
6 **Shirdi-Sakuri-Shirdi** Sunday, October 20, 1985

Excerpts From My Diary

Sakuri, 2:30 p.m. Another good day. This morning at the *cāvaḍī* had a long conversation of about one and a half hour with Sivanesan Swami, who has been living in Shirdi for the past thirty years. It was a good interview, with many profound and interesting stories about himself and on Sai Baba and his teachings. It was quite moving. While conversing with Sivanesan Swami, I also interviewed another man who was with him and who lived here as a kind of begging *sādhu* for five years and who has recently moved to Bombay, in the Andheri area: his name is A. Nagesh Churya.

I then moved to Sakuri and had another long and absorbing conversation with Shri S.N. Tipnis, the Kanyākumārī Sthān's secretary and manager, who is no doubt the most authoritative figure here second only to Sati Godavari Mataji. I later had Mataji's *darshan*. I plan to come back to Sakuri one more time on October 24; hope I will be able to talk to her. The celebrations for the present *yajña* will be over on October 23 and thus I hope that on the 24th she might find the time to see me, even for just a few minutes. Around 4 p.m. I should again see Mr. Tipnis who has promised to give me some important books for my research. Had a good meal here at the *ashram* and now I can rest a while.

7:15 p.m. Back in my hotel room in Shirdi. Bought more books in Sakuri, among which are the first two parts of volume 1 of *The Talks of Sadguru Upasani-Baba Maharaja* edited by Godamasuta and *Sage of Sakuri (Life Story of Shree Upasani Maharaj)* by Shri B.V. Narasimhaswami (pt. I) and Shri S. Subbarao (pt. II). I spoke with Mr. Tipnis. He gave me a book that he published in 1975, titled *The Saints of the Deccan of the 20th Century*, which focuses on Swami Ramdas, Gulabrao Maharaj, and Gondavalekar Maharaj. It is



Figure 40 The road from Sakuri to Shirdi

dedicated to Shri Godavari Mataji. I told him I will come back to Sakuri on the 24th. He said he will show me his PhD thesis which he wrote on Upasni Maharaj, and has promised to offer more useful information. It will also be my last chance to have an interview with Sati Godavari Mataji. Tipnis said that she has been informed about me and my research. Apparently, she instructed him to tell me all the important things about Sakuri and the Kanyākumārī Sthān.

I and my guide and interpreter Swami Shekhar Rao left on foot following the main road and walked half the distance between Sakuri and Shirdi. It was a beautiful walk under a beautiful, clear sky. The road is all along lined with old, magnificent trees and to the left and to the right are vast fields. Peasants could be seen at work with their oxen. It was a spectacular scenery. Halfway along the road a truck picked us up in quite an adventurous way and thus we got back to Shirdi in just a few minutes.

Had a third, brief conversation with Swami Shekhar Rao and then spoke with a couple of secretaries of the Sansthān. Hopefully, tomorrow they should fix me an appointment for an interview. Tomorrow I must get up early around 5:30 a.m. so as to be at the Gurusthān at 6 sharp. From here will start the procession with the picture of Sai Baba that will solemnly open the Pūnyatithi celebrations. Tomorrow I must also send two telegrams, one at home and another one to H.J. Agrawal in Khamgaon; they should receive them in two or three days. I took a shower and will soon go to eat at the hotel's restaurant. It has been another eventful day, having seen many people and having learned lots of things. I am truly grateful for the work done so far, which looks very promising.

Interviews of the day



In Shirdi, inside the *cāvaḍī*, 8:15 a.m.

Long conversation with Sivanesan Swami, fifty-nine years old, and my occasional interpreter, Mr. Nagesh Churya of Bombay.

- Q Could you tell me about life here in Shirdi when you arrived for the first time? Was it very different from today? Were there more people or less people?
- A In those years there was not such a crowd as today. Now, however, Baba is better known, he is known everywhere and therefore day after day the people increase. He leads them to him.
- Q Can you tell me about your daily routine here in the *cāvaḍī*?
- A I must open the *cāvaḍī* at 5 a.m. I must clean, do *pūjā*, direct prayers to Baba's pictures and sit here, being careful that women don't enter on the right side of the *cāvaḍī*. This is the reason I must stay here all day, to tell women not to go inside.
- T This happens in the morning. The *cāvaḍī* is one of Baba's four temples. There is the Dvārakāmāi where Baba lived all his life, that is, for about fifty-two years. It's a mosque. Then, after Baba left his body it was placed in the Buti *vāḍā*, which is now known as the Samādhi Mandir, as it was Sai's wish to be buried there. The building became a temple after Baba died. Behind the Samādhi Mandir is the Gurusthān, where Baba was found the first time he came to Shirdi, under the *nīm* tree. Under that tree he was seen practicing penance when he was a lad of fifteen. Later, he became known with the name of Sai Baba. This is the fourth temple, the *cāvaḍī*. Baba used to come here on alternate nights to sleep. Baba slept one night in the Dvārakāmāi and one night in the *cāvaḍī*. This continued until his *samādhi*. In the beginning, about 1912, Baba was worshipped only in the *cāvaḍī*. The devotees used to bring Baba here in a great procession, offering him *pūjā*, followed by *ārtī*, and then he was offered a *cilīm*. The *cilīm* is an earthen clay pipe. Baba used to smoke tobacco in it. He would aspirate a puff, and then the pipe was passed around to all the devotees. At the end, the devotees left Baba here alone. Then he would prepare his bed. Even here he used a peculiar system, placing fifty sheets one on top of the other, to form his bed. He would do this by himself. Baba didn't like his devotees to serve him; he did his chores personally, whatever they were. So, after having prepared his bed, he retired for the night. The next morning, everything would begin all over again. Devotees came to him very early in the morning, before 5 a.m., and they celebrated the *kākaḍ ārtī*, here in the *cāvaḍī*. Then they would lead Baba back to the Dvārakāmāi, where he would open his *darbār*. In Hindī, *darbār* means a royal court assembly. Here people came to meet Baba, to seek his blessings, his grace. Therefore, when Baba was in the *cāvaḍī*, he lived in relative isolation, whereas in the Dvārakāmāi he used to meet with people.
- Q Can you tell me what you think about Baba's origins, his *guru*, etcetera? What is your opinion on these issues?
- T There are two stories regarding Baba's hypothetical *guru*. One time Baba casually said that the name of his *guru* was Venkusha, and that he

came from Selu, a place in Andhra Pradesh.¹ Then, since Baba was seen sitting under a *nīm* tree, some devotees asked him why he was so attached to this tree, always sitting under it. Baba explained that it had belonged to his *guru*, and he said “ancestor”. When a hole was dug in the ground at that spot, following the instructions of Khaṇḍobā – you know that Khaṇḍobā is a form, an aspect of Śiva, who would possess men and respond to the questions of persons interrogating him – it was asked of Khaṇḍobā, during the trance of a devotee, news of the young lad, Baba. Khaṇḍobā answered that that place had belonged to the lad’s *guru*, and this was the reason he was so attached to it. He said that if a hole was dug there, an opening would be found, an underground entrance to a small tomb. Therefore, the local people dug there, found a tunnel that descended for about one metre and sixty-five centimetres under the ground, and they saw that there was a small room constructed in a way that resembled a tomb. They found lanterns burning inside, but no one could understand who could have put the oil there and lit those lanterns. The local people had never imagined that such a thing existed under the ground in that place. When they discovered the room, they found flowers inside, lamps burning. The fragrance was such that it seemed as if someone had just celebrated *pūjā* and then gone away. They were all consternated. Baba told them that that place had belonged to his *guru* whom he had served for twelve years. Baba added: “Today all that I am, I owe to his grace”. Therefore, this place is named Gurusthān. Then people began to get curious about Baba’s origins. They wanted to find out, to arrive at some definite conclusions. Since one time Baba had casually said that he came from Selu and that his *guru*’s name was Venkusha, some people went to Selu to investigate. They were told that years before there had been a man called Venkusha, whose real name was Gopalrao Deshmukh. He was a pious man who lived a very religious life, an enlightened soul. The people also said that Venkusha had a small lad with him, and that at a certain moment the boy had left and gone away. They recounted that Venkusha had saved him from some accidents. In fact, some people were jealous of the boy, and one time they hit him with bricks.

Q Because the boy was so saintly, pious?

T Yes. So his *guru* protected him from that incident, stopping the brick in mid-air before it could hit the boy with force. However, Venkusha then permitted the stone to continue its course, hitting the boy but without damage. Thanks to his protective grace, he slowed the speed and striking power of the stone.² When Venkusha told the boy that it was time to leave him, he said: “All the powers that I have, I invest them now in you”. So said Venkusha. And he went on: “Now you must continue to wander and save humanity”. In this way the *guru* asked the boy to leave that place. And the boy, taking along the brick which had been hurled at him, left. This is the narrative of the inhabitants of Selu, told to investigators from Shirdi.

¹ Here my interpreter and informant was mistaken: Selu/Sailu is a town located in Maharashtra, Parbhani District, not in Andhra Pradesh.

² However, according to the standard version of this story which was first voiced by Das Ganu it was Venkusha who received the blow in lieu of his pupil.



Figure 41 Sivanesan Swami (right), keeper of the *cāvadī*, together with Mr. Nagesh Churya



Figure 42 Sai Baba is taken in procession from the *masjid* to the *cāvadī*

- Q People went to Selu to investigate and this was the story they told them?
- T Yes, this is what the local people of Selu told them. Therefore, there was an agreement with what Baba had said, even though they did not find Venkusha there. The Selu villagers said there had been a man named Gopalrao Deshmukh, who was devoted to god Venkaṭeśvara, and maybe for this reason he was called Venkusha. Then there is the chronological issue. Baba was first seen here when he was sixteen years old. Baba took *samādhi* in 1918, and therefore they say that Baba lived in Shirdi for fifty-two years. Thus, if you calculate these years and you try to confront them with the episode of Gopalrao and his life in Selu...
- Q But how can this fit with the Gurusthān story that he served his *guru* for twelve years here in Shirdi? They seem too many. Couldn't it be a symbolic number?
- T Not only that. If Baba stayed in Shirdi for fifty-two years, and you subtract fifty-two from the year 1918, you should find out the date in which Baba first arrived in the village of Shirdi, that is, 1866. If you also consider that when he first came to Shirdi he looked about sixteen years old, then the date should correspond with the period of time spent in

Selu with Gopalrao, don't you think? Therefore, we suppose that many years ago a certain Gopalrao was in Selu, right? But unfortunately the dates don't correspond.

Q You mean to say that Baba was too young?

T Yes. Therefore, even though there was a man named Gopalrao Deshmukh, whom people presume was Venkusha, this narrative does not allow us to arrive at a definite conclusion.³ When Baba was asked about the Gurusthān, he said he had served his *guru* for twelve years. This would mean that he arrived here at age four and thus could have not been in Selu. Therefore we cannot reach a conclusion. On the other hand, Baba is eternal, you know. Therefore, when Baba said that his *guru* was here [he interrupts himself]... As when Baba once told a Swamiji, one of the most celebrated of his devotees who wrote many books on Baba and who made lots of research: "I was in the army of Lakshmbai during the war of independence",⁴ etcetera.

Q Could it be that he referred to preceding incarnations of his?

T Sai Baba said many things: that he was here, that he was there... And this because Baba is eternal. And although we cannot see him today, he is always here. He is here since the birth of this universe. He is the creator, you know. Therefore, we cannot say anything in a definite way.

Sivanesan Swami says:

Baba said: "Ten thousand years ago I was already in this Dvārakāmāi". So Baba said, and you will find it written in books also.⁵

Q Thus, historically speaking, his origins remain a mystery. Is there any particular teaching that Baba underlined? For example, *bhaktimārga*, that is, devotion, surrender, or *jñānamārga*, the path of knowledge?

A You have asked what Baba gave the most importance to. I think it was to remember God always, in every moment. It is *nāmasmaraṇ*: it means repeating constantly the names of God. Baba himself repeated constantly the name of Allāh. Allāh, in Urdu, means Lord. Therefore, Baba always had the name of Allāh on his lips. He himself practiced this and became an example for all his devotees and followers. He always said that remembering God was the most important thing, and also that this *sādhanā*, this spiritual exercise, was the easiest. Whatever work one does, even if one lives a very social life and must do many things daily, still *nāmasmaraṇ* is a *sādhanā* that one can practice even while being busy with other occupations. Even if one is doing heavy physical

³ For an examination of this story, see Kher, *Sai Baba: His Divine Glimpses*, 37-41, 43-8.

⁴ It was B.V. Narasimhaswami who recorded that Sai Baba was involved in India's war of independence, that is, in the Sepoy Rebellion of 1857-59 in which the Rani Lakshmbai of Jhansi (1828-1858) took part. This was told to him in 1936 by the Sanskrit scholar Balkrishna Govind Upasni Shastri, the brother of the famous Upasni Maharaj who was closely linked to the Shirdi *faqīr*. On B.V. Narasimhaswami (1874-1956) who was the key figure in the popularization of Sai Baba's cult starting in the 1930s, see McLain, *The Afterlife of Sai Baba: Competing Visions of a Global Saint*, 91-132; Shepherd, *Sai Baba of Shirdi: A Biographical Investigation*, 68-73. See also Vijayakumar, *Shri Narasimha Swami: Apostle of Shirdi Sai Baba*.

⁵ For instance, in December 1910 Sai Baba is reported to have said: "This world is funny. All are my subjects. I look upon all equally... God is very great and has his officers everywhere. They are all powerful... I am very powerful. I was here eight or ten thousand years ago" (*Shirdi Diary of the Hon'ble Mister G.S. Khaparde*, 3-4).

labor, mentally he can continue the repetition of the name he has chosen: Sai Baba, Rām, Śiva, etcetera. Any name. The important thing is to repeat it incessantly, until it becomes such a habit that one recites the name of God with every breath, inhaling and exhaling.

Q It becomes a continual *sāadhanā*?

T Yes. Thus the practice of *nāmasmaran* will remain with the *sādhaka*⁶ until the moment of his death. And if one pronounces the name of the Lord at the moment of death, our Scriptures say: “Whatever you think of at the last instant, so you become”;⁷ and that means that the *sādhaka* reaches God himself, the goal, the ultimate aim of human life. If you remember him... Thus, toward this goal, it is necessary to practice *nāmasmaran* all your life. Then God’s name will automatically arise in you even at the moment of death. This was the teaching that Baba underlined. You know, another saint of Maharashtra, Swami Rāmdās, recited the name of Rām incessantly. He then became greatly enlightened, had the vision of Rām, his *darshan*, and became a very popular saint in Maharashtra. Therefore, this extraordinary power can be realized by anyone, if he sincerely practices *nāmajapa*.⁸ Baba insisted on this point. He insisted on another point also: I would call it ‘charity of food’, *annadān*, that is, to feed the poor. Baba himself used to prepare food and invited many people to partake of it.

Q Did he prepare the food alone all by himself?

T Yes, yes. Even during the manual labor and all the preparations, he wouldn’t let anyone else interfere. He used to bring the necessary foodstuffs, vegetables, etcetera, from the bazaar, buying them with his own money. He did all the cooking alone, and when the food was ready he served the people who gathered around, whoever was present, rich or poor.

Q Can you ask the Swami why, in his opinion, the expression ‘Allāh Mālik’ was always present on Baba’s lips and not, for example, Hindu names such as Rām, Kṛṣṇa, etcetera?

A Baba wanted to create unity between the two religions. Therefore, he usually said to Muslims: “Recite Rām Rām, and Allāh will bless you”. While to the Hindus he said “Allāh Mālik” [the Swami and the interpreter burst into laughter]. Baba always said: “God is one”. This means that there are only different paths to reach him, the one God. There is no reason to argue about religion. Baba, for example, kept a fire burning in the *masjid*, built a Tulsi Vrindavan,⁹ and had a big bell as in a Christian church. Sikh devotees viewed the Dvārakāmāi as a Gurudvāra.¹⁰ Baba named the mosque Dvārakāmāi precisely because it was open to all. Baba usually recited the names of Hindu divinities, as he also recited “Allāh Mālik”. To some devotees he said: “I am a pure Brahmin”. To others he said: “I am a Muslim”. Or: “Even if I am a Muslim, continue to adore your own *guru*”.

6 The practitioner of a spiritual discipline.

7 See Kṛṣṇa’s solemn assurance to Arjuna in *Bhagavadgītā* 8.5-7.

8 The muttering of a *mantra* or holy name; a synonym of *nāmasmaran*.

9 Holy basil (*Ocimum sanctum*) regarded by *vaiṣṇavas* as sacred to Viṣṇu and kept in a special masonry structure.

10 Sikh temple.

- I "God is one": this seems to have been the essential point...
- A One time Baba used to give medicine to the ill. A few years later, he said: "I used to sing 'Hari Hari, Allāh Allāh', and then I became Hari, I became Allāh. From that day onward I began to give *udī* to the sick".
- Q As medicine?
- A It means that by singing, reciting the name of God, we become God. Then Baba stopped giving medicine, and only gave *udī*.
- Q Can you tell me something about Basheer Baba?
- A I saw him. At the beginning he was in great difficulty and stayed here for some years.
- Q When did he arrive here the first time?
- A Before he became famous. He came here and stayed in the Leṇḍī gardens. At that time he was unknown. Afterward he went up on a mountain to meditate, and they say that Sai Baba appeared before him and gave him a *yogadaṇḍa*, a stick. This is a wooden stick; it is used in combination with a *jhōlī*¹¹ when begging for food. There was one Raghendra Swami who was also a saint, and Basheer Baba blessed him, that is, gave him *mantralaya*.¹² Raghendra Swami asked him if he had really seen Sai Baba, and Basheer Baba said that he had been blessed by him. From that time on, his popularity grew.
- Q He became famous because he had a vision of Sai Baba who gave him a *yogadaṇḍa*?
- A Yes, yes. So he became very famous. But lately I have heard from people from there, that is, Hyderabad, that he has lost his powers, and that he has begun to make buildings for himself.
- Q You mean that his yogic powers are gone?
- A Yes. Sometime ago he came here. People were worshipping him, as they worship Sai Baba, in his room. The last time I saw him, he was celebrating some *yajñas* in the Leṇḍī gardens. Then after a few months he died.
- Q Do you believe that Basheer Baba had changed in his last years, that he was no longer a spiritual person?
- A I met some of his devotees, people who were close to him, who stayed with him, and they told me he was not the same as before. He took money from devotees and did not repay them. Many of his disciples told me so. This is the reason.
- Q The reason why he lost his powers?
- A Yes.
- I I'm asking you these questions because I know that Basheer Baba said he was Sai Baba's successor, his successive incarnation.
- A Yes. He wanted to go all around the world but Baba didn't allow him to.
- Q Therefore you think that he had some powers but that in his last years he lost them?
- A Yes.
- Q Because of his bad behavior?
- A Yes, right.
- Q What brought Basheer Baba to Shirdi the first time? Why did he come here and stay for a few years?

¹¹ A rectangular piece of cloth in which ascetics keep their begged food.

¹² Yogic absorption by means of a magical formula.

- A You know, when spiritual powers obtained through profound practices are used badly or for material profit, living a lavish and comfortable life and abandoning spiritual discipline, then the powers you attained earlier will come to a sudden end. This has happened to many spiritual personalities. In the beginning, for instance by reciting the names of the Lord, they obtained some powers, but then, interrupting their pious religious lives and abandoning their *sādhanā*, they inevitably lost whatever powers they had acquired. Then they return to being normal, ordinary men. This has happened to many people.
- Q And this is what happened to Basheer Baba?
- T Yes, this is what I also think.
- Q What is your name, sir?
- T Nagesh Churya.
- Q Do you live here?
- T I lived here in Shirdi for five years. I arrived in Shirdi on September 1st, 1978. At that time I knew nothing about Baba, but so many people told me that Shirdi was such a nice place that I thought of coming here, with the idea of staying only one day and leaving that same evening. But after arriving here, I liked the place. You know, the first thing you notice when arriving in Shirdi is the mental peace of the place. Whatever tensions you have accumulated in the place where you live, whatever your anxieties or problems, when you arrive in Shirdi all these just disappear and you experience mental peace such as you never felt before in your life. Therefore, a person begins to love Shirdi and to come often, in order to enjoy this peace. In this way, contact with Baba is developed, and a person understands that he who has protected him for all these years is none other than Baba... Do you understand?
- Q So you stayed here?
- T I remained here for five years, although my intention had been to stay only one day. I left my work and all the rest, and I remained in Shirdi, living as every other *faqīr* or mendicant I should say. But it was Baba's love, this love that he has for all his devotees, that induced me to remain here. Then I began to get interested in spiritual life, and began to read the Scriptures and whatever literature I could find about Baba. I began to study his figure. Then I had two visions of Baba. Thus I can say that my sojourn in Shirdi benefitted me in many ways. I had previously lived a very different type of life, in Bombay. Now, however, I have understood the reason why one is born as a human being, the significance and the aim of human birth. And what we should reach after having obtained this human body. I only understood these things after arriving here in Shirdi. Now I try to make sincere efforts to reach that goal, that destination. Baba has promised that, from birth to birth, he will be with us and guide us, and will help each devotee to reach the goal, the ultimate aim of human life, that is, becoming one with God.
- Q Thank you. You have described a marvellous experience. You now live in Bombay?
- T Yes, I returned to Bombay because Baba never gives an excessive task to anyone. If I remember correctly, there was one Mister Jog here in Shirdi, who always celebrated the *ārtī* to Baba. He wanted to take up

saṃnyāsa,¹³ but even to him Baba said: “The time will come for that, but you must wait”. You know, Baba used to say that a person must be qualified to obtain something. Therefore, a person like me or like us, who are tied by numerous karmic bonds on the basis of the good or bad that we have done, must undergo the results, the consequences of these actions. Unless these ties are dissolved, for example by reciting the name of the Lord as the Scriptures say, one cannot enter monastic life because of a lack of spiritual maturity. Therefore, until in our *karmayoga*¹⁴ we do not reach an equilibrium or balance, the moment is not ripe to take *saṃnyāsa*, that is, to lead a life of begging.

- I Studying the books about Sai Baba I realize that his teaching is very modern, in the sense that he addresses all types of persons, in particular people who lead ordinary worldly lives, who are *grhasthas*.¹⁵ Therefore, it’s an opportunity for spiritual growth addressed to anyone desiring it, even if he has family, wife, children, job. I think this is especially important, because if Baba’s teaching was restricted to the *saṃnyāsa* aspirant or the renunciant, then only a small minority could hope for enlightenment, for *ātmajñāna*.¹⁶ Thus, I think this was a great grace which Baba offered to his devotees, inviting them to practice *nāmasmaraṇ*, etcetera wherever they found themselves. Don’t you think so?
- T As you know, different types of spiritual practices were prescribed when the *Vedas* were written, according to the different eras. For the present age of *kali*,¹⁷ the *Vedas* recommend the practice of *nāmasmaraṇ* as the most appropriate. The *Vedas* knew that in the *kali* age human life would be short and that man would live totally absorbed in mundane, worldly affairs. Therefore, it would be difficult for man in this age to practice complex *sādhana*s. Thus the simplest *sādhana*, which is the remembrance of God, was already prescribed when the *Vedas* were written. The Samartha Sadgurus¹⁸ like Baba, lead their devotees along the spiritual path in the best way possible, this is their goal. Therefore, these Samartha Sadgurus continue to change their techniques, adopting those that are most suitable in a particular historical period. So, during Baba’s time, when God incarnated as Sai Baba, he privileged this technique of *nāmasmaraṇ*. If we look at the crowds arriving in Shirdi today, we see people from high society, I mean people living modern lives. They cannot arise at 3 a.m. as people did one time, bathe in the river, meditate, etcetera. Today our times are not conducive to such practices. Moreover, Baba cleared up one point, and that is that every religion has equal dignity, that there is no difference between religions, or difference between the God of one and the God of another. God is one, one energy that manifests itself from time to time with different names and different forms. For this reason, we should not think that Islām is different from Hinduism, that Christianity is different from

13 Renunciation.

14 Lit. ‘the discipline of action’. A path to liberation outlined by Kṛṣṇa in the *Bhagavadgītā* and requiring an attitude of detachment from the results of one’s actions (*naiṣkarmya*).

15 Householders.

16 Lit. ‘knowledge of the Self’.

17 The last and most degenerate of the four world ages or *yugas*.

18 All-powerful, supreme *gurus*.

Hinduism. Our present type of comprehension is very negative. We have hostility toward each other, arriving at very negative excesses. People belonging to a different religion from our own are considered enemies because they practice things that we don't. Baba wanted clarity and the elimination of all that enmity. For this reason, he wouldn't allow anyone to know what religion or sect he belonged to. When Muslims came to him, he told them: "Recite Rām, Rām", or: "Recite Kṛṣṇa, Kṛṣṇa and Allāh will bless you". This, you see, is a completely different kind of teaching. Telling a Muslim to recite the name of Rām, and that Allāh will in consequence bless him, means that one can recite any name, it's the same. So, to Hindus Baba said: "Allāh Mālik", 'Remember Allāh'. Many people heard Baba say: "What is there in the name of Allāh? Do you think that Allāh is different from Viṭṭhal of Pandharpur? Do you think that Allāh is different from Rām? He is the same". So Baba said. With techniques such as *nāmasmaraṇ* Baba made it easier for people in our times to lead spiritual lives. These techniques are adapted to the times by the Samartha Sadgurus. Their ultimate aim is to confer liberation to all those who surrender completely. For this scope they recommend different methods and techniques from time to time, and the devotee should persevere in these. This is what I think.

- Q Could you ask Sivanesan Swami what his intentions were the first time he came to Shirdi? Did he think he would stay so long, for thirty years, or did he come only because he wished to visit a holy place? What was his experience with Baba like?
- T I will refer what Swamiji told me. Swamiji left his native city, Kamuthi, at the age of fifteen. I should add that he had a strong, innate spiritual vocation, having developed detachment from worldly things at the age of fifteen. Thus, he began to wander.
- Q Excuse me, what city did he come from?
- T Kamuthi, which is in Tamil Nadu. It's a city in the South. He stayed in the company of numerous *sādhus* and *saṃnyāsīs*, and finally Swamiji reached Ganeshpuri, where Swami Nityananda was flourishing.¹⁹ In those days, he attracted large crowds. Swamiji stayed with Swami Nityananda for about two years, and then thought about going to the Himālayas to undertake other ascetic practices, he thought about going to Badri or Kedar. But Swami Nityananda was also known as *antaryāmī*,²⁰ and he knew the desires and intimate thoughts of every individual. Therefore, one day he suddenly ordered Swamiji to go to Shirdi. He told him: "All that you can aspire to reach in this life is to be found only in Shirdi". Nityananda told him that he would obtain everything in Shirdi. But, you know, as it almost always happens, Swamiji knew nothing of Sai Baba of Shirdi at that time; he didn't even know his name. So when he was ordered to go to Shirdi he could no longer stay at Ganeshpuri with Swami Nityananda. So he left and went to Bombay, and began to make inquiries about Baba, asking news and information about Shirdi...

¹⁹ Swami Nityananda (c. 1896-1961) was an influential Maharashtrian saint and miracle-worker, the *guru* of Swami Muktananda who met him in 1947. In 1936, Swami Nityananda settled in Ganeshpuri, near Mumbai, where he had an *ashram* built in which he spent the rest of his life.

²⁰ Lit. 'the inner ruler/controller'.

Q In what years?

T About 1951 or 1952. While he was making this inquiry, one day a person showed him a photo of Sai Baba he had in his shop. You know, many people in Bombay worship Baba. He was very popular in Bombay from the beginning, in his own times. When Swamiji was shown the photo, he thought: "He certainly looks like a Muslim. What can I learn or attain by going to a Muslim?". Therefore, he wasn't very enthusiastic about going to Shirdi. So he remained in a temple, a Hanumān temple at Khar, a suburb of Bombay. Since he couldn't decide what to do, he simply stayed there, wasting time. After about seven or eight days, when no one else was present, he heard a voice, telling him: "I asked you to go to Shirdi, but instead you're wasting your time here". Swamiji looked around but saw no one and so he thought that it was an illusion or his imagination, so he continued staying there, mainly because he didn't want to go to a Muslim. After three or four days he again heard the voice, the same voice. This time it sounded threatening, saying: "So, are you going or not?". Swamiji got frightened and decided to go to Shirdi. He came from the South and didn't know the local language of these places, so he decided that instead of going to Shirdi by road he would follow the railway tracks. This way he thought that he would surely reach Shirdi, and he would not be confused or be afraid of getting lost. So that's what he did. If you were to do this today, you would see that for miles and miles there are neither inhabitants nor houses. Swamiji at that time wandered as a beggar. He had no money and had to walk the whole way. Only when someone offered him food could he nourish himself. This means that he lived only on alms at that time. So, while he was following the railway tracks in complete solitude, Swamiji for three or four days had nothing to eat, and he was starving. One night about midnight, as he walked along the tracks, he suddenly got the idea that since he was going to a *guru* - as tradition would have it - the *guru* as such should be able to take care of his disciple in all circumstances... The *guru* must be able to save the disciple, even from death. A Samartha Sadguru should be thus. And it is said that one should find such a *guru* and follow him. It's not said to follow just any kind of *guru*. So Swamiji wanted to test Baba because he didn't know him, he knew nothing of him. And so he had this thought: "If Sai Baba is so great, he must know that I have been without food for four days, and that at least one meal a day is necessary to stay alive. Therefore, if I must depend completely on him, he should also see to my necessities". Swamiji thought: "If here, in this exact moment, Baba furnishes food for me, then I'll believe that I can totally depend upon him". So he reasoned. Just then, he heard a train approaching from behind him and he moved to one side to let it pass. As the train passed, he heard a package fall to the ground. He thought that a passenger must have lost one of his bags. Out of curiosity, he wanted to see what had been dropped, what was inside the package. So he took it and opened it. Baba was faithful to his words. The package contained food, seven or eight *capātīs*,²¹ made of wheat and vegetables, etcetera. So Baba gave him this proof... Because Swamiji had mentally asked him for food, think-

21 Unleavened flat bread.

ing that, if helped, he would completely surrender to him. Baba granted his wish, giving him food at that precise moment, and making him understand he could surrender totally to him, for all things. So Swamiji developed faith in Baba, even if he knew nothing about him. This was the first significant episode. When he finally reached Shirdi, he obviously had many other experiences.

Swamiji recounts:

I was going toward Shirdi, but at a certain point I left the train tracks at Nasik, and went toward Tryambakeshvar. It was night and I didn't know the way but I went on. I met a *sādhu* who gave me food and had me stay there at Tryambakeshvar for six months. After six months, someone came from Shirdi, and he also stayed at the place where the *sādhu* lived. Together we talked about the Dvārakāmāi and the Samādhi Mandir. The same day, Swami Nityananda appeared to me in a dream, saying: "Are you still here? Then you don't want to go to Shirdi?". The next day I left, telling the *sādhu* I was going to Shirdi. He wanted me to remain and he built a small hut for me, but I left Tryambakeshvar and finally arrived in Shirdi. At that time I used to walk by night, along the tracks. Near the station at Nasik, about midnight, a police jeep arrived and stopped me. An inspector asked me where I was going and I told him I was going to Shirdi. He asked: "Why are you walking?", and I replied: "Because I have no money. I go on foot". Then the man invited me to sit in his jeep. He offered me tea and gave me some money, saying: "Offer my *praṇāms*²² to Sai Baba". Then I met three or four *sādhus* who told me to get on the train, and they invited me to go with them to Kashi. I accepted, but when I came to Shirdi and saw the image of Baba in the Dvārakāmāi, Baba himself appeared to me in the form of Hanumān and then, after a while, he appeared as an Arab. I sat in the *masjid* looking intensely at the image, and in certain moments it appeared similar to Hanumān, and in others it seemed an Arab. I sat there all day and thought: "Here there is something strange. This is not just a picture".²³ I stayed there until they came to close the Dvārakāmāi. The next day I heard that the Sansthān gave free meals to the poor. So I went there but they didn't give me food. That's because there weren't *saṃnyāsins* there. They asked me where I came from and I told them I came from Bombay. But they didn't give me anything. At that time, there was a man named Sagun Merunai who was from the South of India and who had come to stay here since Baba's time. He called me and gave me a meal. Sagun Merunai was a *saṃnyāsin*. He came here, saw Sai Baba, and Baba told him to remain here. He sold books about Baba. First, he used to run a small hotel for pilgrims. He told the man in the canteen to give me food, and so I took my meal there, and the next day I went to sit in the Dvārakāmāi. I used to meditate there. I meditated on Baba. Afterward, for three days, I didn't ask anyone for food. Some people gave me *prasād*²⁴

22 Reverential salutations, bowings.

23 Sai Baba's expression in this portrait is at once intense and compassionate and devotees worship it and meditate on it. The saint himself used to say that there is no difference between his physical self and his image.

24 Lit. 'grace', 'favor'. In particular, food which is offered to a deity or *guru* during worship. This food is regarded as sacred and devotees partake of it as a holy communion, i.e. as a token of the deity's or *guru*'s grace.

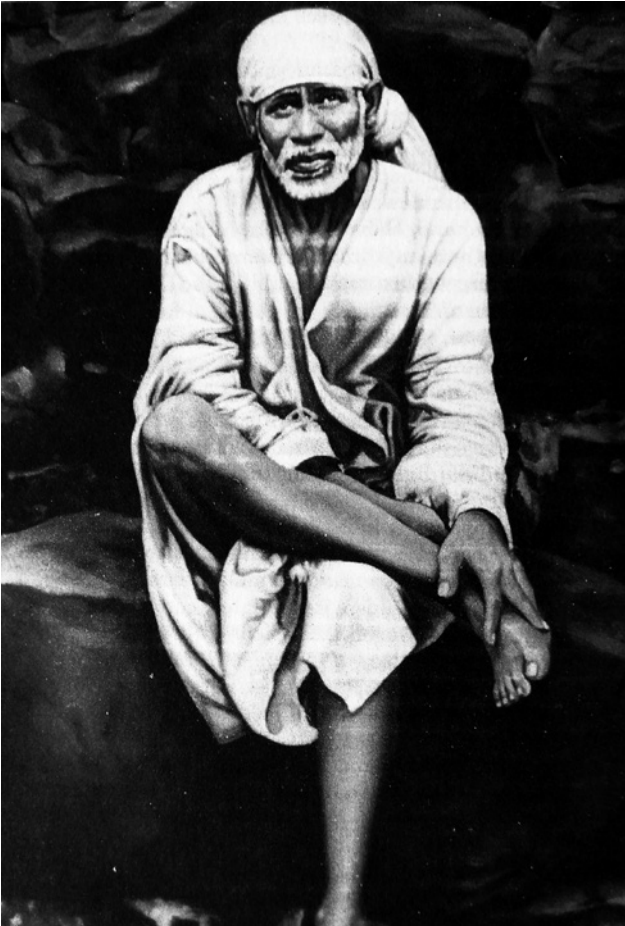


Figure 43
Sai Baba seated
on a stone

which I ate with a little water. Then I asked Baba to have at least one meal assured every day, and I prayed to him for this. I prayed and meditated. At that time Shyama Deshpande's son, Uddhao, came to the Dvārakāmāi. He rang the bell very loud. I opened my eyes and he asked me if I had had anything to eat. I said: "No". Then, after *ārti*, he brought food and gave this *naivedya* to me. After that, I met a *sādhu* in the Dvārakāmāi who often used to go see Swami Nityananda. I spoke with him and he told me that Swami Nityananda told him to learn to recite the *Bhagavadgītā*. He said: "I am not an educated man, but thanks to the grace of Swami Nityananda I can now recite the eighteen chapters of the *Gītā*". That man learned the *Gītā* by heart; I had to look at the book to see if what he said was correct... Thus he usually gave me food in the Dvārakāmāi. Then, one evening around midnight, I was in the Leṇḍī gardens. It was a full moon night and I wasn't meditating, I was just sitting there. At that hour there was no one else around. Then, I saw Baba seated on a stone.



Figure 44 The *cāvaḍī* where Sai Baba used to sleep on alternate nights

Q You saw Sai Baba seated on a stone?

A Yes. He remained there for half an hour, then he disappeared. Only then did I realize that Sai Baba is alive, is here. Then I decided to remain in Shirdi. On another occasion, in the Dvārakāmāi, my spiritual master, Muktaya Swami, who had told me to come to Shirdi even before Swami Nityananda, and whose *samādhi* is at Kanyakumari, appeared to me at noon. I wasn't meditating. My eyes were open, and I saw my master, Muktaya Swami, come out of Baba's image. He stood there for a little while, and then disappeared. Then I read the *Shri Sai Satcharita* and found out that Baba had given to one Mulay Shastri the *darshan* of his master who had taken *samādhi* several years previously.²⁵ After another six months, my *guru* again appeared to me at the same spot in which he appeared the first time [he laughs]. I arrived at the conclusion that the image in the Dvārakāmāi is no common image, and that Baba is really alive, present. For whatever I need, I go to Baba in the Dvārakāmāi and tell him, and Baba helps me. Also in the past Baba helped me. For example, Baba once told me: "This man will help you, he will give you..." and infallibly the man arrived and gave me money to buy books, etcetera.

²⁵ See Dabholkar, *Shri Sai Satcharita: The Life and Teachings of Shirdi Sai Baba*, 190-2 (ch. 12, vv. 126-50).

Q Therefore Sai Baba has protected and guided you all your life?

A I tried two or three times to make a trip, to go away. I wrote to the *ashram* of Shivananda,²⁶ asking to go and live there permanently, and Shivananda wrote to me saying: “Don’t come here. You live in a great and holy place. In our *ashram* there are twenty-four programs at night. You remain in Shirdi and do your best with your *sādhanā*”. That’s what he wrote to me. From that *ashram* once came his secretary, Krishnananda, and he stayed here for six months – today he is back again at Shivananda’s *ashram*. I used to go to a canal near here to take a bath, and so did he. I met him there. I asked him where he came from and he said he came from Shivananda’s *ashram* and that his name was Krishnananda. I then told him I had written a letter to Shivananda and he said: “Yes, yes. I wrote the reply to that letter and Swamiji signed it”. Then he told me he wanted to remain in Shirdi because there were many debts that Swamiji had to pay. And he said: “Everyone doesn’t ask money to Swamiji, but they come to me, the secretary, and people torment me. That’s the reason I came here, and I have no intention of returning to the *ashram*”. Then he went on, saying: “I can’t find peace of mind at Rishikesh. Instead, here I have found peace”. Then, about six months later, Baba appeared in a dream to Krishnananda and ordered him to return to the Shivananda *ashram*, to return to his *guru*. So he went back, but first he went to Swami Nityananda, as I had advised him to do. And also Swami Nityananda told him to go back to his *guru*. So he returned to Rishikesh and is still living there today. After these things I have told you, I tried to leave Shirdi [he laughs] but it wasn’t possible. So I remained. In the early times there were three policemen here in Shirdi: one of the village, one of the Sansthān, and another one. It so happened that someone stole the silver ornaments of Sai Baba. In that period, they didn’t allow *sādhus* and others to remain here for more than three days. I was here, but they didn’t allow me to sleep here. Anyhow, I participated in the *ārtīs* and slept outside the village. One of the policemen asked me: “Why do you stay in Shirdi for so long?”. I answered that Baba wanted me to stay here. One time, when I was praying in the Samādhi Mandir, the third policeman told me: “If you don’t leave, I’m going to take you to the police station”. I told this to Baba. I went to the Dvārakāmāi and told him that they wanted to take me to the police station. I prayed in the Dvārakāmāi, and that same night a circus came to Shirdi. A man from the circus had a fight with that policeman and beat him up. Then he left and I stayed on. However, after a few days, the policeman returned and, upon seeing me, said: “Are you still here?”, and I answered: “Yes, certainly. Baba has ordered me to remain here”. On another occasion, I really thought I would leave. Indeed, the village people invited me to go, as well as others. But then I said that I wouldn’t leave because Baba didn’t want me to. A few days later I thought to myself: “This is a very noisy and crowded place. I would prefer to live in a small place where I can meditate”. So this time I said to the people: “I’m leaving”. But now the very people who kept telling me to go said: “Don’t go away. Baba won’t allow you to go”. Those same

²⁶ Swami Shivananda (1887-1963) was the founder in 1936 of the Divine Life Society advocating a synthetic form of *yoga*, with its headquarters at the Shivananda *ashram* in Rishikesh.

people said so. And I tried to leave on another occasion also. I said nothing to anyone and one evening I went to the Khaṇḍobā temple to pay my respects and then depart. But suddenly I felt very weak, I couldn't walk, and I had the shivers. I went back to the Dvārakāmāi and slept there and prayed to Baba saying: "I won't leave anymore [he laughs], help me". And the next day I felt fine as before.

I Incredible...

A I tried yet another time, having this idea in mind: to go to a small village and collect alms, because I don't like noisy places. So, without saying a word to anyone, at about 2 or 3 a.m. I decided to leave. I went down a small road that flanked a narrow canal, and I walked along for an hour or two until I felt tired and thirsty. But I saw there was no water in the canal, nor anywhere else. Then I saw a well under a *nīm* tree. The steps were not very good and I could not descend to get the water, nor did I have a pail. The tree branches descended down to the water level, inside the well, but even by climbing on the tree I wasn't able to reach the water. So while I was thinking about this problem, wondering what to do, I fell asleep. After an hour or two it was sunset, and I thought: "Where am I sleeping?". Then I saw the image of Sai Baba under the *nīm* tree, seated on his stone. I wondered and brooded over this, thinking: "The water is in the well but I can't drink it. Baba has appeared under the *nīm* tree, here, for the first time". I then realized that Baba wanted to tell me that wherever I go he is with me. I cannot even have a drop of water without him, even though the water is at hand and I can see it. Then I decided to go back to the Dvārakāmāi and stay there. Since that day, I haven't tried to leave Shirdi anymore [he laughs].

T This story is very interesting, isn't it? It has great symbolic value. It means that only Sai Baba can extinguish the spiritual thirst of Swamiji. The water is there, but he can't reach it. The only thing that can calm his thirst is Sai Baba. That day Swamiji realized this, so he abandoned forever his idea of leaving Shirdi and remained here. It's very interesting.

We begin to say goodbye but Sivanesan Swami further tells us:

Not only I, but many other people, other devotees, have told me that they have seen Sai Baba in person, that they have had his *darshan*. Thus it is very evident that Baba is still living today, and he continues to appear here and there. From Delhi, one Doctor Swati once went to a hospital in London, since he was very ill. His wife was with him. The doctor in the hospital said his case was very serious and that he was not able to cure him. "He is dying", he said to the wife, "and you'll have to take his body back to India". You know that Baba, in his eleven assurances, had said: "Even after I leave my body, I will run toward my devotees who are in need of help".²⁷ So Doctor Swati's wife, for the entire night, kept repeating Baba's phrase, adding: "Baba, you promised that you would come to help your devotees, therefore please save my husband". That night Baba appeared at the hospital. The ill man had two photographs near his bed, one of Baba and one of Guru Nanak. Indeed, he was a Sikh. Sai Baba ap-

²⁷ On Sai Baba's eleven assurances, see Rigopoulos, *The Life and Teachings of Sai Baba of Shirdi*, 376.

peared at the hospital, and a nurse saw him in flesh and blood. He asked her: "How is my son?". The nurse was very grave and answered: "It's not possible for him to pull through". But Baba said: "He will be alright", and he blessed the man. He stayed there for a while and then went away. The next day the sick man said he felt well. The nurse told him that the night before his father had come and had inquired about him. The man asked: "My father? What did he look like?". Then the nurse saw a photograph near the bed and said: "That's him". Doctor Swati answered: "That is not my father. That is the Universal Father! He is Sai Baba". Doctor Swati narrated this experience and wrote about it before returning to Delhi. Many facts such as this happen even today. Baba is alive and he appears to devotees, saving their lives. In New York there is a man named Namdev, alias Robert Pink. He has also written a book about Sai Baba. The first time he came here he was suffering from diarrhoea. He came and told me of his problem. I told him to take some *udī*, mixed with water. But he didn't have any. He went to the toilet, and when he returned to his room he found a packet of *udī* in his bag. So he told me. He drank some *udī* and was cured. After that, he made a habit of coming here. He would come and remain a while, collecting episodes from Baba's life, and he wrote a book in English. He wanted to publish it with his own money, he didn't want to collect donations in New York. Thus many foreigners come here and Baba appears to them, helping his devotees.

- T You see, before taking *samādhi*, Baba told his devotees not to worry. He said: "I am eternal. Thus, don't think that I will leave you behind nor that I will die. I am always alive. I will always run to my devotees whenever they are in difficulty. When someone takes refuge in me, or when someone has completely surrendered to me, then I will be with him night and day. My vigil over my devotees will be constant and I will take care of them".
- Q Is this one of Sai Baba's famous promises?
- T Yes, this is one of the eleven promises. And the story of the doctor who went to England for an operation proves it. You know, Baba manifests himself suddenly to save his devotees from danger. For example, this Doctor Swati needed an urgent and difficult operation, and was in one of the best hospitals in London. His case was very serious and he was in the intensive care unit, where no one had permission to enter. It happened that a nurse on night duty saw an old man who said he was the father of that patient, and he said that he felt that his son would soon recover. Instead, the hospital personnel and the doctors had lost all hope of saving the patient. They knew he would die within a few hours and that there was no hope for any possible recovery. This is the reason why the night nurse allowed the old man to enter the intensive care unit, although it is normally not allowed. The nurse was convinced that the old man had come all the way from India to have a last look at his dying son, and so she thought: "Why not allow him to enter? Since his son is about to die, let the old father see him". After a few minutes, she looked through the window to see what the old man was doing inside the room. She saw him passing his hand over the patient's body, and walking around the body three or four times. You know, it was as if he meant to keep death away. Baba in this way placed a limit not to

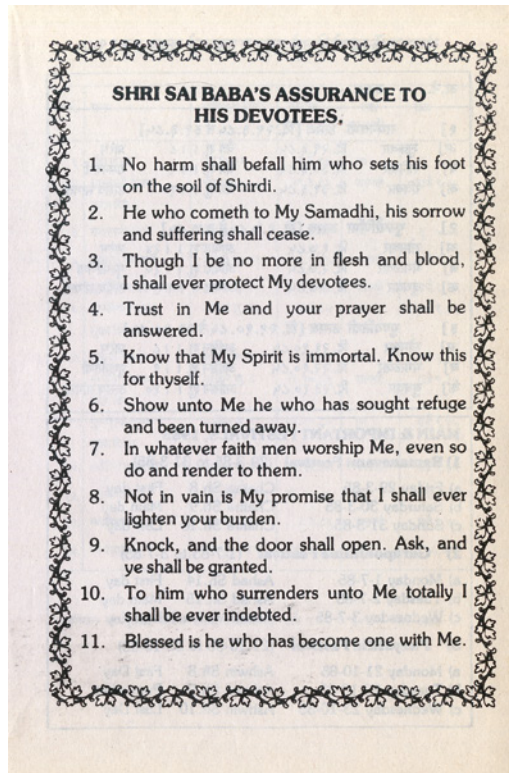


Figure 45
Sai Baba's eleven assurances
to his devotees

be surpassed, a boundary line, beyond which death could not pass.²⁸ The next morning the hospital personnel arrived and, to their surprise, the patient was better and had regained consciousness! Then the nurse told the sick man that the night before his father had come to see him, and had said he had high hopes that he would recover, and she added: "Well, this has actually happened and today you seem much better". The patient was greatly surprised and thought: "How is it possible that my father came to England from a small village in the Punjab, with all the formalities of passport, visa, etcetera?". So he asked for a description of this old man from the nurse. She pointed her finger at the photograph the patient had brought with him. The patient was a Sikh and he had photographs of Guru Govind, Guru Nanak, and one of Sai Baba, who was his *iṣṭadevatā*,²⁹ his favorite deity. The nurse knew nothing of Sai Baba, but seeing his photo on the bedside table, said:

²⁸ Here my informant had in mind a famous episode which is narrated in Dabholkar, *Shri Sai Satcharita: The Life and Teachings of Shirdi Sai Baba*, 11-14 (ch. 1, vv. 104-38): after grinding large quantities of wheat at the mosque, the saint instructed the women of the village to throw the flour at the side of a brook at the village boundary. Local people in Shirdi gave the interpretation that in this way the saint banished a cholera epidemic, preventing it from entering the village. It was not wheat, but the terrible disease that he fed to the quern to be crushed. Dabholkar was present at the mosque when Sai Baba performed this strange feat: he was filled with admiration and wonder and thought that he should write a book on his life, i.e. what was to become the *Shri Sai Satcharita*.

²⁹ Lit. 'chosen deity'.

“That is the man who came yesterday”, pointing her finger at Baba’s photo. This story proves that Sai Baba even today comes to help us devotees. Whenever Baba wants to manifest himself, he does so. This means that he is always alive, in accord with his promise.

- Q Marvellous, thank you. Could you tell me anything about Narayan Baba, and what you think of him?
- T Look, if I must give an opinion it is this. Baba can use any person as his instrument, in order to help his devotees in one way or the other. Baba can even make you one of his instruments. Imagine, for example, that he wants to send me something through you. He would manifest himself to you under the form of another person, giving you a package, for example, and giving you my address, asking you to deliver this to me, to Nagesh, since you are going to Bombay. And if you felt like doing a favor to that man, then you’d come or send it to me. This doesn’t mean that you have become Sai Baba, however...
- Q I understand. But do you believe that since 1959 Sai Baba speaks through Narayan Baba? The latter claims to have had a mystical vision or something of the sort, and since then Baba has been using him as his instrument, speaking through him.
- T I don’t think it’s like that.
- I The Sansthān doesn’t believe this. I have spoken with them yesterday and they don’t believe this.
- T I don’t believe it either, because Baba said that he would always remain active and vigorous for the welfare of his devotees even after having left his body. Baba said so, and he has kept his word. Every time one of his devotees thinks of him, he is there with him, wherever the devotee happens to be. He could even be beyond the seven seas, but Baba is there at the moment the devotee thinks of him. When Baba himself is so active and working for the good of his devotees, then there is no reason to believe the story of incarnations, or that Baba possesses the body of someone, and so on, or that Baba speaks during an individual’s trance, etcetera. I personally don’t believe this. Because, according to Baba’s promises, he is always with us, and we really experiment this. I myself have had certain experiences with Baba... You know, with the many problems I have had, I always prayed to Baba and told him about my problems. For example, yesterday I left Bombay to come to Shirdi on the 2 p.m. bus. I couldn’t get at the bus stop in time, and I was eight minutes late. Usually the driver leaves exactly on the hour. Therefore, when I was still two or three miles from the bus stop, I prayed to Baba, asking him: “Baba, help me not to miss this bus!”. Because I had a group of people from Delhi with me who wanted to visit Shirdi. Thus it would have been very inconvenient for them, not for me alone. Above all, I didn’t want those devotees coming from so far away to have this hardship of missing the bus. So for this reason I asked Baba, praying: “Please, don’t let us miss the bus”. And even though we arrived eight minutes late, the bus was still there, just starting to leave. I was able to speak to the driver and tell him why I was late, how I had got held up in traffic, etcetera. The driver was understanding. He stopped the bus and let us all get on. You see, all this is Baba’s doing. We must think of him. So, if Baba is always with us one can communicate directly with him, and when Baba acts directly in helping his devotees there is no reason to look for any intermediary.

- Q Then you consider Narayan Baba simply as a devotee? That's what the Sansthān says. From others I've learned that he comes very often to Shirdi and spreads Baba's teachings.
- T Even the people who pretend to be incarnations of Sai, as well as those who say they are his instruments, simply tell people to continue remembering Baba, to recite his name, to surrender to him, etcetera. Now, just as Swamiji does, I say to people in the simplest way: "Go to the Samādhi Mandir, go to the Dvārakāmāi, tell everything to Baba. Recite his name and you will be free, your difficulties will be solved". Therefore, when they come here to Swamiji, he tells them the same thing and they are relieved of their problems. Swamiji tells them: "Those who are sincerely near to Baba and who have prayed to him, those who have sincerely surrendered to him, for them Baba will take care of everything. It's not me. I tell everyone to go to the Dvārakāmāi but this doesn't mean that I am Baba's instrument. I am here as one of you. It is you who have done these things, such as praying to Baba, etcetera".
- Q Thus you mean to say that it is the devotees themselves who 'force' Baba to intervene and help them, through their faith, *śraddhā*?
- T Yes, therefore it is you and Sai Baba, with no one in between. A simple soul and simple mind such as Swamiji tells you this. Other people complicate things, thinking to be instruments, incarnations, etcetera. You know, it is easy to confuse people. I tell you that it is not necessary to go to any presumed incarnation when Baba is present here in Shirdi. Even if we can't see him, because he has left his physical form, he is here spiritually.

Thanks and regards follow.

In Sakuri, Śrī Upāsnī Kanyākumārī Sthān, 11 a.m.



Long conversation with Shri S.N. Tipnis, secretary and administrator of the Śrī Upāsnī Kanyākumārī Sthān. This exchange took place in his office within the *ashram* with no need of any interpreter since Shri S.N. Tipnis spoke English.³⁰

Shri S.N. Tipnis says:

I would like to tell you about the relationship between Sai Baba and Upasni Baba. Upasni Baba, like other saints, had from his youth a strong impulse and desire to lead a godly life. Since he was a child, he used to visit many different places, practice seclusion and hard penances. Even before meeting his *guru*, he was already very advanced on the spiritual path. But, you see, without the *guru* it is not possible to reach the highest level of spirituality...

Q The *guru* is thus necessary?

A Yes. So while searching for God and his *guru*, he passed through many different places, and finally somebody advised him to go see Sai Baba in Shirdi. He met with Sai Baba and, due to his grace, Upasni Baba reached the greatest spiritual height; which is a truth we still experience today. You see, when he went to Sai Baba, the first thing Sai Baba told Upasni Maharaj was: "I waited for you for many years. We are bound together by innumerable births. You are my Paraśurām". Paraśurām³¹ means one who has come to dissipate the world's ignorance... Sai Baba spoke very highly about him. After this first meeting, Upasni Baba stayed with Sai Baba for a four-year period. After this, he left Shirdi and went to Karagpur, and then finally came to Sakuri. This is a very small village. At the time, he preferred to live in the outskirts of the village, somewhat removed from it, because he wanted to keep away from society. Soon, however, people started coming to him and the construction of a building was started, in Shirdi Baba's times. See, the relationship between Shirdi Baba and Upasni Baba is absolutely peculiar, similar to that between Ramakrishna Paramahansa and Vivekananda.³² It is a *guru-śiṣya*³³ re-

³⁰ The transcription of this interview was first published in Rigopoulos, "Women and Ritual: The Experience of a Contemporary Marāṭhī āśram".

³¹ These words might point to Sai Baba's identification with Rām, thus establishing a peculiar bond with Upasni (identified as Paraśurām). Paraśurām (lit. 'Rām with the axe', which was donated to him by Śiva), the sixth *avatāra* of Viṣṇu, appeared in the world before Rām, the seventh *avatāra*. They were both living at the same time, the elder incarnation showing jealousy of the younger. The *Mahābhārata* represents Paraśurām as being struck senseless by Rām, and the *Rāmāyaṇ* relates how Paraśurām, who was a follower of Śiva, felt aggrieved by Rām's breaking the bow of Śiva, and challenged him to a trial of strength. This ended in his defeat. The relationship between Upasni and Sai Baba is reported to have been similarly characterized by moments of opposition and friction.

³² Ramakrishna Paramahansa (1836-1886) was a highly influential Bengali *guru* and mystic. From a Vedāntic perspective, he recognized the value of both *saguṇa* (with attributes) and *nirguṇa* (devoid of attributes) forms of worship, and revered Islām and Christianity as different paths leading to the same ultimate goal. Vivekananda (1863-1902) was Ramakrishna's foremost disciple and the driving force behind the Ramakrishna Mission. Steeped in Vedānta, he promoted Hinduism as a world religion and as the 'Mother' of all religions at the Chicago World Parliament of Religions in 1893.

³³ Master-disciple.



Figure 46
A young Sati Godavari Mata
between Upasni Maharaj
(left) and Sai Baba (right)



Figure 47 Portrait of Upasni Baba at the Śrī Upāsni
Kanyākumārī Sthān, Sakuri



Figure 48 Sati Godavari Mata in the 1970s



Figure 49 A full-size oil portrait of Sati Godavari Mata at the Śrī Upāsni Kanyākumārī Sthān, Sakuri

lationship, of a very deep character. For example, many were the disciples of Ramakrishna Paramahansa, but yet Vivekananda's position in the hierarchy of relationships was absolutely unique. When Vivekananda met Ramakrishna the first time, the latter told him: "You are truly great, you have come to do my work, for my mission. You are a divine incarnation". The same thing Sai Baba said to Upasni Baba, when they met each other. Do you follow me? And Sai Baba told him to keep silence and to live at the temple, the temple of Khaṇḍobā. The temple was in a bad condition, Upasni Maharaj could not have shelter in it, his only companions were snakes and scorpions... He suffered many calamities. Some people would beat him up, because at times they thought he was a bit of a lunatic. Yet he was truly receiving Sai Baba's grace. When people came to see him, he used to tell them the same things Sai Baba said. So things were in those days... In a few months he acquired many virtues... For several months he did not take either food or water. He was thus reduced to a skeleton, and still he would keep himself busy with hard physical labor. Few people realized Upasni Maharaj's greatness, his spiritual potential.

Q Was he always protected by Sai Baba's grace, in all his calamities?

A Yes. And Sai Baba told him: "We have prenatal connections. Do not fear. I will have you reach the highest spiritual greatness, the summit of realization".

Shri S.N. Tipnis narrates:

One time it so happened that Upasni Baba started cooking. He was a Brahmin and he knew how to cook. So one day he thought he should prepare *naivedya*, food for the *guru*, and bring it to Baba. That day he went to see Sai Baba who asked him: "Why have you come to me?". Then Upasni replied: "Baba, I have cooked some food and I brought some *naivedya* for you". But Sai Baba said: "When I came to you, you sent me away. So then why do you come here now?". Then Upasni Maharaj asked: "But Baba, where were you?". He was surprised and felt sorry... Then Sai Baba again told him: "I really did come to see you". And Upasni Baba: "But I haven't seen anyone. There was only a dog with me, inside the temple". Then Sai Baba said: "That was me. And you sent me away". Upasni felt really bad, and again asked Sai Baba: "Was that really you?". And Sai Baba replied: "Yes. I am not in the dog only, or in the cat, etcetera. I fill the entire cosmos, the whole universe".

The following day, Upasni Baba was cooking some food and there was a beggar standing near him. He forgot Baba's instructions and... he didn't want to give him anything, since according to our tradition the food which is reserved for a *guru* or a saint has not to be given to anyone else... It's a strong religious tradition. We don't want anybody else to partake of it. Thus, seeing the beggar, Upasni Baba sent him away. Then, after a few minutes, the food being ready, he went to Sai Baba. But, even before coming close to him, from a distance, Sai Baba shouted at him angrily: "Go away. Why have you come? You told me to leave, so then why do you now come to me?". Then Upasni asked: "But Baba, where were you?". And Baba replied: "I was close to you, and you told me: 'Don't stay here'". Then again Upasni said: "Oh Baba, forgive me, I'm sorry. It was really you who stood

in front of me as a beggar?”. And Baba said: “Yes. I am in all beings”.³⁴ After this episode took place, a profound inner transformation occurred in Upasni Maharaj. We cannot fully grasp it with our limited intellects, but from a superficial point of view we can say that there was a total transformation. Upasni Baba did not meet with Baba often, still there was radical inner transformation. He continued to do hard manual labor. He was a changed person by then... This is what really counts. This casts light on the relationship which is established between a *guru* and his disciple, and it shows the greatness of Sai Baba.

Q When did Sati Godavari Mataji arrive here in Sakuri for the first time?

A Upasni Maharaj arrived here in 1917. This whole area was a cremation ground at the time; but thanks to him it was transformed into a beautiful place... Thanks to Upasni Baba’s spiritual greatness. It became a place of pilgrimage. Around 1924, Godavari Mata arrived in Sakuri for the first time, together with her mother. As a matter of fact, her parents had a devotional nature, and used to visit several pilgrimage sights in Nagpur, Berar, etcetera. Coming here, they passed through Shegaon, where the famous temple dedicated to Gajanan Maharaj³⁵ is located.

Q Ah, so they came from Shegaon?

A Yes. Shegaon is Godavari Mata’s birthplace. Her childhood was characterized by intense devotional feelings. So, when her parents heard of holy places or holy men, they would visit them. They liked doing this and participating in the worship. When they came here to Upasni Maharaj’s place, this was their first visit to Sakuri. It was in the month of January or February 1924. They came with their daughters. Godavari Mata was maybe eight or nine years old at the time. When they first came here, Sakuri was still in its first stage of development. There was Upasni Maharaj’s *jhoprđi*, his hut, and the *mandap*³⁶ where Upasni sat. Many people from all corners of India had come, since the name of Upasni Maharaj had already become famous. They used to take his *darshan* and then leave. There were lots of flowers, garlands and fruits which the devotees would offer him. Godavari Mata was a little girl, and for this reason she got to sit in the first lines for Upasni Maharaj’s *darshan*. Upasni then placed the garland that a devotee had put on his neck on little Godavari Mata’s neck... Then, pointing out various things and places, he said: “Little girl, you will have to take care of all these things in the future”. You have to keep in mind that she was only eight or nine years old at the time and that she had never gone to school, having been educated at home. She knew nothing about the world. Upasni Baba’s words revealed themselves to be the gospel truth. Then, Godavari Mata stayed in Sakuri for about two or three years, and at the

³⁴ These two episodes of Upasni Maharaj not recognizing Sai Baba’s presence in a dog and in a *sūdra* beggar, probably took place in October 1911; see Narasimhaswami; Subbarao, *Sage of Sakuri*, 45-7.

³⁵ Apparently, Gajanan Maharaj first appeared in Shegaon on February 23, 1878. The local people recognized him as an *avadhūta*, i.e. a naked ascetic having relinquished all ties. It is said that he came to be addressed as Gajanan because he used to constantly chant the words *gaṇ gaṇāt bote* or *gaṇāṅguṇa gaṇāt hote* in praise of Gaṇeśa.

³⁶ An open hall, a temple porch. Also, a temporary platform set up for weddings and religious ceremonies.

age of twelve she became Upasni Maharaj's disciple. She was his first informal disciple... After Upasni Maharaj's *samādhi*, which took place in 1941, the whole responsibility fell on Godavari Mataji's shoulders. Upasni Maharaj left this world on December 24, 1941. After him, for more than forty years, his work of spiritual regeneration and of awakening of consciousness, of transmission of values and spiritual truths to people has been continued by Godavari Mata. Not only did she continue his mission, but she also expanded it through her spiritual fervor. Even Westerners come here to Godavari Mata seeking peace, guidance, and enlightenment.

- Q Could you tell me what is, in your opinion, the most important teaching Mataji offers, alongside her *darshan*? How are we to attain peace of mind?
- A You see, the fundamental teaching of Mataji is that of assuming in one's own self the divine name, *nāmasmaran*, so as to advance on the spiritual path and gain peace of mind. Peace of mind is gradually reached through the repetition of God's names. This can be done also by people who have worldly duties or who are heads of families.
- Q Thus she recommends the practice of *japa*, of *nāmasmaran*?
- A Yes. It is *nāmasmaran* or *japa*. This is the most important thing; devotion to God, devotion to the *guru*, *bhakti*... But I would like to answer by telling you about something which happened some years ago. An American scholar came and he interviewed the mother. He asked Mataji about God-realization. I shall give you the same answer which Mataji gave to that man. Mataji said: "To enquire about God or God-realization is something which is very remote. Man should first of all behave as a man. At the moment, however, the situation in the world is such that man has lost the qualities of love and compassion toward his fellow-men. But man should behave first of all as a human being, since he has taken this body on himself. Nowadays, however, people live like animals...". You see, before becoming human one must first pass through inferior stages, and then gradually proceed in his evolution. If someone has not yet realized the conditions, the qualities pertaining to his state, he shouldn't even dream or think about successive stages, God-realization, etcetera. Thus, Mataji says that man must first of all behave as a man; only then will he have the right of inquiring about divine realization. All this refers to the basic human values... A *sādhaka* or not, each individual who lives in the world should have love, compassion toward his fellow beings. If one does not have this, then he is just nothing... Then the values leading to spiritual progress are absent. Spiritual values are the necessary, essential things that one must possess when undertaking the path of God-realization. Without these, you can talk about God, or you can write books, give conferences, etcetera, but all this will be of no use at all. In the spiritual realm, what really counts is personal experience, one has to put the teachings into practice. Into experience. Spirituality must live in your life. It has nothing to do with talking. Do you follow me? Thus, Mataji says that one has to develop these human values; this is true spirituality. It's not just doing *japa* or performing *ārti*. Nor does it mean to pray or train oneself in various kinds and methods of *sādhanā*. Many people are led astray on this subject... They think they are doing great things, but this is not enough. Rather, the practice of these disciplines

should develop and nurture those inner values. In the spiritual path what is required is broadness of vision, broadness of mind, and broadness of heart. Without these qualities, no God-realization or spiritual advancement is possible. People must learn to keep away from demonic qualities. Spiritual practices are worthless if not conducive to an inner transformation. You see, what I want to underline is the fact that man is made up of a divine principle, a human principle, and an animal principle. Thus, each *sāadhanā* has as its goal the elimination and the overcoming of the inferior principles, so as to reach the divine one. The basic qualities, animal and human, must be removed spontaneously.

Q Gradually?

A Yes. From one's own soul. When the opacity of gold is removed, then it shines in all of its brilliance. Similarly, each one of us is made up, in differing proportions, of *rajo guṇa*, *tamo guṇa*, and *sattva guṇa*.³⁷ Thus, to be short, I shall say that one needs to remove the *rajo guṇa* and the *tamo guṇa*. When the *sattva guṇa* alone remains, then one becomes a divine man, an exceptional man... Do you follow me? Thus, I'm saying that spiritual practices are indeed necessary, but if the people who come here to practice *japa* and *sāadhanā* end up torturing people, or having jealousy or hatred for one another, everything loses its meaning. Thus, Mataji says that there are people who, because they come here for many years, think they are saintly. Concerning these individuals, she says: "Rather than defining them devotees, I would call them hypocrites". Mataji uses these terms rarely, but these are the facts... This means that people can go astray on the path. Or that they can lead astray others by thinking they are good devotees, just because they go visit a saint, or live close to him, practicing *japa*... But what really counts is the change in one's heart. This only counts. There must be divine love, love which embraces the whole universe, for all different kinds of animals, beasts... not just for human beings. This is the mark of true, inner progress.

Q Could you explain to me why all the *kanyās* wear yellow robes? Does the color yellow bear a particular symbolic meaning?

A This is their uniform. The color is the color of spirituality, of *vairāgya*.³⁸ This is their uniform particularly at this moment, when the *pūjā* is celebrated. In this way, they are distinguishable from householders and other women... Without putting on those yellow *sārīs*, they could not perform any kind of *yajña* nor *pūjās*, as for example the Satyanārāyaṇa *pūjā*³⁹ or any other *pūjā*. In Marāṭhī, these *sārīs* are called *deśnivastra*, silken garments, which are used by Brahmins. These robes are never used for worldly pursuits. The guiding idea which inspires the wearing of these robes is the following: the preservation of sanctity. For this

³⁷ According to Sāṃkhya philosophy, the three constituents of nature (*prakṛti*): obscurity/ignorance and inertia (*tamas*), activity and passion (*rajas*), luminosity/knowledge and goodness (*sattva*).

³⁸ Lit. 'loss of color, growing pale'. It comes to mean dispassion, detachment, indifference to worldly objects and desires.

³⁹ A popular rite performed when some new undertaking is begun or to insure good fortune in the coming year. Satyanārāyaṇa is a form of Viṣṇu as the embodiment of truth.

reason, they are kept separate from other clothes and are employed only at ritual times, so as to preserve purity...

Q What happens when a girl becomes a *kanyā*? Must she undergo a period of novitiate?

A It happens all in a very spontaneous and natural way. Indeed, you raise an important question. See, the *kanyās* are not accepted too readily... I shall explain this. There were many families which used to come to Sakuri for years... to the *ashram* of Upasni Baba. They would come for thirty, even forty years in a row... So, their daughters would come along with them, and would remain here for several days. Thus, very naturally, by a law of transmission, these girls would inherit divine qualities, of *bhakti* and devotion. Sometimes, when they came to visit together with their families, the girls would express the wish of remaining here with the other *kanyās*. Their inner desire would then be further kindled. At this point, one of the novices, by seeing the lifestyle of the rest of the *kanyās*, their habits, etcetera could start to think of living here permanently, like the others. But, even in this case, the girl is not accepted immediately. When she tells Mataji about her wish to stay, Mataji will talk to her parents and might say: "Let her remain here, but only for a period of time". Thus, she is not immediately taken as a *kanyā* nor is she initiated. Mataji will say: "Remain here for just a period of time". This probation period usually lasts three or four years.

Q Does the girl wear a particular robe during this time?

A No. Unless she becomes a *kanyā*, she will not wear their robes. These four years represent the probation period for the girl. Not less than three, four years. During this time, she will come to understand in her heart if she feels fit to live like that for the rest of her life. The ascetic life is full of difficulties if compared to family life. See, there are no comforts in such a life. There are fasts, and one undergoes physical and mental strains. Here, from dawn to dusk, one must remember God's name, practice *nāmasmaraṇ*. One needs to be constantly fixed in the divine awareness. This means that it is necessary to totally forget the world... It's a life of contemplation, of meditation, of practice of *japa*. In every way and in every form, one is concentrating himself on the Supreme. Thus, one must forget about himself and the world, about himself and his own body. Not everyone can do this. So, in this probation period, the girl will come to realize by herself if she has the resources and the desire to continue leading such a life... If then Mataji thinks it right to give her initiation, then she will initiate her and will accept her as her *kanyā* and disciple. Not otherwise. Thus, this is a very natural and gradual process... Moreover, it might happen that a *kanyā* does not feel like continuing the monastic life anymore. In this case, she can think about it for several days, and then autonomously decide to go back into the world.

Q Thus, there is total freedom in this choice?

A Yes. It's not necessary for all the girls to be here... See, Upasni Baba used to say: "Not all girls must necessarily become householders, just as not all girls must feel drawn to abandon the world". Thus, only a few of them end up living here. They represent a model and an inspiration to the others and to all the people who come visit this place. The girls who come here often derive inspiration from seeing them. Then, an inner transformation occurs. See, spirituality, Vedānta phi-

losophy, God-realization are not limited in space and time... According to the spiritual qualities of a person, they are utilized in worldly activities. This is what really counts.

- Q When a girl becomes a *kanyā*, after the four-year probation period, does she have special meetings with Mataji at certain hours of the day? Or, rather, Mataji often talks to them freely...?
- A As in college education one must undergo a curricula with BA, MA, etcetera, when a *kanyā* is ordained, she is in her initial stage of spiritual development. Here also, one must undergo a training, that is, go through stages of development. Besides the practice of *japa* and meditation, the *kanyā* must study Sanskrit and the *Vedas*. Then, gradually, she will go more and more in depth... This is necessary so as to guarantee the best training... After three or four years, the *kanyā*, as a good student reaching maturity, will evolve and develop herself. There is then the issue of the relationship of the *kanyās* with Mataji. All of them are Mataji's disciples. Mataji gives *darshan* every morning at 10 a.m. to everyone who is present in the *ashram*. Besides this, in the afternoon there is a period of about half an hour in which all the *kanyās* go to Mataji's room and stay in her company.
- Q Thus, if a *kanyā* has a problem she can talk about it with Mataji?
- A Yes, she talks about it with Mataji. At the afternoon meeting, or afterward, or whenever she wishes to do so... When she wants to see Mataji, she can go directly to see her. Things are arranged thus. Anyway, there is always a meeting of all the *kanyās* with Mataji in the afternoon. Usually, they talk about issues concerning God-realization, or about good books, or about saints... Moreover, since Mataji is the *guru*,⁴⁰ the *kanyās* want to know things which concern the *guru*. This is the way they pass their time.
- Q How many *kanyās* reside here at present?
- A Now there are about sixty *kanyās*. Upasni Maharaj initiated twenty-five, and Mataji in a forty-year period has initiated about thirty-five. Thus, in total they are about sixty.
- Q Do they live here all the time or do they travel as well?
- A They reside here permanently since it is here where their inspiration abides. It is precisely because they all reside here that the institution is kept alive. However, it occasionally happens that the *kanyās* may go somewhere to celebrate *yajñas* or other religious functions along with Mataji.
- Q Nearby or even far away from here?
- A Outside Sakuri. Up till now, Mataji has celebrated *yajñas* at Hyderabad, Nagpur, Surat, Bombay, Benares and in all the most important places in India.
- Q Thus Mataji travels?
- A Yes. And of course the *kanyās* accompany Mataji. Mataji is always accompanied by the *kanyās*. Sometimes for celebrating *yajñas*, other times because Mataji is invited by devotees to visit their towns. Then, devotees take care of all the arrangements so as to greet her properly; especially the older devotees... In this way, the whole place is benefited by Mataji's *darshan* and the people who cannot come to Sakuri are blessed by Mataji's *darshan*. Do you follow me?

⁴⁰ The appropriate term would be *gurvī*, the feminine of *guru*.

- Q At what time do the *kanyās* get up in the morning?
- A At about 4:30. Yes, because the *ārtī* starts at 5.
- Q Could you describe a *kanyā*'s typical day, from dawn to dusk?
- A See, here the day starts at about 5 a.m. There is the *jhoprḍī* at the main temple. *Jhoprḍī* means hut; inside the temple is the *samādhi* of Upasni Maharaj. Here in Sakuri there are several temples. There is Upasni Maharaj mother's temple, the Kanyākumārī temple, Upasni Baba's *samādhi*... All these, together with the *pūjā* and the worship, are taken care of by the *kanyās* during the day. All the *pūjās* are celebrated by the *kanyās*. Then there are several other temples: the Datta temple, the Śani temple... Outside this *jhoprḍī*, there are the Khaṇḍobā temple, the Gaṇeś temple, the Mārutī temple. The *pūjās* in these temples are celebrated by Brahmins. But here we have one main temple and the *jhoprḍī*. The day begins at 5 in the morning with the performance of *ārtī*. It is celebrated following the local tradition; first inside the temple and then at the *jhoprḍī*. After this *ārtī*, which is called *kākaḍ ārtī* and which varies in time according to the season, the *abhiṣeka* to the *samādhi* of Upasni Maharaj is performed. This goes on up to 8, 8:30 a.m. At 9, the *kanyās* sing *bhajans* in the hall, at Upasni Maharaj's *samādhi*. *Bhajans* continue up to 9:30 a.m. Then another *ārtī* at Upasni Maharaj's *samādhi* follows. After this, excerpts from Upasni Maharaj's talks are read. As a matter of fact, when Upasni Maharaj was alive, there was a time during which he would talk even for several hours with no pause. His discourses are known as *Upāsni-Vāk-Sudhā*,⁴¹ and each one of them is about five, seven pages long. I would like to add that Upasni Maharaj's saintly literature amounts to about five thousand pages all together. Actually, my PhD thesis is based on Upasni Maharaj's discourses... His talks concern God-realization, ethics, spirituality, Vedānta. Also, some discourses concern education and family-planning. Just imagine what it was like to preach birth control here in India... He was one of the first to come up with this idea, about sixty years before the law became operative. Thus, he also concerned himself with social issues. However, his main emphasis was on topics such as the *guru*, God-realization, *japa*, *tapas*⁴²... He was a man of God, and these were his principal themes of discussion. Sometimes, however, it happened that people would ask him about social problems, and then he would express his views. So, there are these lectures which take place up to around 10 a.m., for ten, fifteen minutes. At 10, Godavari Mata comes and grants her *darshan*. At that time, visitors arrange themselves in lines so as to see her. This lasts about thirty minutes. Then, there is an *ārtī* at the temple and also at the *jhoprḍī* which starts at 11 and which ends around 12, 12:30. The evening *ārtī* is first celebrated inside the temple at dusk. This is performed between 7 and 8 p.m. Then it's dinner time, from 8 to 9 p.m. At that time, the *diṇḍī*⁴³ begins. *Diṇḍī* means that the *kanyās* come out in procession and recite *bhajans*. When they finally reach the *jhoprḍī*, the main place, then the night *ārtī* is celebrated. This final *ārtī* is over around 10:30 p.m. This is the usu-

41 Lit. 'Upasni's nectar-speech'.

42 Lit. 'heat'. Ascetic practices, that is, the warmth generated by such austerities.

43 A group led by a leader, participating in a pilgrimage or procession.

al schedule of activities. Besides this, from 6 to 7 p.m. the *kanyās* sing *bhajans* and then a lecture follows. It is a *kanyā* who does this *pravacana*.⁴⁴ It is similar to what a student does when he takes a philosophical text like the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, the *Rāmāyaṇ* or the *Yogavāsīṣṭha* and then gives a presentation concerning that text... In this speech, the *kanyā* explains, from her point of view, the philosophical thought that characterizes the text, the ideas which are expounded in the passages she has chosen to comment upon.

Q Could you explain what constitutes the uniqueness of this Sakuri *ashram*?

A See, when you go visit saintly people, *bhakti*, *nāmasmaran*, the reading of sacred texts, meditation, *bhajans*, all these are common things, you find them in every *ashram*. However, every institution and each individual has its own peculiarities, its own special characteristics. Thus, here in Sakuri, Upasni Baba's foremost contribution to Hinduism or more generally to world philosophy is that of having created a religious institution for women only, and of having established the practice of *yajñas*.

Q Also, allowing Vedic recitation to women is quite exceptional, isn't it?

A This concerns the practice of *yajñas*. The fact is that in India there are very few institutions which are open to women aspiring to lead a spiritual life. As you know, in the West there are many nunneries, and actually I have read that these institutions first arose in the West. In India there are very few. This is one of them, and also one of the best organized. For example, the Ramakrishna Mission⁴⁵ has some, and there are others founded by Anandamayi Ma...⁴⁶ Still, the Sakuri *ashram* is beyond doubt one of the best. *Kanyās* and *brahmacāriṇīs*⁴⁷ come here from all over India, they don't come only from the Nagar District⁴⁸ or Maharashtra. They belong to all castes and creeds; it's their spiritual anguish which brings them.

Q Do they really come here from all over India?

A Yes. All day long they are busy with *bhajans*, *ārtīs*, various *sādhanās*, etcetera. Their mind is constantly fixed on God. This is their curricula here. The practice of *yajña* also constitutes something which is unique to this place. This is the only place in India where you can find women who are skilled in *yajñas*' celebrations and in the chanting of Vedic hymns. There are seven *yajña* celebrations during the year. Sometimes people question the right of women to celebrate them, since they

⁴⁴ Oral instruction, exposition and interpretation of a text.

⁴⁵ Started in 1897 by Swami Vivekananda, the Ramakrishna Mission, with orders of both monks and nuns, had and still has as its main tasks the teaching of social reform, the performance of works of education and social service, and the preaching of a Vedāntic universalism. The Ramakrishna Mission is a well-organized community, maintaining numerous colleges, high schools, hostels and hospitals and publishing an impressive amount of religious literature.

⁴⁶ Alias Nirmala Sundari, lit. 'immaculate beauty', she was born in 1896 in Kheora, East Bengal, from devout *vaiṣṇava* parents. Many women renunciants were drawn to her *ashram*, where they received training as disciples of 'the Mother'. Anandamayi Ma was a holy woman outside of any formal tradition, her spiritual status being based almost entirely on her ecstatic states. Contrary to Sati Godavari's case, she had no *guru*, initiated herself, and learned rituals from 'invisible voices'.

⁴⁷ Women living a celibate life. *Brahmacarya* is the first stage in the life of a high caste Hindu, i.e. of a 'twice-born' (*dvija*) man.

⁴⁸ The Ahmednagar District.

don't see this happen in any other place. Indeed, it's only after many centuries that women have regained this right, thanks to Upasni Baba. This is why we say that Upasni Baba was a revolutionary. Do you follow me? This feature constitutes the uniqueness of this monastic institution. The *kanyās* are all well-versed in Vedic knowledge. Some of them are Gaṇapati,⁴⁹ which means they have knowledge of the subject at its highest level. To witness a *yāg* is an experience in itself. See, my words are really inadequate to explain how the *kanyās* perform them...

Q How long will this October *yajña* last?

A This *yajña* began the first day of Navarātri and continues for about a week, eight days. The time period of each *yajña* is fixed in accordance to the *Śāstras*, as the Scriptures say. Thus, one *yajña* can last four days and another one fifteen... It depends. For example, the Sūrya *yāg* begins on the first of January and ends on the fifteenth. All in accordance to the *Śāstras*. At this point, I deeply thank Shri S.N. Tipnis for all his valuable information and his help.

Shri S.N. Tipnis says:

I should thank you, for having gone through various difficulties, for having come to India to gather information on these topics, spending time and money...

Shri S.N. Tipnis adds:

It seems fairly certain that Mataji's birth was blessed by Gajanan Maharaj's grace, which was granted to her parents. Apparently, Gajanan Maharaj told them that "he would have a great soul be born in their family". This soul is Mataji.

I Thus, there seems to be a connection between Gajanan Maharaj, Godavari Mataji, and Shirdi Sai Baba...

A Mataji's father could not have children, so Mataji's grandfather was very worried about this. For this reason, Mataji's grandfather used to go see Gajanan Maharaj; he was a great devotee of his. Once, Gajanan Maharaj told him: "Why do you worry? I shall give you what other saints would never grant you. I myself will be born in your family". Then, Mataji's grandfather asked him: "How shall I know that you will be born in my family?". Then Gajanan Maharaj told him that the birth would be characterized by special signs and events, and he described these to him. When Godavari Mataji was born, her grandfather saw these signs described by Gajanan Maharaj happen. Thus, he was convinced that it was he, Gajanan Maharaj, who had come back on earth again. Often, Gajanan Maharaj had on his lips the words Gaṅgā and Godā,⁵⁰ since these are the names of the sacred rivers of India. Thus, remembering Gajanan Maharaj and his words, his *prasād*, the grandfather gave her the name of Godavari. This is the story concerning her name...

⁴⁹ Another name of Gaṇeśa meaning 'lord of the *gaṇas*', i.e. of the troops, especially those attendant upon Śiva. Gaṇapati is the lord of wisdom.

⁵⁰ The Ganges and the Godāvāri, the sacred river of Maharashtra passing by Sakuri.

- Q Thus, it was due to Gajanan Maharaj's grace if Sati Godavari Mataji was born?
- A Yes, and she also received the blessings of many other Indian saints. For example when, still a child, she would go visit some holy men with her parents... Finally, when she arrived in Sakuri for the first time, Upasni Baba told her: "You yourself shall have to take care of all this one day". Thus, you see, Gajanan Maharaj's words are related to Upasni Baba's own words...
- Q Do you believe there exists a full connection?
- A Yes.
- Q Thus, we would have a strong tie between Shegaon, Gajanan Maharaj, Shirdi, Sai Baba, Upasni Maharaj, Mataji...?
- A I would like to remember the two most important facts. The first, when Gajanan Maharaj said: "I will myself incarnate". The second one, when Upasni Baba was here in the early days, in 1922-23, or maybe 1924. To one of his closest disciples, Mister Borawke, Upasni used to say: "A *yogī* is coming in my womb". In saying these words, Upasni Baba would put his hand on his stomach, repeating: "A great *yogī* is coming in my womb". That *yogī* was Gajanan Maharaj. You see then how the words relate to each other...
- Q Did he refer to Sati Godavari Mataji?
- A See, the meaning is allegorical. Gajanan Maharaj had said that he would come, that he would incarnate in that family, and Upasni Baba said: "The *yogī* has come...". He didn't mention his name. This meant that he, Gajanan Maharaj, had come. Do you follow?
- Q You mean to say that there is total identity between Gajanan Maharaj and Sati Godavari Mataji, that they are the same person?
- A Yes. These words of Upasni Maharaj confirm it. It was an allegorical speech. The words 'in my womb' mean that he would come to Sakuri in Mataji's form. And actually after a few days Godavari Mata came, and settled in Sakuri. Can you see how Upasni Maharaj's and Gajanan Maharaj's words relate to each other, and together explain themselves? And Upasni Baba first words to her were: "You shall have to take care of all this...". She was the only person to whom he ever said anything like this. And his words were the gospel truth. And now we can all see Godavari Mata's greatness, having followers all over the world... As if Upasni Maharaj and Gajanan Maharaj's words had come to fruition.
- I Thank you very much.



Figure 50 The *kanyās* performing a *yajña* at the Śrī Upāsni Kanyākumārī Sthān, Sakuri

Figure 51 The *kanyās* circumambulating the temple's hall and singing *mantras* at the Śrī Upāsni Kanyākumārī Sthān, Sakuri



Figure 52 A *kanyā* conducting a *pūjā* at the Śrī Upāsni Kanyākumārī Sthān, Sakuri

In Shirdi, in the Leṇḍī gardens, 6:45 p.m.



Third, brief conversation with Swami Shekhar Rao.

Swami Shekhar Rao says:

All that I previously told you I said as if in Baba's presence and it's the absolute truth. That's all I want to say, thanks.

Q You mean to say what you have told me in the previous interviews?

A Yes, everything that I have said I have said as if being in Baba's presence and it's the truth.

Q Well, I was sure of that. Have you had any trouble in translating so far?

A Everything here goes as it should. Don't bother with me, everything depends upon Baba's will. I am in front of him, and if I am here at all it's his will. Baba knows and Baba will do. That's all. Thank you.

Swami Shekhar Rao next offers some information on the Dixit *vāḍā*:

We are in the gardens in front of the temple, which in Sai Baba's times didn't exist. It was built later. On the left of the temple, you can see an old white building with some tiles: this was the Dixit *vāḍā*, the first edifice built in order to lodge pilgrims who came to Shirdi to have Baba's *darshan*.⁵¹ Nowadays, the Dixit *vāḍā* is no longer used as a guest house. After Baba's *samādhi*, it was used as a *bhojanghar* and today it has been turned into a tea canteen. During Sai Baba's days, when Mister Dixit came to Shirdi, he would stay on the upper floor of the *vāḍā*, where that yellow colored house is, the tallest one [he indicates it to me].

Q So this was the first *vāḍā* to be built?

A Yes, yes. In Baba's time only this *vāḍā* existed. Later many other *vāḍās* were built, such as the Buti *vāḍā*, etcetera.

I Thanks.

⁵¹ In fact, the first *vāḍā* to be built was the Sathe *vāḍā*, which was built by Rao Bahadur Hari Vinayak Sathe in 1908 as per Sai Baba's explicit request. The Dixit *vāḍā* was built three years later by Hari Sitaram Dixit, also known as Kakasaheb Dixit. Both R.B.H.V. Sathe and H.S. Dixit were prominent Sai Baba devotees. On these *vāḍās*, see Satpathy, *New Findings on Shirdi Sai Baba*, 72-100.