Preface

The *Shirdi Diary* of Ganesh Shrikrishna Khaparde (1854-1938), a renowned lawyer and political activist from the Berar area in eastern Maharashtra, is an invaluable primary source on the life and teachings of Sai Baba (d. 1918), offering the reader a unique opportunity to appreciate the *faqīr*'s daily routine during his final years, especially between December 1911 and March 1912. My first encounter with excerpts from the diary dates back to 1983, when I began work on my BA thesis under the guidance of Professors Franco Michelini Tocci and Mario Piantelli.[1] I came to appreciate its importance especially during a fieldwork trip to Shirdi in October 1985, when I interviewed the last surviving elders who had known Sai Baba personally. While in Shirdi, I was able to read Khaparde's *Shirdi Diary* in its entirety at the local library of the Shri Sai Baba Sansthān. All interviews with the old villagers were taped, translated into Italian, and included in the thesis as an appendix.[2] In addition to the interviews, the appendix featured a substantial excerpt from the diary – covering the period from 15 February to 13 March 1912 – which I translated into Italian.[3] From those early years, it was clear to me that the relevance of the diary as a primary source was second to none and that it deserved close study. However, when I published a revised English version of my BA thesis with the State University of New

1 I completed and defended the thesis at Ca' Foscari University of Venice in June 1987 under the title *Un maestro dell'India moderna: il Sāī Bābā di Śirḍī. L'uomo, l'ambiente, gli insegnamenti*.

2 See Rigopoulos, *Oral Testimonies on Sai Baba*; `https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mCYiz_2kiXA`.

3 This excerpt was taken from the monthly magazine *Shri Sai Leela* 64, 10 (January 1986): 5-10, and 64, 11 (February 1986): 7-13

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York Press in 1993 – *The Life and Teachings of Sai Baba of Shirdi* –[4] I was not allowed to include the interviews from my field research nor the diary, as the publisher considered the book to be already too long. Thus, I had to sacrifice the appendix and content myself with integrating only a few passages from the interviews and the diary into the main text. Over the years, a comprehensive study and commentary on the *Shirdi Diary* remained a long-cherished goal, and I am pleased to have finally dedicated myself to it.

In all, Khaparde visited Sai Baba five times: his first visit lasted a week, from 5 to 12 December 1910; his second and longest visit lasted more than three months, from 6 December 1911 to 15 March 1912; his third visit lasted three days, from 29 to 31 December 1915; his fourth visit was on 19 May 1917, in the company of his political hero Bal Gangadhar Tilak (1856-1920); his fifth and final visit took place on 19-20 March 1918 and was very short. It is important to note that Khaparde wrote his entries in English. By all standards, they are a treasure trove of information on Sai Baba's habits, behavior, and utterances – notably the cryptic parables he narrated – as well as the diverse individuals who visited him in the burgeoning pilgrimage site of Shirdi. I have sought to attend closely to Khaparde's words, immersing myself in his daily accounts: they reveal the schedule of activities that Sai Baba observed and that he required all visitors to accurately follow, from dawn to dusk.

Immersion in Khaparde's entries offers a rare glimpse into the rhythm of life surrounding Sai Baba and his devotees. With possibly the only exception of the *Shri Sai Satcharita* (*The True Life of Lord Sai*) of Govindrao Raghunath Dabholkar (1859-1929), the realism conveyed by Khaparde's *Shirdi Diary* is unmatched by any other primary source, which is precisely what makes it invaluable, a special gift for devotees and scholars alike. I encourage readers to immerse themselves in Khaparde's text by perusing one diary entry per day, along with the commentary and footnotes that accompany it. This deliberate slowness of pace will allow them to relive the experience of the saint's *darśan*, *sparśan*, and *sambhāṣaṇ* – the grace of beholding his gaze, the blessing of his touch, and the intimacy of his conversation. More than a mere historical document, Khaparde's *Shirdi Diary* functions as a form of experiential testimony. Its vivid and almost uninterrupted chronicle of daily life in Shirdi enables the reader to enter, as far as possible, into the temporal rhythm and devotional atmosphere that surrounded Sai Baba during the final years of his life. In this sense, the diary functions almost as a 'time machine', transporting us into the intimate world of the mosque, the village streets, the *vāḍā*s (guesthouses), and the gatherings of devotees. Few modern Indian saints are documented with such immediacy and continuity. Precisely because of its concreteness and attention to seemingly ordinary details, the diary preserves not only historical information but also the texture of a lived religious world.

While in Shirdi, Khaparde found accommodation in one of the few guesthouses that were available. The expenses were low, given that the cost for both accommodation and food was minimal. The diarist came to Shirdi either with one of his sons, as he did on his first visit, or together with his wife Shrimati Lakshmibai (d. 1928), one of their sons and a few friends, as he did on his second and longest visit (during his third visit, his wife and sons had preceded him and were already there). As is the case in many

4 I remain deeply grateful to Prof. Sheldon I. Pollock and William D. Eastman, former Director of SUNY Press in Albany, for their unwavering support

*ashram*s, it appears that in the village males and females, even if married, were expected to stay apart in order to avoid distractions. It is reasonable to infer that Khaparde and his wife stayed in separate guesthouses – men with men and women with women.

Khaparde's focus remains unwaveringly fixed on Sai Baba, around whom everything revolved. The diarist captures his words and silences, his shifting moods, and his every gesture. Whatever the *faqīr* did or refrained from doing was implicitly understood to possess profound meaning, since he was regarded as a *bolte calte dev*, 'a speaking and walking god'. Especially significant are the tales Sai Baba shared at the mosque (*masjid*), which Khaparde recorded with diligence. These stories linger in the mind, seizing one's attention, and yet are quite enigmatic, given that the saint never bothered to explain them and the diarist himself did not venture to offer any interpretation. In my commentary, I have centered my analysis on these narratives, since Khaparde's *Shirdi Diary* is the preeminent source documenting them over a sustained period. For each tale, I have proposed an exegesis which I hope may help illumine Sai Baba's intended meaning. While his stories were purposefully open to multiple interpretations, I trust that my endeavors in deciphering them will be received as a worthy contribution. The challenge lies, as it were, in 'entering the saint's mind', to uncover the ethical and theological principles that inspired his life. To my knowledge, this represents the first systematic and comprehensive study of Khaparde's *Shirdi Diary* ever undertaken.

Although Sai Baba is the centerpiece of the diary entries, Khaparde's record is precious because it offers a comprehensive picture of the context in which he was immersed – namely, the everyday life in Shirdi, with occasional references to births, deaths, marriages, fairs, epidemics, and festivals. It further details the community surrounding the saint, documenting the names and professions of the devotees who came and went, alongside the activities that characterized their routine. Indeed, there is no master without disciples, for the two are interdependent; Sai Baba cannot be understood in a vacuum, but only through his symbiotic relation to his followers within the rural environment of Shirdi and the broader socio-political context of colonial India. This is precisely the kind of material that Khaparde's *Shirdi Diary* preserves: a chronicle – though at times seemingly dry – of the events unfolding around him. Therefore, in my commentary, I have examined each entry in its entirety, seeking to analyze the significance of every detail Khaparde noted, however secondary they might at first appear. Since he chose to record them, I have proceeded on the assumption of their relevance, making every effort to ensure no detail was overlooked.

In order to enter deeply into the diary, one must first get to know its author. For this reason, the book offers a comprehensive portrait of G.S. Khaparde. To fully appreciate the *Shirdi Diary* one needs to delve into the author's biography and historically contextualize his figure within the colonial era in which he lived. I have endeavored to present an all-round, comprehensive portrait of Khaparde, highlighting his social milieu and upbringing, his wide-ranging learning – he knew Sanskrit well and had a gift for languages – and strong religious inclinations, his professional stature as a lawyer and, most importantly, his untiring political activism at both a regional and national level as the principal aide to B.G. Tilak, popularly known as the Lokamanya, one of the earliest and strongest advocates of *svarāj* or self-rule in the Indian independence movement. There is no doubt that in the 1910s Khaparde

was among the most highly educated of Sai Baba's devotees as well as one of the most prominent political figures, not only within the Marāṭhī-speaking area but nationwide. In the diary, one senses the high regard that villagers and devotees alike had for him and that Sai Baba himself manifested when he interacted with him. Khaparde was animated by a profound religious and political passion and these two dimensions were inextricable and constitutive of his character. In this regard, it is important to underline that Khaparde was never communal in his political ideas and actions but strove to achieve harmony between Hindus and Muslims. Sai Baba's persona and integrative spirituality must have confirmed him in his non-communalism, though this appears to have been a characteristic of his even prior to meeting with the Shirdi *faqīr*.

In the Introduction, I delineate Sai Baba's figure and focus on his practice of sharing short tales and parables (*goṣṭ*ies) particularly during the latter part of his life. The *faqīr* did not teach through formal sermons or public discourses; instead, he communicated through captivating narratives. His words held devotees in rapt attention, fostering an atmosphere of fraternity within the mosque. My aim is to highlight the primary characteristics of these tales, concentrating on their intended purpose and the layers of meaning that shifted according to the recipient's receptivity. By situating these narratives within their cultural and religious context, I seek to uncover Sai Baba's deeper intentions beyond the communal joy of storytelling. I also offer broader comparative reflections on the genres of allegory and parable, drawing parallels with the Gospel parables of Jesus, familiar to both Indian and Western readers.

Chapter 1 focuses on the figure of G.S. Khaparde, delineating the essential features of his biography. I highlight his distinguished education and brilliant personality, his success as a leading attorney in Amravati, and, most importantly, his lifelong commitment to the political ideals of B.G. Tilak. This activism led him to hold increasingly prominent national positions and to make significant personal sacrifices for the Nationalist cause. His political fervor coexisted with a deep religious sentiment, which eventually led him and his wife, Lakshmibai, to become devotees of Gajanan Maharaj (d. 1910) of Shegaon in Buldhana district. It was reportedly Gajanan Maharaj who, shortly before his passing, directed them to Shirdi to find solace at the feet of Sai Baba. From the 1870s onward, Khaparde maintained a daily diary in English, typically recording a full page of foolscap before retiring each night. While the earliest years are lost, the series is complete from 1894. Even amidst political turmoil, Khaparde wrote with remarkable detachment, adopting the perspective of an objective observer. This intellectual discipline underpins the *Shirdi Diary*, first published in the *Shri Sai Leela* magazine (1924-25). I conclude by reviewing Khaparde's writing style and offering general observations on the value of diaries as primary historical sources.

In chapter 2, I present Khaparde's first visit to Sai Baba: following Gajanan Maharaj's words, he came to Shirdi for a week, from 5 to 12 December 1910, together with his son Balkrishna (1882-1968). He was 56 years old, while his son was 28. Though it was a short visit, it was a memorable one given that he had his first *darśan* of the saint and his first encounter with the people of Shirdi and the routine of the village. I offer a survey of the circumstances that preceded his coming to Shirdi and the dangerous political situation in which Khaparde found himself, he being constantly monitored by the British Criminal Investigation Department.

Khaparde had just returned to India in November after spending two years in England to try all legal and diplomatic options in order to free Tilak, who in July 1908 had been sentenced to six years in prison and sent to Mandalay jail in Burma. Khaparde's efforts, however, were all in vain. On his return from England, he visited his leader in Mandalay jail to offer support and plan their next moves. Khaparde's first visit to Shirdi was quite eventful and I provide a detailed commentary on each of the diarist's entries. During this week, he recorded ten stories and sayings of Sai Baba.

Chapter 3 is dedicated to Khaparde's second and longest stay in Shirdi, from 6 December 1911 to 15 March 1912. It presents the critical situation in which Khaparde found himself at this crucial juncture, politically as well as economically, given that his arrest by the British appeared to be imminent. It seems that his intention, when he reached Shirdi together with his wife Lakshmibai, his son Balvant, his friend K.J. Bhishma and one Mr. Bandu from Elichpur, was to stay there for no more than one or two weeks. Given the hard times he was facing and his many political and professional responsibilities, he looked forward to being in the proximity of the saint so as to regain strength and obtain Sai Baba's blessings. Little did he know that the *faqīr* would 'detain' him in Shirdi for more than three months, refusing him permission to leave on many occasions despite Khaparde's and his entourage's insistence. Indeed, the unwritten rule was that all devotees had to seek the saint's approval if they wished to leave Shirdi and only when the saint granted it could they safely depart. The general belief is that Sai Baba knew that Khaparde would have been arrested and prosecuted had he gone back to Amravati and therefore, in order to protect his devotee, forced him to remain in Shirdi. Khaparde accepted Sai Baba's will and thereby learned a lesson in faith and patience, *niṣṭhā* and *saburī*, the fundamental couplet that the *faqīr* required of all his followers. This second and longest stay in Shirdi is the most precious, since the diarist's entries are especially rich in detail. I have endeavored to analyze Khaparde's words with utmost care, highlighting the relevance of the main occurrences he describes within the context of Shirdi as a place of pilgrimage, while focusing on the saint's deeds and utterances alongside Khaparde's response to them. As a whole, during his hundred days in Shirdi the diarist recorded a total of thirty-eight stories and sayings of Sai Baba.

Chapter 4 examines Khaparde's third visit to Shirdi, a short stay between 29 and 31 December 1915. His wife and sons had preceded him and were already there. As always, the commentary is introduced by a survey of what was the diarist's predicament between 1912 and 1915, i.e., between his returning to Amravati after his long stay in Shirdi in March 1912 and his returning to Shirdi at the end of 1915. By now the political situation had improved and the chance of Khaparde being arrested was low. The future appeared to be promising for both him and the Nationalists, especially after Tilak had been released from prison in June 1914. During the course of 1915, while World War I was raging, the opposition of the Indian National Congress towards the Nationalists diminished significantly, leading Tilak and his supporters to rejoin the party the following year. By then, the main political issue at stake for the Nationalists was the establishment of a Home Rule League. In December 1915, nearly four years had passed since Khaparde's last visit to Shirdi, and the diarist didn't fail to notice how Sai Baba's health was fast declining.

In chapter 5, I analyze Khaparde's fourth visit to Sai Baba along with Tilak and his entourage, which took place on 19 May 1917, during the height of the Home Rule movement. Khaparde must have thought that it would be auspicious to take the Lokamanya to Shirdi and obtain the saint's blessing for the Nationalists' cause. After reviewing the major political events that took place in 1916 and in the first months of 1917 – the Home Rule League campaign witnessed an unprecedented peak of popularity for both Khaparde and Tilak, especially in Maharashtra – I offer an extended commentary of the diarist's entry of that day comparing it with that of Narasimha Chintaman Kelkar (1872-1947), a close associate of Tilak. He was also an eyewitness to the events, being part of Tilak's entourage, and wrote about it in his biography on the Lokamanya. Moreover, I take into account the testimony of other eyewitnesses, among whom was the philosopher and poet Shuddhananda Bharati (1897-1990). Unfortunately, nothing is known of Tilak's own impressions about Sai Baba. Shuddhananda Bharati is the only one to report Tilak's purported opinion: "He is a Saint for all, who speaks not from books but from the soul".

Chapter 6 focuses on Khaparde's fifth and last visit to Shirdi on 19-20 March 1918, just seven months before Sai Baba's death. This sojourn was brief and is documented in the Marāṭhī biography *Śrī Dādāsāheb Khāparḍe yāñce caritra*, written in 1962 by Khaparde's eldest son Balkrishna. Besides seeking the *faqīr*'s *darśan* and blessings, he possibly asked his advice on the issue of his going to England with the Congress deputation for demanding Home Rule. Between May 1917 and March 1918, Khaparde was involved in intense political activity aimed at promoting the Home Rule League and the Nationalists' cause. In his diary, Khaparde mentions Sankaran Nair (1857-1934) – a jurist, statesman, and member of the Viceroy's Executive Council – who had asked him to convey some questions to Sai Baba on his behalf. Apparently, it was during this last visit that Khaparde was instructed by the saint not to accept any further political positions. I bring the chapter to a close by reviewing the main events that characterized Khaparde's political engagement during 1918 and by addressing the circumstances of Sai Baba's death on 15 October 1918.

Finally, in the Epilogue, I offer an overview of the last years of Khaparde's life, which were marked by the decline of the Tilakites and the rise of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869-1948) as the uncontested leader of the Congress. The year 1920, which saw Tilak's death on 1 August, marked a turning point in Indian history, acting as the transition from the era of assertive nationalism to the Gandhian era of mass non-cooperation. Politically, this marked the beginning of Khaparde's decline, and on 20 July 1928 he suffered another major blow with the death of his dear wife Lakshmibai. During the decade 1918-28, Khaparde lost his major points of reference: his spiritual master, his political leader, and his wife. During the last ten years of his life, from 1928 to 1938, he withdrew from active politics though he continued to follow its national and regional developments. Khaparde remained pessimistic about the future, seeing little hope for the country's *svarāj*. He realized that for him, too, time was running short, and that he needed to concentrate on his own *sādhanā*, just as Sai Baba had exhorted him to do. Therefore, in the final phase of his life Khaparde gave priority to prayer and meditation. He peacefully passed away in Amravati on 1 July 1938. I bring the book to a close by highlighting Khaparde's spirit of tolerance. This disposition reflected his master's legacy. Just as Sai Baba

stood for an integrative spirituality that advocated the oneness of God and universal brotherhood, so too Khaparde was opposed to communalism and sectarian divisions. In an era increasingly defined by fragmentation and religious exclusivism, Khaparde's life remains a powerful testament to the possibility of reconciling devout faith with a pluralistic vision.