
7 **Shirdi-Kopargaon-Shirdi** **Monday, October 21, 1985**

Excerpts From My Diary

7:30 a.m. Early this morning I took part in the procession from the Gurusthān to the *masjid*. I didn't find it particularly engaging. But then I went to the *cāvaḍī* and while I was casually sitting at the *cāvaḍī*'s entrance, looking at the *raṅgolīs*, the auspicious signs that some young women were skilfully drawing on the ground, a stray dog caught my attention. He was full of pustules and eczemas, of fleas, and was in a really bad shape. Then it suddenly flashed on me that that dog *was* Sai Baba. It was something stronger than a simple thought, like an insight or a sudden flash of awareness that I find hard to put into words. I really felt that he was that dog and that he was standing in front of me in that very form: it had the force of an incontrovertible truth. It was a strange and startling experience indeed. Sai Baba was that dog: the lowest, the despised, the most neglected creature. The dog had sweet and penetrating eyes, which called for sympathy and attention. I felt I finally understood something: not intellectually, i.e. with the head, but emotionally, i.e. with the heart. *There* was Sai Baba, truly and fully. It came like a revelation and I shed a few tears; couldn't help it. It was just so overwhelming. So this is the way my day starts. I have taped the music, that is, the *ārtīs* which were sung during the procession. Now it's time to have some breakfast.

12:30 p.m. Sent my telegrams, one to Venice and the other one to H.J. Agrawal in Khamgaon. At the post office they told me they should receive them within next Thursday. Together with Swami Shekhar Rao, I then went to the bank in Kopargaon and at last I was able to change my one hundred and forty dollars into rupees. The guy at the bank was so terribly slow, it really took forever. Anyway, everything went well and I now have about one thou-



Figure 53 Meher Baba's five perfect masters: Sai Baba, Babajan, Tajuddin Baba, Narayan Maharaj and Upasni Baba

sand and eight hundred rupees with me which makes me feel safer. We got back to Shirdi and in a short while I'll go have lunch at the hotel's restaurant. At 5 p.m. I have an appointment to interview one Homi Baba who I'm told has been living here for about fifteen years.

7:35 p.m. Spoke just very briefly with Homi Baba. Right now he is too busy to talk to me so I may be able to interview him some other day. He has what I would call a small *ashram* here in Shirdi and apparently he met Meher Baba. He is a Parsi and definitely imitates Sai Baba in his attire: he wears a white robe and a white cloth tied around his head. He is quite a bizarre, unpredictable character; he is somewhat gruff but at the same time can be very kind. This at least is the impression I got. Many Parsi devotees go pay their respects to him when they arrive here. According to Swami Shekhar Rao, Homi Baba comes from a very rich family.

I then had a nice interview with one Deshpande Saheb, a devotee of Meher Baba. He used to be his personal photographer. He has been living in Shirdi for one year now. He was close to Meher Baba since 1958, living with him. The conversation was very pleasant though not too long, i.e. it lasted about twenty to thirty minutes. As a gift, he gave me three photos of Meher Baba which he himself took. He also gave me a nice photo of Meher Baba together with Sati Godavari Mataji and another picture of Avatar Shree Meher Baba surrounded by the five *gurus* who would have led him toward enlightenment: Sai Baba of Shirdi (placed at the top), Sadguru Babajan of Pune, Tajuddin Baba of Nagpur, Narayan Maharaj of Kedgaon, and Sadguru Upasni Baba of Sakuri (in clockwise order).

We later went to the Sansthān. Tomorrow morning, after 11 a.m., I should have the much awaited interview with the Sansthān's manager. We'll see. This evening I will participate in the palanquin (*pālkhī*) procession. Tomorrow will be the big day of the *samādhi* celebrations. By now the crowds have increased a lot; I think there must be around five or six thousand people. And tomorrow will certainly be the most crowded day being the holiest day of the year. All in all, this was another fruitful day. I also recorded the singing of all *ārtīs*.

9:40 p.m., in my room. Participated in the *pālkhī* procession which started from the Dvārakāmāi. There was an intense spiritual atmosphere. The *masjid* is truly a sacred place and one can feel the holy presence. I pictured in my mind Sai Baba when at night in front of the fire of the *dhunī* repeated 'Allāh Mālik' or when during the day held his *darbār* and met visitors giving them blessings, telling them stories and asking for *dakṣiṇā*. His portrait, an oil painting, is beautiful: he looks alive and his eyes are most powerful and penetrating. During the procession I met with a woman devotee of Sai Baba and Sri Narayan Baba and had a nice talk with her. She told me I will be able to meet Sri Narayan Baba if I go to his *ashram* in Panvel, a suburb of Bombay. She very much encouraged me to go see him. She is a nice person, with a charming smile. I'll see if I can make it. This is all for today. I am exhausted and go straight to bed.



Figure 54 Preparing the *palkhi* for the evening procession



Figure 55 The seat of the *palkhi*



Figures 56-57 The evening *palkhi* procession at the *masjid*





Figures 58-61 The evening *palkhi* procession leaves the *masjid*



Figures 62-63 The evening *palkhi* procession in the street just outside the *masjid*

Interviews of the day



In Shirdi, near Homi Baba's *ashram*, 5:30 p.m.

Impressions after a brief visit to Homi Baba, a Parsi holy man. These comments were recorded soon after my visit.

Homi Baba recites a *mantra* or a prayer in front of a Sai Baba image while surrounded by many devotees, most of them Parsi.

My interpreter Swami Shekhar Rao tells me that Homi Baba was a disciple of Meher Baba, or at least that he met with Meher Baba in the past. This, however, will later be denied by Homi Baba.

It is eleven years now that Homi Baba lives in Shirdi, dressing in the same way as Sai Baba used to dress.

He has a small *ashram* and Parsi devotees of Sai Baba always come to pay their respects to Homi Baba. I think their presence in Shirdi is a testimony of Sai Baba's universalist spirit.

Homi Baba strikes me as being an odd character; his ways are strange and rough. In particular, a bizarre feature of his deserves mention: he gives *darshan* to people by pulling up his shirt, claiming that the hair on his chest, in the region of the heart, has arranged itself so as to 'create' an image of Sai Baba sitting in his cross-legged posture. Lots of people come to Homi Baba to witness this performance of his. Unfortunately, I was unable to detect Sai Baba's outline in his hairy chest.

Today he could not receive us being busy with the preparations for Sai Baba's *samādhī* anniversary. I will try to speak to him in a few days.

In Shirdi, Shri Deshpande Saheb's house, 6:15 p.m.



Conversation with Shri Deshpande Saheb, professional photographer, devotee of the Parsi saint Meher Baba (1894-1969).

Shri Deshpande Saheb says:

My name is Deshpande, and it's twenty-five years that I am a Meher Baba devotee. I come from Ahmednagar. The first photo of Baba is of 1933. You know, Meher Baba is great... I am a devotee of his. He has many followers: Americans, Indians, etcetera. On January 31 there will be a big function in Meherabad,¹ near Ahmednagar.

Q Did you ever see Meher Baba?

A Yes, I saw him. I used to take photos of him. He was a very powerful man [he shows me some black and white photos of Meher Baba which he made, both in small and large formats].

Q Could you tell me what, in your opinion, is the most relevant teaching Meher Baba gave his disciples?

A Meher Baba told everybody to behave with love, *bhakti-prema*, with devotion.

Q What is the link connecting Meher Baba to Shirdi Sai Baba?

A The connection is that Sai Baba was Meher Baba's *guru*. Even Upasni Maharaj was his *guru*. The five Sadgurus were all *gurus* of Meher Baba... These were: Sai Baba, Upasni Maharaj, Babajan of Pune, Tajuddin Baba of Nagpur, and Narayan Maharaj.²

Q Could you tell me something about your personal experiences with Meher Baba?

A My daughter was very ill, and the doctor said there was no more hope to save her. Then I prayed to Meher Baba, and after an hour my daughter felt better, she was cured... This was my experience with Baba.

Q Did you live near his *ashram*?

A Yes, in Arangaon, which is very close to Meherabad.

Q How long did you live there?

A From 1970. Arangaon is close to Ahmednagar.

Q What was Meher Baba's personality like?

T He had long hair and white complexion...

Q I mean his character... did he often get angry, was he loving?

A No, no anger. Love only. Never angry, always loving toward all.

Q I know that Meher Baba kept silent for a long period of time. Could you tell me something about it?

T Meher Baba took up the vow of silence, that is *maunam*, from 1930 till his death, till the time of his *samādhi* in 1969.

Q Thus he did not speak anymore starting from 1930?

T Yes, right. He only wrote.

Q What's the significance of this period of silence?

T Meher Baba told his devotees that his *guru* had told him to do so.

¹ The *ashram* established by Meher Baba in 1923 near the village of Arangaon. For a brief sketch of Meher Baba, see Rigopoulos, *The Life and Teachings of Sai Baba of Shirdi*, 208-10. For an in-depth study on his life and teachings, see Shepherd, *Meher Baba, an Iranian Liberal*.

² On these and other perfect masters with whom Sai Baba is believed to be linked, see Satpathy, *Shirdi Sai Baba and Other Perfect Masters*.



Figure 64
Shri Deshpande Saheb,
Meher Baba's photographer

- Q Who of the five previously mentioned?
- T Upasni Maharaj.
- Q I know that Meher Baba went to America. What was his impact in the West?
- T There are Meher Baba centers in California and also in New York, I believe.

Shri Deshpande Saheb says:

There are many followers of Meher Baba in the United States.

- Q When did Baba come back to India from the States?
- T After a year...
- Q Which year?
- T He left for America in 1953 and came back to India in 1954.
- Q When he came back, where did he go?
- T He went back to Pune.
- Q How was the daily life at Meher Baba's *ashram*?
- T It started at 5 a.m. with an *ārtī* and prayer. Then, at 10:30 there was the *darshan* of Baba. Everybody wanted to ask things to Baba; people would give him letters, and he would answer them by writing back, since he didn't speak.
- Q What took place in the afternoon?

- T There were *bhajan* programs, songs... There was lots of music, and Baba himself often used to sing.
- Q Did he give a second *darshan* in the afternoon?
- T No; only once, in the morning. Baba never took any money, any *dakṣiṇā* from devotees. Many devotees made donations to Meher Baba, however, and thanks to these donations he created hospitals, and lots of *sevā* centers... He fed the poor by serving them rice. Once, about a thousand people were fed at Arangaon for several days.
- Q Thus service, *sevā*, was considered to be very important by Meher Baba?
- A Yes; *sevā* only counts.
- Q *Sevā* and love?
- A *Sevā* and love, for Meher Baba. His *ashram* is still active today.
- Q Are there many devotees of Meher Baba in India?
- A In Maharashtra there are about seventy-five thousand, and in the whole of India there are around five hundred thousand or a million followers.
- Q Now you live here in Shirdi, with Sai Baba. Do you think there exists a strong connection between Meher Baba and Shirdi Sai?
- A Yes. Sai Baba and Meher Baba are in a *guru-śiṣya* connection.
- Q *Guruparamparā*?³
- A Yes, *guruparamparā*.
- Q Thus, you perceive them as being one, the same person so to speak?
- A Yes, same...
- Q When did Meher Baba take *samādhi*?
- T He took *samādhi* in 1969.
- Q And from that year you moved here in Shirdi?
- A No. I have been living in Shirdi only since last year. Before, I was in the places where Meher Baba was.
- Q Thus, you transferred only recently?
- T Yes, recently.
- Q So you were Meher Baba's photographer?
- A Yes, I was Baba's photographer.
- Q Did he call you when he needed you?
- A Yes, yes. Baba would call me at any time, for whatever service or ritual function, out of love for the devotees... and I would take pictures. I have here about five thousand negatives of Meher Baba; lots...
- T Mister Deshpande would like to give you some photos, Mister Tony...
- Q How was Meher Baba? I mean, was he very serious or rather a joyous type of person?
- A He was peaceful, he had a peaceful mind, *saṃtoṣa*,⁴ and a smiling face.
- Q So he would not get angry at people?
- T No, he would not get angry... he loved everybody and smiled at everybody.
- Q Did he use to embrace his devotees?
- A Yes, yes. Children, old people... he would embrace them all.
- T As a sign of love.

³ Tradition or lineage of teachers.

⁴ Lit. 'contentedness'.



Figure 65 Meher Baba and Sati Godavari Mata (right) during one of her visits to Meher Baba's *ashram* (photo by Shri Deshpande Saheb)

I In Bombay I have found many books in English on Meher Baba and I know that there are many Meher Baba devotees in the United States. I hoped to have this opportunity of speaking with someone who had personally known Meher Baba, since I know that he was here in Shirdi as a disciple of Upasni Maharaj for some time. Sai Baba apparently asked him to go to Upasni Maharaj and become his *śiṣya*...

A Yes.

I He also declared himself to be an *avatāra*...

A Yes.

T You see, in his studio Mister Deshpande has a big picture of Meher Baba. Have you seen it?

Q Was he really very powerful? Did he make many miracles?

T Yes, yes. Many miracles, so Mister Deshpande says. But I haven't seen them... Deshpande Saheb says that in 1957 Meher Baba came to Sakuri and met with Godavari Mayi.⁵

Q In 1957?

T Yes.

Q Twenty-eight years ago?

T Yes [Shri Deshpande Saheb shows us the photos of that meeting].

Q [looking at other photos] Meher Baba looks quite young in these pictures. Did you make all these?

⁵ Lit. 'Mother Godavari'.



Figure 66 Meher Baba giving *darshan* to devotees (photo by Shri Deshpande Saheb)

A Yes.

Q Did Meher Baba smoke?

T No, not at all. He didn't smoke neither the *cilīm* nor cigarettes, and he didn't even chew betel nut... nothing.

Q Was he a vegetarian?

T No. He would take both vegetarian food as well as non-vegetarian. Mister Deshpande met Meher Baba the first time in 1958. Before this date, his father worked for Meher Baba.

Q Thus your whole family is linked up with Meher Baba?

A Yes.

T Even his father used to take photos of Meher Baba; he would do what Baba told him to do, particularly during ritual functions. Then, in 1958, Mister Deshpande Saheb himself started taking photographs. So he says...

I Thank you very much.

At the end of our conversation, Shri Deshpande Saheb shows me various other photos and lets me choose three to keep for myself.

