Introduction

Sai Baba of Shirdi (d. 15 Oct. 1918), now one of the most popular saints in India, with hundreds of temples dedicated to him in Maharashtra and throughout the subcontinent – and even worldwide in the Hindu diaspora – was an eclectic Sufi ascetic, a *faqīr* (lit. 'poor'), part and parcel of the integrative cultural landscape of the Deccan.[1] His early life is shrouded in uncertainty; no historical evidence is available concerning the time and place of his birth, the identity of his parents, or his religious upbringing and training. He is said to have first appeared in the village of Shirdi, located in the Ahmednagar district of Maharashtra, at age 16, dressed in the white garb of a *faqīr*.[2] Even his actual name is unknown, since Sai Baba is an appellation that was attached to him by local people. When he was young he was simply addressed as Sai (*sāī*), a term of Persian origin often attributed to Muslim ascetics, meaning 'holy one'. The epithet Baba (*bābā*), a common term ascribed to respected seniors and holy men, meaning 'father', was added later on.[3]

He read no books and never wrote a single word, preached no sermons, and delivered no public discourses.[4] He often remained silent, and such non-verbal communication with his devotees – his silent *darśan*, coupled

1 On Shirdi Sai Baba, see Rigopoulos, *Life and Teachings*; Rigopoulos, "Shirdi Sai Baba", 641-50. For more recent perspectives, see Satpathy, *An Inspiring Life*; Srinivas, Jeychandran, Roberts, *Devotional Spaces*. On the village of Shirdi, see Williams, *Experiencing Sai Baba's Shirdi*; Kakarya, *Shirdi Within & Beyond*.

2 It should be noted that Sai Baba explicitly identified himself as a *faqīr*. On the broader figure of the *faqīr* in colonial South Asia, see Green, "The Faqir and the Subalterns", 57-84, esp. 60-5, for a comparative perspective that may illuminate Sai Baba's position.

3 On the various speculations concerning Sai Baba's early years, see Rigopoulos, "Connections and Correspondences", 125-57, esp. 130-40.

4 See Chitluri, *Baba's Rinanubandh*, 38.

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with his signs and gestures, penetrating glances, and smiles – was thought to transmit the highest spiritual instruction, from heart to heart, and bring about a person's transformation.[5] He never preached any doctrine since what was crucial for him was to communicate the reality of God, his omnipresence and boundless love. His oral instructions were brief and direct, attuned with one's receptivity.[6] Apparently, whereas in the beginning he used to speak plainly to devotees, when his fame started expanding and more people flocked to Shirdi he resorted to talking in parables.

Sai Baba's entire life may be understood as a parable of God's love and mercy. Thus his purported miracles,[7] which are the main reason for his extraordinary fame, are a parable of God's compassion for the sick and the suffering. In particular, the sources report that in the last part of his life he was fond of telling short, allegorical stories (*goṣṭ*) to the people who, thrice a day,[8] gathered at his *darbār*, the 'royal court' which he held in the dilapidated mosque (*masjid*) where he resided.[9] We read: "[Sai Baba] gave advice in the form of (by narrating) stories".[10] Unfortunately, there are no extant sources of Sai Baba's parables in the language he actually spoke, i.e., Marāṭhī or Deccani Urdu.[11] Although he taught through his whole persona – his life being his primary message – the significance of his *goṣṭ*ies remains undeniable; indeed, this mode of communication became one of his principal means of engaging with his followers.

This study argues that Sai Baba's *goṣṭ*ies were not merely anecdotal or hagiographical embellishments, but constituted a deliberate and distinctive mode of spiritual instruction. These narratives operated within a dynamic pedagogical framework in which meaning was context-dependent, addressed to particular individuals while remaining open to multiple layers of interpretation. At once enigmatic and pragmatic, they engaged the listener's interpretive effort, thereby transforming understanding into lived experience. By examining these tales primarily through the lens of Khaparde's diary – one of the most immediate and detailed records of Sai Baba's daily interactions – this work seeks to elucidate their narrative structure and pedagogical intent, showing how they mediated between personal guidance, symbolic expression, and broader religious discourse.

Madhav Vittal Kamath and Vishwas Bal Kher have estimated that Sai Baba "began to speak in parables and symbology from 1910 as the number of his visitors began to grow in volume".[12] According to Bapu Rao N. Chandorkar, son of the saint's prominent devotee Narayan Govind

5 See Rigopoulos, *Life and Teachings*, 353-5.

6 For a sample of Sai Baba's essential teachings, see Dabholkar, *Shri Sai Satcharita*, 734-6 (chap. 44, vv. 147-72).

7 For an overview, see Satpathy, *An Inspiring Life*, 157-73. The miraculous constitutes a central dimension of the *faqīr*'s life, comparable in certain respects to the miracle traditions of Jesus in the Gospels; see Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, 2. On miracles more generally, see also Aguti, *Il miracolo*.

8 See Pradhan, *Shri Sai Baba of Shirdi*, 50. On Sai Baba's daily routine, see also Satpathy, *An Inspiring Life*, 108-17; Chitluri, *Baba's Vaani*, 98-9.

9 On the saint's *darbār*, see Satpathy, *An Inspiring Life*, 121-8.

10 Pradhan, *Shri Sai Baba of Shirdi*, 49.

11 Nonetheless, Govindrao Raghunath Dabholkar's *Shri Sai Satcharita* approximates the words actually spoken by Sai Baba.

12 Kamath, Kher, *Sai Baba of Shirdi*, 9.

(Nanasaheb) Chandorkar,[13] he would have developed this habit of telling short, puzzling tales some years before: "After 1902, Baba began use of mystifying parables or symbology etc. […] We were all concerned with Baba's *chamatkaras* [= miracles], prophecies, *goshties* (i.e.) moral talks, etc. and we did not mind about philosophy at all".[14]

The Chitpavan Brahmin Narayan Dattatreya Sahasrabuddhe alias Das Ganu (1868-1962),[15] a noted performer of song-sermons (*kīrtankār*) who first met Sai Baba in 1892 and along with Chandorkar was instrumental in spreading the saint's fame in Western India,[16] states that "Baba spoke thousands of '*goshties*'. […] I found that the numerous *goshties* I had heard from Baba furnished me with fresh analogies and similes to embellish my commentary [on the *Amṛtānubhava*][17] and avoid a repetition of the stock similes".[18] Govindrao Raghunath Dabholkar (1859-1929), author of the Marāṭhī *Shri Sai Satcharita* (*Śrī Sāī Saccarita*) or 'The True Life of Lord Sai' – which Hindus regard as the most authoritative text (*pothī*) of the saint's life and deeds[19] – confirms Das Ganu's statement: "Though outwardly he [= Sai Baba] held a splendid *durbar* [royal court] regularly and related a thousand and one stories, yet inwardly he was committed to silence".[20] Even Amidas Bhavani Mehta, who was an eyewitness to many of the saint's utterances and miracles, writes:

> Baba mostly imparts His teachings through storytelling. However, only a few among those who sit near Him can grasp the true essence, according to their own understanding. If one were to compile Baba's stories and the invaluable lessons derived from them, it would be immensely beneficial not only to Baba's devotees but also to the public. There is no doubt about

13 He first met Sai Baba in 1891 and played a key role in introducing influential figures to Shirdi; see Pradhan, *Shri Sai Baba of Shirdi*, 41-3. Among those he brought were G.R. Dabholkar and H.S. Dixit. Chandorkar recognized Sai Baba as a "self-realized Muslim saint" (Chitluri, *Baba's Vaani*, 70). Sai Baba himself referred to their "*rinanubandhic* ties for six generations", i.e., karmic bonds extending across past lives (Chitluri, *Baba's Vaani*, 156). On their relationship, see also Chitluri, *Baba's Rinanubandh*, 17-19.

14 Narasimhaswami, *Devotees' Experiences*, 249. Bapu Rao N. Chandorkar rendered his testimony in September 1936.

15 A few songs of his are famous, being sung daily in Shirdi during ritual ceremonies (*ārtīs*): *Sai raham nazar karna*; *Raham nazar karo ab more Sai*; *Shirdi majhe Pandharpur Sai Baba Ramavar*. On Das Ganu, see McLain, *The Afterlife of Sai Baba: Competing Visions of a Global Saint*, 54-90; Shepherd, *Biographical Investigation*, 221-6; Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba*, 2: 122-54; `http://saiamrithadhara.com/mahabhakthas/das_ganu.html`.

16 It was Chandorkar who first brought Das Ganu to Shirdi. There is no doubt that Das Ganu played a major role in popularizing Sai Baba's cult, especially from 1910 onwards; see Dabholkar, *Shri Sai Satcharita*, 240 (chap. 15, vv. 33-6), 422-3 (chap. 26, vv. 59, 64), 635 (chap. 38, vv. 107-8).

17 A philosophical work of the Maharashtrian poet-saint Jñāndev (d. 1296), the originator of the Vārkarī tradition (*sampradāya*), which celebrates the essential unity of the individual soul (*jīva*) with the Absolute (Śiva).

18 Narasimhaswami, *Devotees' Experiences*, 143. Das Ganu was interviewed in June 1936. On one occasion, Sai Baba resolved Das Ganu's doubts concerning the opening verse of the *Īśā Upaniṣad*, on which he intended to write a commentary, through what may aptly be described as an extraordinary 'parable in action': the song of an eight-year-old maidservant of the Kunabi caste at the home of the devotee Hari Sitaram Dixit in Vile Parle; see Dabholkar, *Shri Sai Satcharita*, 324-36 (chap. 20).

19 He wrote the book while the saint was still alive, having obtained his permission and blessings. For a recent addendum to it, see Chitluri, *Sai Satcharita Commentaries*.

20 Dabholkar, *Shri Sai Satcharita*, 59 (chap. 4, v. 52).

> this. Baba narrates tales not just about saints and holy figures from the last hundred to two hundred years, but also from five to ten thousand years ago, using the stories as teachings. This implies that Baba dedicates all His time to the well-being of the devotees who come to His holy feet.[21]

In order to evaluate Sai Baba's words, the daily diary kept by G.S. Khaparde – especially during his second visit to Shirdi, which lasted more than three months from 6 December 1911 to 15 March 1912 – is an invaluable source of information. It allows one to monitor the saint's daily routine over an extended period. In the diary, one can appreciate Sai Baba's habit of narrating a variety of tales in a time continuum, offering unique insights into the ways he conveyed his teachings and the context in which he uttered them. In several cases, Khaparde even documents the reactions his words elicited among those present during the gatherings inside the *masjid*.

This study deliberately follows Khaparde's diary in its entirety, including entries that may at first appear uneventful. Such passages are not devoid of significance: they help reconstruct the rhythm, routine, and lived texture of an extended stay in Sai Baba's presence. The apparent monotony of daily life in Shirdi – its repeated *ārtī*s, *darśan*s, conversations, silences, delays, illnesses, visits, and devotional practices – forms the necessary background against which the more striking episodes acquire their full meaning. Routine, in this sense, is itself a form of evidence.

During his life, Sai Baba likely told hundreds – and perhaps well over a thousand – of short tales and parables, and he appears to have developed this habit when his popularity started growing, i.e., from around 1902 onwards, when his fame as a miracle worker attracted to Shirdi increasing numbers of visitors. Prof. Ganpatrao G. Narke writes that even in March 1918, just seven months before his passing away, Sai Baba "narrated many parables and stories. Most of the stories were about Namdev and Kabir".[22] If one tentatively assumes that, at least starting from 1910, Sai Baba told an average of two tales per week – a conservative estimate –[23] the number of these narratives would amount to more than 900. If we date this habit back to 1902 – which appears probable according to the testimony of Nanasaheb Chandorkar's son – the total number of his short narratives would rise to around 1,740. Even if only approximate, these figures remain significant and testify to the importance that the saint attached to this peculiar mode

21 Mehta, *Purna Parabrahma*, 101-2. The book was originally written in Gujarātī and published in August 1918, when Sai Baba was still alive. Even Dabholkar mentions Mehta's work; see Dabholkar, *Shri Sai Satcharita*, 19 (chap. 2, v. 31).

22 Chitluri, *Baba's Vaani*, 19. Nāmdev (trad. 1270-1350), a Maharashtrian tailor-saint of the Vārkarī tradition, and Kabīr (d. 1518), a north Indian Muslim weaver and exponent of *nirguṇabhakti*, i.e., devotion to a God without attributes, are among the most prominent poet-saints associated with Sai Baba's narrative repertoire. On Muslim poet-saints in the Marāṭhī cultural sphere, see Kulkarnee, "Maharashtra and Muslim Saint-Poets", 198-231; Wagle, "Hindu-Muslim Interactions", 51-66.

23 During his first visit (5-12 December 1910), Khaparde recorded ten stories. During his longer stay (6 December 1911-15 March 1912), he documented thirty-nine stories and sayings, averaging approximately 2.8 per week. These figures likely underestimate the total, as Khaparde could not have recorded all utterances and may have omitted particularly obscure or aphoristic ones.

of communication: through it, he conveyed his instruction (*upadeśa*)[24] and revealed his perceived omniscience (*antarajñāna*)[25] in a memorable and distinctive fashion. As his biographer Dabholkar states: "Maharaj's ways were most unusual and his manner of instructing was interesting enough to remain in the memory. I have no experience of having seen or heard anything like this, anywhere else".[26] Moreover: "Baba's speech was captivating: his style of instructing was most remarkable".[27]

Unfortunately, relatively few of these stories have been preserved in the sources. Of these, Ganesh Shrikrishna Khaparde's *Shirdi Diary* is arguably the most valuable, since it records forty-nine of the saint's tales and sayings.[28] Khaparde's diary is precious above all because it allows us to effectively monitor the saint's daily routine, his most significant utterances and deeds, over an extended period of time: more than three months during his longer stay in Shirdi. Sai Baba's other tales are scattered throughout the extant sources and most importantly in Govindrao Raghunath Dabholkar's *Shri Sai Satcharita*. It is difficult to determine their exact number. More numerous are narratives in which the saint offers apparently autobiographical details and illustrates his *antarajñāna* with regard to people, animals and even objects. Typically, these stories are deeply imbued with symbolism. Any attempt to determine the total number of Sai Baba's tales, sayings, autobiographical utterances, and episodes illustrative of his *antarajñāna* necessarily remains highly tentative, not least because the boundaries between these categories are often fluid.[29] Strictly defined parables are relatively few,[30] whereas episodes involving revelations of *antarajñāna* are far more numerous and difficult to classify systematically. Even so, if one cautiously assumes that roughly one hundred and fifty such narratives and utterances may be gathered from the *Shri Sai Satcharita* and other extant

24 Often, Sai Baba and Nanasaheb Chandorkar had long conversations on various subjects and the latter called these conversations "Baba's *updesh*"; see Chitluri, *Baba's Vaani*, 22.

25 Lit. 'inward knowledge'. Nanasaheb Chandorkar was convinced that Sai Baba had mastery over Sanskrit; see Pradhan, *Shri Sai Baba of Shirdi*, 42. On Sai Baba's reputed knowledge of Sanskrit and his interpretation of *Bhagavadgītā* 4.34, see Rigopoulos, "Silenzio, gesto, parola", 255-85. Reportedly, the saint recited verses of the *Bhagavadgītā* (4.36; 9.30) before Mukunda Lele Shastri, a Brahmin scholar: when interviewed by Narasimhaswami in June 1936, Shastri unhesitatingly told him that Sai Baba "knew Sanskrit"; Narasimhaswami, *Devotees' Experiences*, 219. For additional testimonies, see Narasimhaswami, *Charters and Sayings*, 167; Dabholkar, *Shri Sai Satcharita*, 438-44 (chap. 27, vv. 72-130).

26 Dabholkar, *Shri Sai Satcharita*, 393 (chap. 24, v. 32).

27 Dabholkar, *Shri Sai Satcharita*, 337 (chap. 21, v. 4).

28 It should be noted that, in the case of two tales, Khaparde furnishes no details, while for two episodes illustrative of Sai Baba's *antarajñāna* he likewise provides no particulars. An additional short parable of Sai Baba is recorded in Khaparde's diary entry of 17 January 1911 – which does not form part of the *Shirdi Diary* proper – thereby bringing the total number to fifty.

29 The categories employed here are necessarily fluid. Sai Baba's 'tales', 'parables', '*goṣṭ*ies', autobiographical utterances, and accounts illustrative of his *antarajñāna* often overlap and resist rigid classification.

30 See Chitluri, *Baba's Vaani*, 115-16, 131-5; Chitluri, *Baba's Rinanubandh*, 32-4; Narasimhaswami, *Charters and Sayings*, 275-6.

sources,[31] in addition to the forty-nine preserved in Khaparde's diary, the resulting corpus would reach about two hundred. This amounts to only about 22% of the estimated total since 1910, or 11.5% if one counts from 1902, leading to the sobering conclusion that the overwhelming majority of Sai Baba's spoken narratives and revelatory utterances have almost certainly been lost.

The *Shri Sai Satcharita*, along with the broader literature on the saint, is keen to emphasize the utmost importance of these tales, of each and every word that Sai Baba uttered during his daily meetings with his devotees. As Dabholkar points out:

> Many were the tales of wisdom that Baba narrated […]. If I were to make a complete collection of these, it would become Sai Baba's '*Gatha*' (sacred poetic composition). […] Listening to these tales, which came straight from Baba's mouth, the devotees will become oblivious of their physical sufferings and as they meditate upon them constantly, they will be liberated automatically from the ties of worldly life. The words that came out of Sai's mouth are as sweet as nectar. How can I describe their beauty and charm? Listening to them, the heart will be filled with supreme bliss. […] The most remarkable style of presentation of these stories, as also the ingenious use of every word and phrase, holds the audience enthralled, bringing joy to one and all.[32]

Given the preciousness to devotees of these *goṣṭ*ies – "that even the Goddess of Speech would not have ventured to utter"[33] – Dabholkar remarks that the "stories coming out of the *guru*'s mouth should be listened to, and his inscrutable *leela*s experienced. And as many of them as can be remembered, should be collected together and narrated to others".[34] Significantly, on this issue the *Shri Sai Satcharita* quotes the very words of Sai Baba himself:

> "He who looks up to me single-mindedly, narrates and listens to my Self-purifying tales and is devoted to none other but me, his mind will become one with God". He kept on telling everyone: "Take my name; surrender to me". But to know who he was, he exhorted the devotees to listen to and contemplate on his stories.[35]

Moreover:

> Sometimes Baba used to narrate brief stories and even as the listener tried to store them in his ears, he would say: "Get up; go to the *wada*

31 Mention must be made of the *Shri Sainathprabha*, the first exclusive magazine on Sai Baba that was published between 1916 and 1919. Herein, one finds "several interesting facts like the daily routine and lifestyle of Shirdi Sai […] Shirdi Sai's mystic and unintelligible utterings as well as the parables and stories narrated by him"; Satpathy, *An Inspiring Life*, 264. Most of these stories and utterances, however, are included in the *Shri Sai Satcharita*; see *ibid*., 268-9.

32 Dabholkar, *Shri Sai Satcharita*, 21 (chap. 2, vv. 53, 55-6, 58).

33 Dabholkar, *Shri Sai Satcharita*, 156 (chap. 10, v. 88).

34 Dabholkar, *Shri Sai Satcharita*, 278 (chap. 17, v. 118). On the *guru* and his essential role in leading the disciple toward the experience of the divine, see Rigopoulos, "*Guru*, Hinduism", 1-8; Rigopoulos, *Guru*.

35 Dabholkar, *Shri Sai Satcharita*, 319 (chap. 19, vv. 219-20).

> [= a lodging for visitors] for the *pothi* [= holy text]". As the trusting devotee went to listen to the *pothi*, the story in the *pothi* would turn out to be such as would only confirm what he had heard from Baba, earlier, and its significance would be understood better and more fully. To his great amazement, *Jnaneshvari* of Jnaneshvar or the verses of Eknath only reiterated the story that Baba had narrated.[36]

The tales that the Shirdi saint told would typically appear obscure and puzzling to his audience, despite the fact that when he "narrated various stories with profound significance, the listeners used to be totally engrossed, forgetting even hunger and thirst".[37] Here, enigma and wisdom are strictly intertwined; only the person who is able to solve the puzzle is a true sage. Enigmatic speech is a challenge to which the master subjects his disciples. Wisdom hides itself and can never be obtained easily; humans must struggle with the enigma until they grasp it, since its unravelling is thought to be the only way to salvation. Indeed, solving the enigma is a matter of life or death, which is why this kind of speech is valued as the most important form of communication. As with Jesus' parables,[38] the truths these stories hold are too essential and profound to be conveyed in a simpler way. A keen effort is required to grasp the precious pearl of their wisdom. Analogously, Sai Baba's enigmatic *goṣṭ*ies were difficult to penetrate, and he himself did not care to explain them, thus forcing his listeners to reflect upon them over and over in an effort to unveil their meaning. The saint's behavior was truly unpredictable, as Dabholkar aptly summarizes:

> Sometimes, to hold a resolute silence would itself be his discourse on the *Brahman* […]. Sometimes, his utterances would be pregnant with profound meaning; sometimes he would talk jestingly in a light, humorous vein. Sometimes he would leave aside his usual cryptic speech and feign anger. Sometimes, implied and suggestive; sometimes to be known by discrimination and sometimes open and determined – such were his different ways of giving instructions to different people. Beyond the power of the mind, intellect and speech was the behavior of Sai Samarth. And his actions were simply beyond one's imagination, difficult to comprehend and quite unexpected. Long as one may gaze into his face, one's desire knew no satiety; conversing with him, a longing grew for more and more; listening to his words, left behind a craving for it to continue. And the joy it brought could hardly be contained in the heart.[39]

Concerning the difficulty or utter impossibility of understanding his symbolic parlance, no matter how hard one tried to unravel its meaning,

36 Dabholkar, *Shri Sai Satcharita*, 293 (chap. 18, vv. 103-5).

37 Dabholkar, *Shri Sai Satcharita*, 856 (chap. 52, v. 6).

38 The occasional comparison between Sai Baba's narratives and the parables attributed to Jesus is intended as a hermeneutic aid and comparative point of reference. Since many readers are more familiar with the Gospel tradition than with Marāṭhī hagiographic literature, such parallels may serve as useful bridges of intelligibility. Moreover, Jesus has long occupied an important place within Islāmic and especially Sufi traditions as a figure of sanctity and spiritual wisdom.

39 Dabholkar, *Shri Sai Satcharita*, 353 (chap. 22, vv. 31-5).

and the inevitable frustration that followed, the testimony of Justice M.B. Rege deserves notice:

> Sai Baba occasionally talked in mystic language and used parables freely – which, however, were construed in widely different ways by different listeners. Once he talked to me in the mystic way and asked me whether I understood him. I said "No". Others were present then. After they left, I told him that I did not grasp mystic utterances and that if he intended that I should grasp anything he should speak to me in plain terms. After that he spoke to me only in plain words and not in parables.[40]

For those few with ears to hear,[41] however, Sai Baba's allegorical stories spoke to their hearts. Their ability to listen proved the purity of their intention, which itself was understood as a gift of grace. Moreover, Dabholkar highlights how the saint's utterances, despite their obscurity, had a profound impact on all listeners and were destined to achieve their goal, since he or she would eventually come to realize their import:

> In expression, very brief and aphoristic, but in the gravity of their meaning, most profound; wide and comprehensive in their application, and yet, equally compressed – such were Baba's words, which were very deep in significance and substance; and so perfectly well-balanced and precious – they were never meaningless or in vain![42]

> So, the words of a saint should be carefully stored in the ears, word for word. Never dishonor or reject them, as if the saints are saying just anything. In the beginning, however nonsensical or obscure they may appear to be, their significance is understood as times goes by.[43]

Several contemporaries of Sai Baba have pointed out that his stories were often not told as general instruction – to be grasped and treasured by everyone – but were specifically tailored for particular individuals. While it is believed that all those present would benefit from hearing his utterances, interpreting them in their own way, only the person for whom the *bodha paddhati* (his method of instruction) was expressly meant would truly understand it.[44] Consequently, it is said that those for whom his narratives were not intended would be incapable of even retaining his words. Along these lines, in 1933 Rao Bahadur M.W. Pradhan noted:

> At times he gave advice through stories, which stories used to solve the different questions and anxieties of the different *bhakta*s [= devotees], without the *bhakta*s having to utter a single word. […] And there was such

40 Narasimhaswami, *Devotees' Experiences*, 1. He interviewed Justice M.B. Rege in June 1936. See also Chitluri, *Baba's Vaani*, 120.

41 As Jesus states in *Luke* 8:8: "If you have ears to hear, then hear" (*The New English Bible: New Testament*, 110). See also *Matthew* 11:15.

42 Dabholkar, *Shri Sai Satcharita*, 198 (chap. 13, vv. 1-2).

43 Dabholkar, *Shri Sai Satcharita*, 725 (chap. 44, vv. 41-2). See also *ibid*., 732 (chap. 44, vv. 132-3), 748-9 (chap. 45, vv. 114-23).

44 See Chitluri, *Baba's Vaani*, 131; Chitluri, *Baba's Rinanubandh*, 33.

> a unique way of narrating a story that sometimes one story used to create different impressions on the minds of different *bhakta*s, and those for whom it was not meant would invariably not understand it or follow it, or miss it. But it would go straight home to those for whom it was meant and restore calm and contentment within their ruffled and distracted minds.[45]

Although Sai Baba did not usually care to explain his *goṣṭ*ies, when he wanted a particular person to grasp them, he would convey their meaning in indirect, even bizarre ways. The sources report that he would send the devotee to another follower – often a simple villager accustomed to his symbolic parlance – who could clarify the story's meaning. Alternatively, he would ask for a certain sum as *dakṣiṇā* (a 'sacrificial fee'); typically, this was a small amount where the numerical symbolism of the coins – easier to decipher as it followed a more or less regular pattern – would allow the individual to finally unlock the spiritual content of his tale. We read:

> Baba had a unique and delightful way of imparting *jnana* or knowledge. Sometimes he sent a devotee to an illiterate person, at other times he sent the devotee to get *dakshina* of a specific amount from another devotee. That specific amount carried a deeper meaning.[46]

In many cases, the stories that Sai Baba told were not to be construed as allegories but as the account of something that had actually happened to one of the persons who stood in front of him. By addressing that particular individual, he would reveal to him/her his omniscience and all-pervasiveness, confirming his or her faith in him.[47] At times, Sai Baba would narrate these accounts in the presence of the person involved, addressing them not directly to that individual but to someone else who was entirely unaware of the matter and would be puzzled by its meaning. Eventually, the protagonist of the story would recognize themselves in the events narrated by the saint, who would thereby offer an even more striking demonstration of his *antaraj̃ña*.[48]

When the intention behind Sai Baba's storytelling was to demonstrate his omniscience, he would often speak in the first person, saying "I did this and that", when in fact he was not referring to himself but to the specific person for whom the story was intended. Indeed, it was that individual who had acted in such a way, leaving the rest of the audience to wonder at his words and puzzle over their meaning. By speaking in the first person, the saint was concretely proving the non-separateness between himself and all beings, effectively conveying the lesson of nonduality. Dabholkar writes: "All his utterances were in the first person, but were always about another person. And those who observed him closely, invariably had this experience".[49]

45 Pradhan, *Shri Sai Baba of Shirdi*, 50-1. See also Chitluri, "A Tribute to Tosher. Sai Baba's Mahabhaktas", `https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nHE7a1ZMDuc` (minute 3:55 onward).

46 Chitluri, *Baba's Vaani*, 119.

47 See for instance Dabholkar, *Shri Sai Satcharita*, 592-8 (chap. 36, vv. 30-110). This elaborate story concerns two gentlemen from Gomantaka/Goa.

48 Dabholkar, *Shri Sai Satcharita*, 790-5 (chap. 48, vv. 112-19, 131 ff.). This story concerns Mr. Sapatnekar and his wife, who had recently lost their son. See also Satpathy, *An Inspiring Life*, 131-3.

49 Dabholkar, *Shri Sai Satcharita*, 536 (chap. 33, v. 43).

This observation, however, needs to be qualified, as there were times when Sai Baba did indeed refer to himself – either autobiographically or by providing details of what devotees assumed were his prior lives (along with those of his followers). We find instances of both cases in Khaparde's diary. A well-known autobiographical tale – replete with symbolism – is reported by Dabholkar in the *Shri Sai Satcharita* (chap. 32, vv. 37-90). In this narrative, Sai Baba relates a lengthy story of how he and three friends – all of them wealthy and learned – were discussing how to attain God-realization while wandering in a forest. At a certain point, they met a Vanjari, a grain trader of humble caste who lacked any formal education but was full of compassion, in whom Sai Baba came to recognize his *guru*. The tale highlights the indispensability and supreme greatness of the *guru*, who imparts the teaching that only he who loves without any expectation in return is a true sage. Sai Baba further describes how his master subjected him to an initiation that resulted in a blissful experience: taking him to a well, the master tied a rope to his legs and lowered him inside in an inverted position – feet up, head down. This practice, reminiscent of certain Sufi disciplines, led the young Sai Baba to experience full communion with his *guru*-God. The central idea is that only an intense outpouring of love toward one's *guru* – an unconditional yearning for union – brings about God-realization.[50] Thus, the master took him to his 'school', showing him "the same loving concern as the mother-bird who clasps her young ones under her wings".[51]

In the majority of cases, it is fair to say that the intention behind Sai Baba's storytelling was threefold: at times he aimed to provide instruction through enigmatic, allegorical tales in which he might figure as the protagonist; at other times, he narrated autobiographical accounts or stories that proved his *antarajñāna* by recounting events that had actually happened to someone present at his *darbār*. He could offer details concerning a person's life that the individual had forgotten or was not yet aware of. Even if we were to hypothetically estimate that these autobiographical and *antarajñāna* instances formed the vast majority – comprising, hypothetically, two-thirds of his tales – it can still be inferred that he must have narrated at least 300 or, more likely, 580 *goṣṭ*ies of an instructional nature (representing one-third of the presumed totals of 900 or 1,740). This remains a remarkably high number.[52]

It must be underlined that it is very difficult to distinguish the saint's *goṣṭ*ies and parables from those accounts intended as proof of his omniscience. Unless the sources themselves bring the actual protagonists of these latter events to light – which rarely occurs – doubt regarding a tale's function and Sai Baba's intention inevitably remains. It could be argued that if a story is more stylized, characterized by recurrent allegories

50 One is reminded of the imagery of the moth that is found in Sufi parables. The moth is a potent symbol of the soul's yearning for God, it being drawn to the flame, i.e., God, in which it annihilates itself; see Zweig, *A Moth to the Flame*.

51 Dabholkar, *Shri Sai Satcharita*, 518-23. On this episode, see Rigopoulos, "Sāī Bābā of Śirḍī and Yoga Powers", 406-7.

52 During Khaparde's first and second stays in Shirdi (approximately 108 days altogether: one week in December 1910 and 101 days between December 1911 and March 1912), the diary records a total of eighteen allegorical or instructional *goṣṭ*ies *stricto sensu*. If one were to extrapolate from this sample alone, the resulting figure would amount to approximately sixty to sixty-five such narratives per year. Although this evidence cannot be treated as statistically representative, it nevertheless suggests that the estimates proposed above are not implausible and may indeed be conservative.

and symbolic elements, it is likely a *goṣṭ*; nonetheless, one can never be entirely certain. Given that the saint did not care to offer explanations and purposefully nurtured such ambiguity, it is reasonable to assume that he implicitly encouraged his audience to ponder over their meaning. In other words, I believe that Sai Baba attached a public value even to his *antarajñāna* accounts, as their interpretation could convey spiritual lessons and generate profound insights. Therefore, for every tale present in Khaparde's diary, I propose a commentary to shed light on its possible meaning.

The inherent ambiguity of a story serves to engender multiple meanings, allowing the audience to derive different interpretations from what is being told. Sai Baba's tales are destined to be reread in various ways over time, with each interpretation addressing the concerns of the age and reflecting the particular cultural context of the interpreter. Every reader and listener actively appropriates meanings that speak to their own concerns and conflicts. Consequently, each person is called to 'enter' the narrative and make a strenuous effort to discover for themselves the answers within each tale, as well as its deeper meaning and moral import. As he told his devotees:

> Even when I am no more, trust my words as the truth. My bones will give you an assurance from my grave. Not me alone, but even my tomb will speak to you. He who surrenders to it whole-heartedly, with him will it sway. Do not worry that I will be lost to you. You will hear my bones speaking to you of matters of your own interest. Only remember me, always, with a heart that is trusting. Worship me selflessly and you will achieve your highest weal.[53]

One must also be open to the possibility that Sai Baba narrated paradoxical or nonsensical tales – stories with no rational meaning, intended to frustrate any attempt at logical deciphering. In such cases (which I believe were the exception), the saint's aim may have been to induce an attitude of humility and amazement, stimulating a realization of the infinite mystery of the divine *guru*'s words. Ultimately, being forced to abandon all rational effort may open the disciple's mind to an intuitive comprehension of God's transcendence and the mystery of existence. Nonetheless, even here, the listener is expected to engage deeply with the tale; only after having struggled to comprehend it should one reach the final realization that it lies beyond human understanding.

Sai Baba was in no hurry; if people did not grasp his parables, that was fine, too. After all, what mattered most to him was to arouse within visitors those deep questions that lead to an opening of the heart and to new insights. The enigmatic, symbolic way in which he spoke reveals an acute sense of God's indescribability. Through his tales, Sai Baba captured his audience and led them to taste the divine mystery – even if, or perhaps precisely because, they were unable to fully comprehend them. A source reports: "At first when Nulkar and the other devotees were listening to *satsang* [= Sai Baba's words to his assembled *bhakta*s], and trying to decipher what Baba said, Neelkant thought they needed to be in a mental asylum".[54]

53 Dabholkar, *Shri Sai Satcharita*, 414 (chap. 25, vv. 105-8). On a saint's living presence at the site of his tomb (*samādhi*), as represented by the Maharashtrian 13th-century poet-saint Jñāndev/Jñāneśvar, see McLaughlin, *Lord in the Temple*.

54 Chitluri, *Baba's Rinanubandh*, 55.

As a Sufi adept, it seems probable that Sai Baba often improvised on stories received from his unknown teacher and fellow ascetics. Some of these narratives likely circulated within the integrative religious milieu of the Deccan, and it is reasonable to suggest that he recreated new tales based on existing models.[55] At the same time, given the sheer quantity of narratives he provided, there is little doubt that many were his own original creations. Sufi masters are known to instruct their followers through a variety of metaphors and symbolic utterances. Furthermore, the fact that he narrated stories in which he featured as the protagonist – whether in his current life or a past one – should not come as a surprise, as many Indian Sufis shared the belief in transmigration and rebirth with their Hindu counterparts.

There is an inherent reflexivity in Sai Baba's tales, as they mirror his own experience and understanding of the world. At the same time, through his *goṣṭ*ies, he fascinated every member of his audience by depicting familiar situations and highlighting matters of personal concern. Often, his tales portray extremes of behavior – contrasting, for instance, a most noble figure with a most evil one – thereby upholding moral ideals while reminding listeners of the potential abuses of power. His *bodha paddhati*, or 'method of imparting knowledge', [56] was largely based on the use of vivid metaphors designed to linger in the mind, a teaching technique widespread among Sufis.[57] As an Arabic proverb states: "The metaphor is a bridge toward reality" (*al-majāz qanṭarat al-ḥaqīqa*).

Affinities can be detected between the saint's enigmatic utterances and the riddles of Kabīr, which are filled with allusive imagery.[58] As is well-known, Sai Baba took as his model the famous 15th-century poet and mystic of Benares – born into a family of low-caste Muslim weavers (*julāhā*) – to the point of stating that his religion was 'Kabīr'.[59] More than once he identified with him, even claiming that Kabīr was his *guru*; indeed, as previously mentioned, the devotee Ganpatrao G. Narke reported that even a few months before his death, Sai Baba narrated many stories about Kabīr.[60] Like Kabīr, he took pains to emphasize the common core of all spiritual paths – transcending institutionalized religions – and his kinship with various contemporary saints and *faqīr*s.[61] When pressed on whether he was a Hindu or a Muslim, Sai Baba

55 This approach calls to mind Ramakrishna, the famous 19th-century Bengali saint, who similarly used parables to convey the ineffable; see *Tales and Parables of Sri Ramakrishna*.

56 For an overview, see Satpathy, *An Inspiring Life*, 137-56.

57 For comparative material, see Aquil, *Life of a Sufi*; Shah, *Tales of the Dervishes*. On allegorical narratives in Sufi literature, see also Braginsky, "Hikayat Shah Mardan", 107-35.

58 Kabīr's riddles are preserved primarily in the *Bījak*; see Hess, Singh, *The Bījak of Kabir*. On Kabīr's language and interpretive challenges, see Zoller, "Kabir and Ritualized Language", 33-68.

59 See Narasimhaswami, *Devotees' Experiences*, 129. Nothing is known of the historical Kabīr. If he was illiterate, as is claimed, he nonetheless was a relatively cultured person familiar with the prosody and metrical rules most popular in his times; see `https://kabirproject.com`. The architecture at Maghar, the place of his death, eloquently shows the mingling of Hinduism and Sufism. To be sure, across the centuries there have been 'parallel enjoyments' of Kabīr, Muslims taking him to be a Muslim and Hindus a Hindu; see Dähnhardt, "Contemporary Legacy of Kabīr", 177-89. For a concise overview, see Burger, "Kabīr".

60 In one particular parable, Sai Baba mentions Kabīr – a name that may also be understood as a synonym for Allāh, as al-Kabīr ('the great') is one of the ninety-nine divine names in Islāmic tradition; see Chitluri, *Baba's Vaani*, 134-5.

61 On his association with other saints, see Dabholkar, *Shri Sai Satcharita*, 338 (chap. 21, vv. 13-17). See also *ibid.*, 677 (chap. 41, v. 29).

would get angry and even resort to insults. The *Shri Sai Satcharita* repeatedly states that he was "neither Hindu nor Muslim",[62] that he was "beyond *dharma-adharma*"[63] and "without any caste".[64] Moreover, he was not at all interested in establishing a new cult or lineage.

Sai Baba's figure can best be understood by contrast – that is, by highlighting his opponents within the religious sphere. These were found among the so-called orthodox, the 'traditionalists' (be they Hindus or Muslims) and, more generally, among the official representatives of institutionalized religion. Conversely, Sai Baba always insisted on the oneness of God and universal brotherhood; consequently, he never sought to position himself against or above any other *guru* or religious figure. As Dabholkar states: "He never competed with anyone, in any way".[65]

Clearly, the saint and his tales cannot be understood in isolation but only by taking into account the colonial context in which he operated and the web of connections in which he was implicated.[66] To tell his story is to tell the story of his relationships at a particular time and place. Given that his audience was primarily Hindu, he tended to couch his narratives within a religious and theological symbolism they could grasp: as the skilled storyteller he was, Sai Baba adapted his tales to the needs and interests of his devotees.[67] Over time, Shirdi villagers became familiar with his symbolic parlance and often acted as the most reliable interpreters of his enigmatic utterances. Nonetheless, it is important to stress that his stories were meant for all, be they Hindus or Muslims, educated or illiterate.

His aim in storytelling was to narrate tales that everyone could relate to by drawing on their own cultural background. His stories are about people, and they are compelling precisely because they resonate with everyday life. Significantly, the late 19th-century *Censuses of India* show that hundreds of thousands of people declared themselves to be Hindu/Muslim or Muslim/Hindu, reflecting an awareness of a nondual identity.[68] This was a characteristic of Sai Baba's mentality that many of those he interacted with either shared or found acceptable – a product of the inextricably interwoven fabric of 19th-century Maharashtrian popular religion.[69] Certainly, his teaching of universalism and oneness drew on an integrative culture that had been constitutive of the Deccan for centuries. Even if orthodox Hindus and Muslims had difficulty approving of his lifestyle and recognizing his sanctity – as the sources document – the cultural environment in which Sai Baba and his followers were situated favored a fusion of horizons.

In essence, a parable is a comparison with a pedagogical function. It can be defined as a short tale employing figurative language – that is, a metaphor or simile extended into a narrative – designed to be sufficiently

62 Dabholkar, *Shri Sai Satcharita*, 75 (chap. 5, v. 24), 105 (chap. 7, v. 13), 159 (chap. 10, v. 119). See also *ibid.*, 692 (chap. 42, v. 27), 720 (chap. 43, v. 174).

63 Dabholkar, *Shri Sai Satcharita*, 634 (chap. 38, v. 94), 697 (chap. 42, v. 78).

64 Dabholkar, *Shri Sai Satcharita*, 636 (chap. 38, v. 117).

65 Dabholkar, *Shri Sai Satcharita*, 371 (chap. 23, v. 6).

66 On these issues, see Satpathy, *An Inspiring Life*, 18-27.

67 On the contemporary tales of a Hindu holy man, see Narayan, *Storytellers, Saints, and Scoundrels*.

68 On these issues, see Kent, Kassam, *Lines in Water*; Gottschalk, *Beyond Hindu and Muslim*.

69 For an overview of the religious landscape of Maharashtra, see Feldhaus, *Connected Places*.

surprising and enigmatic to prompt the listener to probe its meaning and derive a personal understanding. Often, these narratives are constructed upon parallelisms as well as oppositions. For instance, a correspondence (*bandhu*, *upaniṣad*) is established between macrocosm and microcosm, between ordinary reality and the highest truth.

Parables illustrate either eschatological themes – such as the kingdom of God or the soul's reunion with the divine – or ethical ones, highlighting virtues like patience, humility, and servant leadership. While both subjects are present in Sai Baba's tales, ethics clearly predominates.[70] Regardless of their emphasis, parables actively elicit from their audience the interpretation and application of their message. As noted, these tales tend to be open-ended and are subject to plural explanations, resonating anew with each individual and generation. They prompt us to draw our own conclusions, which may evolve as our lives open up the narratives to new readings. Consequently, reducing parables to a single meaning is a fallacy that undermines their very function and potential.

Though no single explanation can exhaust a parable's significance, some interpretations are nonetheless better than others – that is, more plausible and convincing. In this regard, it must be stressed that a text without a context is merely a pretext for making it say whatever one wishes. And Sai Baba's tales, like any text, are historically specific. The *faqīr* appears to have had perfect knowledge of those who came to him; indeed, they often remarked: "He told this story for us". None of the *goṣṭ*ies he narrated were abstract; rather, they were always situated and tailored to individual needs. Failure to acknowledge this context inevitably leads to erroneous, ahistorical, or anachronistic readings. It follows, therefore, that not all explanations of a given tale carry the same weight.

Having said this, even if Sai Baba intended to convey a specific teaching to a specific individual through each of his narratives – reflecting the conviction that every story has its own primary moral, which researchers strive to uncover – one must still accept that, once told, a parable takes on as many nuances and meanings as the listeners who appropriate it. This is the defining characteristic of these enigmatic tales and what makes them so fascinating. Sai Baba was fully aware of this and encouraged his *bhakta*s to constantly reflect upon his utterances.

The present study adopts what may be termed a hermeneutics of empathy rather than a purely reductionist hermeneutics of suspicion. This does not entail an uncritical acceptance of devotional claims, miraculous accounts, or retrospective interpretations. Rather, it reflects the conviction that Sai Baba's words and actions can be adequately understood only through a sustained effort to enter sympathetically into the religious world inhabited by his devotees and contemporaries. Historical and philological rigor are therefore combined here with an attempt to recover the horizon of meaning within which these narratives were originally received.

The examination of Khaparde's manuscript diaries preserved in the National Archives of India has also made it possible to clarify a number of historical and textual questions, including the precise chronology of his fifth and final visit to Shirdi on 19-20 March 1918, whose exact dates have

70 On the other hand, in the case of the Gospel parables their eschatological dimension is paramount, as these narratives serve primarily to illuminate the kingdom of God.

hitherto remained uncertain. Such results further illustrate the exceptional historical value of Khaparde's diaries.

Parables, both old and new, are intended to help us ask the right questions and determine what ultimately matters, redefining our priorities.[71] Crucially, these narratives are meant to challenge us to act – to translate thought into practice – rather than merely reflecting on ideas. One should respond to a parable by embodying its teaching, as it calls for a transformation of the listener's mind and heart. Indeed, these *goṣṭ*ies demand a response because they challenge our stereotypes. Although we tend to resist their difficult lessons by closing ourselves to *metanoia* – the 'threat' that parables pose to our daily routine – it must be emphasized that their function is precisely to stir and provoke us into changing our habits. Thus, these stories are designed to surprise and trigger a reaction: their aim is to involve each listener and to demonstrate that these narratives address matters of ultimate concern.

Each person is called upon to decide where he or she stands, identifying with one of the protagonists and reflecting on the reasons for his or her choice. One cannot remain neutral but must take a side. Moreover, a parable must disturb the listener; if it does not unsettle us, we must return to it and listen more deeply to grasp its fundamental import. In other words, one should never attempt to domesticate these narratives by imposing simplistic interpretations upon them. As Amy-Jill Levine observes with reference to the parables that Jesus taught:

> [P]arables more often tease us into recognizing what we've already always known, and they do so by reframing our vision. The point is less that they reveal something new than that they tap into our memories, our values, and our deepest longings, and so they resurrect what is very old, and very wise, and very precious. And often, very unsettling.[72]

Parables remind us of what we already know but have grown resistant to recalling. The *goṣṭ*ies that Sai Baba narrated to his rapt audiences in the Shirdi *masjid* operate on this same principle, forcing us to examine our consciences by delving deep within ourselves.

As in Jesus' parables, Sai Baba's tales contain nothing strictly doctrinal; their focus remains on everyday life and practical experience, even when describing unusual or unique events. These stories often concern what is hidden or non-evident, requiring discovery. Their primary aim is the realization of God's omnipresence – within and around us – since the dawning of this awareness radically shifts one's perspective on life. Realizing God's ubiquity, first in one's heart and then in one's neighbor, leads to a reversal of hierarchies: it implies the extinction of separateness and the recognition of oneness and equality (*samatva*). From this point of view, Sai Baba's entire life can be seen as a 'parable in action' of God's kingdom, centered on the name of Allāh that the saint constantly invoked: *Allāh Mālik* ('God is the Master'). Even his insistence on patience or forbearance

71 For anthologies of parables within the contemporary Indian milieu, see Kumar, *India First*; Vajpeyi, *A Poet's Parables*.

72 Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus*, 25. On Jesus' parables, see Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*; Zimmermann, *Kompendium der Gleichnisse Jesu*. See also Cheaib, *Guarire con le parabole*. On the use of allegory, metaphor, and parable in the New Testament, see Pitta, Filannino, *L'officina del Nuovo Testamento*, 13-16, 269-78, 313-14.

(*saburī*) should be understood in this light – as the virtue of accepting Allāh's will while faithfully awaiting the manifestation of his sovereignty, which is already operating in the world.

We can distinguish three aspects or phases in the telling of a parable. First, it generates wonder, for these stories possess a charming and attractive force that surprises the listener. In many ways, they express a countercultural vision, challenging established patterns of thought and behavior by offering a new perspective. Second, these stories require a sustained effort of interpretation because of their extensive use of metaphors and enigmatic expressions; for this reason, one must attend to every detail with the utmost care. If the narrator does not provide an explanation – as was often the case with both Jesus[73] and Sai Baba – the tale remains open to a variety of interpretations, which is precisely what the storyteller intends. Third, once understood, the parable should lead to an existential decision; it must bring about a radical change in attitude and behavior, since its teaching demands to be embodied in practice. In this sense, Sai Baba's *goṣṭ*ies were not merely stories to be heard and remembered, but invitations to spiritual transformation.[74]

73 See Jesus' parable of the sower: without his explanation in *Matthew* 13:18-23, it would remain highly enigmatic. The same can be said of the parable of the wedding feast in *Matthew* 22:1-14.

74 On these issues, see Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, 5. The author challenges scholarly consensus about the parables and argues instead that only four (those of the Mustard Seed, the Evil Tenants, the Talents, and the Great Supper) can be attributed to the historical Jesus with fair certitude. One of the earliest parables (*mashal*) in the Hebrew Bible is that of the prophet Nathan addressed to David (*2 Samuel* 12:1-4).