

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

⁵ Lit. ‘temple priest’.

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

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

Q It is thus a title of respect?

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

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

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

Q Can I take your picture?

A Yes, sure.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Q When was the *laṅgoṭī* discovered?

T After three days.

Q How did they find it?

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

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

T It is naturally so...

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

- Q How old are you?
 A I'm ninety years old.
 T When Baba took *samādhi*, he was over thirty.

Balaji Pilaji [correcting the interpreter]:

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

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

Balaji Pilaji says:

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

- Q Could you tell me what, in your opinion, was Sai Baba's most important teaching?
 A I became a close devotee of Baba when I was fourteen years old. I came to Shirdi with my father in 1912; I was fourteen then.¹⁰ When Baba took *samādhi* I was twenty. In the six years between 1912 and 1918 I received a lot from Baba.
 Q What did you use to do with Baba?
 A My father played music, did *bhajans*. My father's name was Pilaji Gurav. I played too, the *tabla* in particular.¹¹ My father played the *sanai*.
 Q Is it true that Baba often got angry?
 A Sometimes, when I was young, I remember having been beaten by Baba. Sometimes Baba would beat me.
 Q Why did he beat you, were there any reasons?
 A No. Without reason or cause... Baba would simply get angry with us youngsters. One time I remember going to the Leṅḍī *baug* with Baba. Some trees which Baba had planted and which he took care of had been cut and damaged. Then Baba got angry and told me: "Haven't you seen this? Why do you allow the trees to get damaged? Go away..." So Baba said.
 Q Did he beat you?
 T No, no, he told him to go away.
 Q You mean that Baba got angry because Balaji Pilaji was supposed to guard the trees and he hadn't done so?
 T Yes, yes. In those days he was the keeper of Baba's garden.
 Q Thus, there probably were some young people who had climbed up the trees, damaging them?
 T Yes, right.

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

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

Balaji Pilaji adds:

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

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

Balaji Pilaji remembers:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A Nowadays many people come here with Narayan Baba.

Q But do you believe him to possess these powers?

A Narayan Baba is just a Baba devotee.

Q Thus you view him as a mere devotee?

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

Balaji Pilaji [correcting the interpreter]:

He has some powers really.

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

T Yes, correct.

Balaji Pilaji adds:

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

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

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

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

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

Q Thus the food came without any request?

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

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

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

¹⁵ Most probably Madhavrao Deshpande alias Shyama.

¹⁶ Lit. 'brother'.



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

Q Thus Mhalsapati is not in this picture?

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

Balaji Pilaji says:

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

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

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

Balaji Pilaji narrates:

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

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

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

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

Balaji Pilaji continues:

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

Q What is the explanation of all this?

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

Balaji Pilaji continues:

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

¹⁷ Either Bayaji Kote Patil or Tatya Kote Patil.



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

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

Q Had a snake bitten Buti?

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

Balaji Pilaji:

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

Q Baba knew that something was going to happen?

T Yes, he knew.

Balaji Pilaji:

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

Q What is the significance of this whole story?

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

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

Balaji Pilaji:

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

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

Q Thus he loved animals?

T Yes, yes. He loved animals.

Balaji Pilaji:

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

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

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

Q Was this a sign of blessing?

T Yes, yes. It was so.

Q What's the power of *udī*?

A If someone has any trouble...

Q Both physical and mental?

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

I Well, this is quite important...

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

²¹ Lit. 'come, come oh playful Rām'.

Balaji Pilaji:

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

Q To the Dvārakāmāi?

T Yes, to the Dvārakāmāi.

Q Was everybody weeping?

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

Q What did they discover on Baba's body?

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

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

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

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

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

T Only around twenty per cent.

Balaji Pilaji says:

So the body was given to the Hindus.

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

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

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

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

²² Nagar stands for Ahmednagar.

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



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

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

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



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

Sivanesan Swami says:

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

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

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

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

A He was a bit greedy.

External voice:

He got into trouble.

Q And you say he died in 1983?

A Yes.

External voice:

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

Q This year?

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

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

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

External voice:

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

Q They understood that he was a cheat?

External voice:

Yes.

I Thank you. See you tomorrow.

23 A magical staff.

In Shirdi, Leṇḍī gardens, 6:45 p.m.



Second, brief conversation with Swami Shekhar Rao.

Swami Shekhar Rao:

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

Q You live in complete detachment then?

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

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

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

Q You mean a silent place, for meditation practices?

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

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

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

I This is very interesting, very nice.

T Yes.

I Thanks.

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

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

²⁶ Lit. 'good men', holy men.

