

## Animals in the Shri Sai Satcharita

Antonio Rigopoulos

This essay documents the symbolic use of animals in one of the most popular Hindu hagiographies of modern times, *i.e.* the *Shri Sai Satcharita* or ‘The True Life of Lord Sai’ written by Govind Raghunath Dabholkar (1859–1929) and dedicated to the famous saint Sai Baba of Shirdi (d. 1918). Divided into fifty-one chapters (plus two additional ones, *i.e.* an epilogue and an epitome), the *Shri Sai Satcharita* is written in traditional *ovī* verse form and comprises more than 9,300 verses. Special attention is paid to those animals that recur most often and with whom Sai Baba and his devotees are identified. The significance of the *Shri Sai Satcharita* lies in the fact that it is a Hindu appropriation of an eclectic Sufi ascetic, part and parcel of Maharashtra’s integrative culture. This peculiar feature reflects itself even in its choice of animal symbolism. The essay is divided into six paragraphs: Introduction; Fundamental presuppositions in the *Shri Sai Satcharita* with regard to animals; Auspicious and inauspicious animals; Animals that are symbolically ambivalent; Identification of Sai Baba and his devotees with particular animals; The Islāmic element. Appendix 1 offers the complete list of animals present in the *Shri Sai Satcharita*, and Appendix 2 the number of their occurrences in descending order. Animal deities (such as Kamadhenu, the wish-fulfilling cow) and all deities and their animal vehicles (such as Sarasvati and her swan, Ganesh and his mouse, etc.) have purposefully been omitted.

**Key words:** Sai Baba of Shirdi, *Shri Sai Satcharita*, animals, Hindu modern hagiography.

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

(Balaji Pilaji Gurav, villager of Shirdi; Rigopoulos 2020: 81)

## 1. Introduction

Nowadays Sai Baba (Sāi Bābā) of Shirdi (d. October 15, 1918) is no doubt the most popular saint of India, mirroring the archetype of the holy man (Satpathy 2024; Rigopoulos 1993). His temples and shrines are found throughout the country, and Shirdi in the Ahmednagar district of Maharashtra (Rigopoulos 2009; Feldhaus 2003) has become a national pilgrimage center. Venerated as a wondrous miracle worker by millions across the subcontinent, his tomb is visited by crowds of people from all walks of life, primarily Hindus but also Muslims, especially at festival times and on the anniversary of his death. Sai Baba was an eclectic Sufi ascetic, a *faqīr* (lit. poor), part and parcel of the pluralistic religious landscape of the Deccan. He lived most of his life in a dilapidated mosque (*masjid*), advocating a spirituality accommodating Sufism and Hindu devotionalism (*bhakti*), above and beyond caste strictures and the orthodoxies of institutionalized religions. During an interrogation by a legal officer, he is reported to have said that his creed or religion was Kabīr, the famous 15th-century Sant of Benares (Aher 2024: 87-90; Satpathy 2024: 174-177). As other integrative mystics, Sai Baba viewed Kabīr as his model and more than once identified himself with him, even saying that Kabīr was his *guru*.

The *Shri Sai Satcharita* (Śrī Sāi Saccarita) or ‘The True Life of Lord Sai,’ is regarded by Hindus as the most authoritative repository of his life and deeds. This hagiography is revered as a sacred book (*pothi*) by all devotees, who read its chapters as part of their daily worship (Dabholkar 1999).<sup>1</sup> It was composed in Marāṭhī by Govind Raghunath Dabholkar (1859–1929), a Brahmin who Sai Baba nicknamed Hemadpant. He started working on it while the saint was still alive, having obtained his permission and blessings (Aher 2024: 371-376; Satpathy 2024: 269-271; Shepherd 2017: 72-75; Shepherd 2015: 59-67). Divided into fifty-one chapters (plus two additional ones, i.e. an epilogue and an epitome), the *Shri Sai Satcharita* is written in traditional *ovī* verse form and comprises more than 9,300 verses.<sup>2</sup> Dabholkar

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<sup>1</sup> On Indira Kher’s English translation, see “Indira Kher: Translation of *Sai Satcharita*,”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pg-X5XVt6PM>. For the original Marāṭhī text, see Dabholkar (1982).

<sup>2</sup> The term *ovī* comes from the Marāṭhī verb *ovaṇē* ‘to wreath.’ The *ovī* meter consists of either six or eight syllables, the quantity as a rule being that of a long syllable. The origin of the *ovī* is found in folk-songs, as indicated by the famous line: “In Maharashtra the *ovī* is sung while pounding [the corn]” (*mahārāṣṭreṣu yoṣidbhiḥ ovī geyā tu kaṇḍane*).

conceived his work in the trail of the Maharashtrian *Vārkarī Sampradāya*,<sup>3</sup> explicitly linking Sai Baba to it and praising Shirdi as a modern Pandharpur.<sup>4</sup>

The actual model of the *Shri Sai Satcharita* is the Marāṭhī *Gurucaritra* ('Life of the Master') written by Sarasvatī Gaṅgādhara around the mid-16th century, the gospel for all devotees of the god Dattātreya. Indeed, Dabholkar viewed Sai Baba as a manifestation of Dattātreya, a synthetic deity popular all across the Deccan that is revered as an immortal *guru*, *yogī* and *avatāra*, even accommodating Islāmic tenets (Rigopoulos 2024).

In order to assess the types of animals that are present in the *Shri Sai Satcharita*, I have scrutinized each of its 51 + 2 chapters and a summary of these findings is detailed in Appendices 1 and 2. As is typical of Purāṇic tradition, the hagiography attaches a symbolic value to many of the animals it mentions, whether they figure in the deeds and utterances attributed to Sai Baba—the stories of his life and miracles along with his tales and parables—or in Dabholkar's own comments. Animals are thought to teach a lesson (Satpathy 2014: 97-99) and function as a moral and religious symbol, be it positive or negative, and the audience of listeners/readers of the text are perfectly aware of the meaning that is attached to them. With the aim of focusing on animals qua living beings, I have not taken into consideration deities and their animal vehicles.

On the whole, the significance of the *Shri Sai Satcharita* lies in the fact that it is one of the most popular hagiographies of modern times and that it is a Hindu appropriation of an eclectic Sufi saint. This is its peculiar feature, which reflects itself even in its choice of animal symbolism.

## 2. Fundamental presuppositions in the *Shri Sai Satcharita* with regard to animals

What strikes the reader of the *Shri Sai Satcharita* is the frequency with which it refers to animals—only chapter 2 does not mention any—and also their variety since it makes reference to more than fifty of them. Furthermore, the hagiography refers to animals in general more than a hundred times. The leitmotif that runs throughout the *Shri Sai Satcharita* is that Sai Baba (who is identical with God, the *guru*, the Absolute *Brahman* and the Self or *ātman*) abides in all creatures, from the biggest to the

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<sup>3</sup> The tradition of those who regularly go on a pilgrimage (*vārī*) to Pandharpur on the banks of the Bhimā River, the most popular *bhakti* tradition of the Marāṭhī speaking area. Pandharpur is the seat of the god Viṭṭhal/Viṭhobā, who is identified as Kṛṣṇa. The originator of the *Vārkarī* movement was the poet-saint Jñāneśvar (d. 1296), a Brahmin who was possibly born in Alandi in Pune district, and the *Shri Sai Satcharita* recalls one of his famous miracles, i.e. when he made a buffalo recite the *Vedas*; Dabholkar 1999: 330. On the *Shri Sai Satcharita* and the *Jñāneśvarī*, Jñāneśvar's *magnum opus*, see Kher (2001: 151-157).

<sup>4</sup> As is daily sung during the noon *ārtī*: 'Shirdi is my Pandharpur and Sai Baba is my God' (Briz-Kishore 2000: 98).

smallest, being present in all animate beings as well as in inanimate reality (Satpathy 2024: 296-298; Munsiff 1991: 57; Narasimhaswami 1942: 31; Bharadwaja 1983: 46-49).<sup>5</sup> There is a thorough recognition that nonhuman forms of life are expressions of the one divine principle.<sup>6</sup> To quote a few examples:

Sometimes I am a dog and sometimes a pig; sometimes I am a cow, sometimes a cat, and sometimes an ant, a fly, an aquatic creature – in such various forms do I move about in this world. Know, that I like only him who sees me in all the living beings. So give up the sense of differentiation. This is the way to worship me (Dabholkar 1999: 143).

‘An insect, an ant, creatures living in water or moving in the sky, or animals on the land – a dog or a pig, I pervade them all, most truly and always (Dabholkar 1999: 243).

Sai is not confined to one place; Sai dwells in all things—living and non-living. Right from Brahmadev, down to the insects as tiny as an ant or a fly, he pervades them all and everywhere (Dabholkar 1999: 451).

He fills everything totally—animate and inanimate. What then, is coming and going, to him? (Dabholkar 1999: 662).

The text implicitly recognizes that human beings are also animals and that there is a continuum among the different species which are nonetheless hierarchically organized—from invertebrates such as insects and spiders to reptiles, amphibians, fish, birds and mammals—with humans at the top of the evolutionary scale.<sup>7</sup> Along these lines and adhering to the belief in rebirth (*ṛnānubandha*; Chitluri 2007), Sai Baba revealed details about the previous lives of various creatures stating for instance that a frog and a snake had been humans in their past birth, while one of his devotees had been ‘a well-fed cow’ in one of her former births (Dabholkar 1999: 446, 769-779). Therefore, he recommended:

[D]o not repulse or reject anyone contemptuously—be it then a dog, a pig, or a common fly. For, without some special bond from the previous birth, no one comes to us (Dabholkar 1999: 42)<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> A Brahmin devotee, Raghuvir B. Purandhare, recalls that Sai Baba said that he was ‘inside animals’ (Narasimhaswami 2006: 79 n.).

<sup>6</sup> This awareness is attested already in the early *Upaniṣads*. See *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 1.4.16: ‘Now, this Self (*ātman*) is a world for all beings.... When creatures, from wild animals and birds down to the very ants, find shelter in his houses, he becomes thereby a world for them’ (Olivelle 1998: 17); *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 6.10.2: ‘No matter what they are in this world—whether it is a tiger, a lion, a wolf, a boar, a worm, a moth, a gnat, or a mosquito—they all merge into that [Existent]’ (Olivelle 1998: 153). See also *Bhagavadgītā* 5.18.

<sup>7</sup> In the *Shri Sai Satcharita*, noteworthy is the absence of the monkey—given its liminal nature—and also of the sheep and the mouse.

<sup>8</sup> See also Chitluri (2008: 4-5); Narasimhaswami (2006: 195); Narasimhaswami (1942: 212).



In keeping with its nondual (*advaita*) Vedānta orientation and with what Sai Baba used to say, i.e. that one must demolish the ‘wall,’ the sense of differentiation that separates himself/herself from God and all creatures (Satpathy 2024: 304), another basic presupposition of the text is that if all animals including humans are prey to beginningless ignorance (*avidyā*) and the obnubilating power of illusion (*māyā*), yet only humans can develop discrimination (*viveka*) and achieve liberating knowledge (*vidyā*) and thus freedom (*mokṣa*) from the painful cycle of rebirths (*saṃsāra*). This is the reason why human life is extolled as being the most precious of all existences. Significantly, in various places Dabholkar cites the traditional Vedānta examples of illusory perception, i.e. of seeing silver in an oyster shell and a serpent where there is only a rope or a garland (Dabholkar 1999: 258, 269, 418, 703, 829-830).

The idea is that only through unconditional devotion to Sai Baba and by acknowledging his omnipresence will humans free themselves from delusion and ignorance since the *guru* will undoubtedly shower his grace on those who surrender to him. The bond of love between the *faqīr* and his devotees is so strong that the *Shri Sai Satcharita* states:

Full of compassion for his devotees, Baba said, with utmost humility, ‘A slave of slaves that I am, I am indebted to you and have set out to have your darshan. It is indeed by your great kindness that I have met you. I am but a worm in your faeces, by virtue of which position, I am most blessed in this universe’ (Dabholkar 1999: 156)<sup>9</sup>

In Hindu texts on renunciation (*saṃnyāsa*), it is said that ascetics should wander about the earth like worms, going about unnoticed and despised (Olivelle 1992: 107). The *Shri Sai Satcharita* emphasizes Sai Baba’s love toward all creatures and, as a consequence, his strict adherence to the ascetic vow of nonviolence (*ahiṃsā*; Nimbalkar 2006: 82-86; Rigopoulos 1993: 342-343) that his devotees are also instructed to follow.<sup>10</sup> We read:

All living beings, he [= Sai Baba] said, are equal and therefore, nonviolence towards all, is the one common rule. Whether it be a scorpion or snake, God dwells in all alike. And so, when He does not will it so, can they harm anyone? .... Baba had only one thing to say, whether it is a snake or a scorpion, God dwells in all of them. So love them all (Dabholkar 1999: 365, 369).

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<sup>9</sup> A sanitized version of this statement is as follows: “This worm of consciousness which resides in your body with faeces, which causes your actions, is myself. I am the controller of your inner being. As a result of your coming to me, you have become one with me through your *bhakti* or devotion and I consider myself blessed by the *darshan* of God residing in your heart” (Dabholkar 1999: 164 n. 9).

<sup>10</sup> Yet every now and then Sai Baba used to eat meat. He even allowed animal sacrifice, as per the Islāmic law: ‘Baba also sent for the *Mullah* to recite *Fatihah* or *mantras* according to the Islamic scriptures (Quran) and, with proper rites, got the she-goat to be slaughtered’ (Dabholkar 1999: 629).

### 3. Auspicious and inauspicious animals

Following the Hindu tradition, there are animals in the *Shri Sai Satcharita* that are always portrayed positively, being symbolical of a host of moral and spiritual values. Thus, the cow together with its five products (milk, curds, butter, dung and urine) is mentioned a dozen times and is regarded as supremely sacred and a symbol of purity and prosperity, of goodness and motherly love, being a selfless provider (Jacobsen 2009: 713-716). The *guru* is glorified as the divine cow greater than Kamadhenu, the wish-fulfilling cow (Dabholkar 1999: 251).

Another animal that is consistently regarded in positive terms is the bee, particularly the black bee.<sup>11</sup> Devotees are said to be absorbed at Sai Baba's feet as a bee in a lotus, hovering around the physical form of their *guru* (Dabholkar 1999: 166, 457, 509, 874, 880).

The 'swan' or bar-headed goose (*haṃsa*), symbol of the *ātman* and of liberation, is also extolled as the emblem of the steadfast devotee. In particular, the *haṃsa* is praised for its discriminative knowledge as it is said to have the ability to filter water from milk with its beak, i.e. falsehood from truth (Lanman 1898). Sai Baba himself is venerated as the supreme *haṃsa* that swims in the lake that is God, eager to feed on its pearls, i.e. *Brahman* (Dabholkar 1999: 267, 324, 589).

The *Shri Sai Satcharita* honors even the tiny ant since when it is intent on the sweetness of the jaggery it will not let go of it: one should surrender to Sai Baba with the same one-pointed concentration (Dabholkar 1999: 447).<sup>12</sup>

On the other hand, in our text there are several animals that are portrayed negatively either because of their symbolism or because they are dangerous to humans, though the saint required that none of them should be harmed let alone killed.<sup>13</sup>

Thus the scorpion is threatening because of its venomous bite (Dabholkar 1999: 366-367, 536, 872, 874; Frembgen 2004) and so is the tiger due to its ferocity, though the *Shri Sai Satcharita* tells a story of

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<sup>11</sup> The one exception is in *Shri Sai Satcharita* 39.92, where the black bee gets trapped in a lotus being beguiled by its fragrance, proving the danger of running after sense objects (Dabholkar 1999: 651).

<sup>12</sup> The virtues of resoluteness and detachment are frequently ascribed to the ant; see *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa* 43.48-53.

<sup>13</sup> In Narasimhaswami's *Sri Sai Baba's Charters and Sayings* we read:

Hari Sitaram Dixit: 'The serpent kills people; so, when one sees a serpent, should he not kill it?'

Baba: 'No. We should never kill it. Because it will never kill us unless it is ordered by God to kill us. If God has so ordered, we cannot avoid it' (Narasimhaswami 1942: 118).

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For a similar utterance of Sai Baba with reference to a tiger, see *Shirdi Diary of the Hon'ble Mr. G. S. Khaparde* n.d.: 83.

an ill tiger that was taken to Shirdi just a week before the saint's demise where it died a peaceful death at Sai Baba's feet,<sup>14</sup> proving the latter's power of taming even the fiercest animal (Dabholkar 1999: 498, 500, 510-513, 515, 874; Aher 2024: 191-192).<sup>15</sup>

Similarly, the alligator is linked to great worry, the crocodile is synonymous with arrogance and envy, and the *timingil* fish, a huge creature that according to the epic of the *Mahābhārata* (3.166.3) can swallow a whale in one bite, is identified with various diseases (Dabholkar 1999: 222, 273, 278).

The frog that wallows in mud represents the person who doesn't believe in Sai Baba, and the frog that lives in a well is portrayed negatively since it ignores the pleasure of freedom, which is symbolical of *mokṣa*. In a tale narrated by the saint, two men are said to have been reborn as a frog and a snake as a consequence of their greed for money (Dabholkar 1999: 158, 373, 687, 769-779, 822).

The elephant, the donkey and the leech are also depicted negatively: the elephant being identified with wealth and worldly life (Dabholkar 1999: 651, 759, 783), the donkey being identified with sensual pleasures (Dabholkar 1999: 606), and the leech being always searching for 'impure blood' (Dabholkar 1999: 687, 822).

The moth that is attracted to the light of a lamp is compared to a pseudo-sage who is incapable of discriminating between good and bad (Dabholkar 1999: 825) and even the chameleon is referred to disapprovingly, since it is said to symbolize someone who never had a keen desire to reach God (Dabholkar 1999: 801).

#### 4. Animals that are symbolically ambivalent

Most interesting are those animals that are symbolical of both positive and negative features, depending upon circumstances. Thus, the horse, the animal that is most frequently mentioned in the *Shri Sai Satcharita*—thirty times—is said to be symbolical of the sense organs which, being wild and potentially destructive, need to be placed under the control of the intellect through the reins of firm resolution. At the same time, in one of Sai Baba's tales a horse is said to represent God's grace and the

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<sup>14</sup> Sai Baba is said to have given a buffalo a good death or *sadgati*, liberation, after instructing a devotee to nourish it with a sweet flatbread (*puran polī*) with plenty of ghee; Narasimhaswami (1942: 142-143).

<sup>15</sup> For a similar story of an old lion that breathed its last in Sai Baba's presence, see Satpathy (2024: 170). In the 20th century, various ascetics used to surround themselves with wild animals: in 1936, one Swami Krishnananda went to the Kumbh Melā festival of Allahabad together with a lioness that he claimed was tamed and vegetarian; Yogananda (1958: 397).

animal's nine lumps of dung are equated with the nine types of devotion (Dabholkar 1999: 345-346).<sup>16</sup> Moreover, the first miracle of the saint was the retrieval of the lost mare (Kher: 2001: 21-28) of one Chand Patil, a Muslim, and we know that starting from 1911 he had a horse called Shyamsundar/Shyamkarna of whom he was very fond of. The animal would bow its head at Sai Baba's feet (Karve 1988: 160-161) at the time of congregational worship (*ārti*) and would accompany him during processions.<sup>17</sup> This horse had a black ear (*śyāmakarṇa*; hence its name) and had been offered to him by a breeder as a token of gratitude (Dabholkar 1999: 73-74, 270, 345-346, 616-617, 650, 811, 853; Aher 2024: 81-82).

The snake is a dangerous creature and is generally viewed negatively in the *Shri Sai Satcharita* that mentions it twenty-nine times. There are stories in which snakes threaten and even bite devotees and Sai Baba intervenes and cures them by 'scolding' the venom. The snake is also said to symbolize *māyā*, that 'coils' herself round her pray, and the saint is extolled as he who destroys the snake of the fear of worldly life (Dabholkar 1999: 273, 355, 357-358, 364, 374-376, 871-872, 882). On the other hand, Sai Baba is identified by devotees with the divine *nāga*, i.e. the cobra—mentioned six times in the text—whom they worship with milk offerings (Jacobsen 2009: 711-713; Rigopoulos 2017; Rigopoulos 2014).<sup>18</sup> The Śeṣanāga or the thousand-headed cobra, king of serpents, is said to praise Sai Baba with all his mouths though he is ultimately unable to understand his real nature (Dabholkar 1999: 351, 568, 570, 586-587). It is noteworthy that in March 1912 the *faqīr* narrated a tale in which he was metamorphosed into a cobra (*Shirdi Diary of the Hon'ble Mr. G. S. Khaparde* n.d.: 103): defying species boundaries, Sufi as well as Hindu ascetics are believed to be capable of effecting bodily transformation from one category of being to another, as from human to nonhuman animal.

The parrot is a symbol of a variety of conflicting characteristics: wisdom and detachment as well as ignorance and lust (it being the vehicle of Kāma, the god of love; Doniger 1993). In the *Shri Sai Satcharita*, the parrot that holds fast to the perch within the cage is akin to the frog in the well and represents man who is held captive due to his/her identification with the body. As a symbol of the

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<sup>16</sup> Listening to scriptures/holy talks (*śravaṇa*), singing devotional songs (*kīrtana*), recollection of the divine name (*smaraṇa*), homage to the feet of the *guru*/deity (*pādasevana*), ritual worship (*arcanā*), reverential bowing (*vandana*), service to the *guru*/deity as his/her slave (*dāsya*), friendship with the *guru*/deity (*sakhya*), and the total offering of oneself to the *guru*/deity (*ātmanivedana*); see *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 7.5.23 ff.

<sup>17</sup> Having pet animals is a characteristic of ascetics who reside in hermitages (*āśramas*). See the case of Ramaṇa Maharṣi (1879-1950); Sri Ramana, *Friend of Animals: The Life of Lakshmi the Cow* (2004).

<sup>18</sup> The *nāga*'s forehead is said to be adorned with a beautiful gem that will eventually destroy him; Dabholkar (1999: 773). Cobras are believed to live in subterranean worlds and to be the guardians of all sorts of wonderful gems and riches.

imprisoned soul (*jīvātman*), the parrot is called to free itself from the cage of the body and fly up in the sky (Dabholkar 1999: 278-279, 373). Sai Baba loved to gaze at parrots, admiring their size and colors (*Shirdi Diary of the Hon'ble Mr. G. S. Khaparde* n.d.: 95; Narasimhaswami 1942: 74). In one of his autobiographic tales, he pointed out that he once exchanged 'the lower part of his body' with that of a parrot and that later 'a great serpent woke up,' which seems to imply that though he had been prone to lust (*kāma*) he was able to subdue it and eventually achieve the highest spiritual state, 'waking up' to his divine *nāga* nature (*Shirdi Diary of the Hon'ble Mr. G. S. Khaparde* n.d.: 8-9).

The bird in general is symbolically ambivalent in the *Shri Sai Satcharita*. On the one hand, Sai Baba compares it to the mind that is caught in the bewilderment of *māyā*, and on the other the *guru* himself is compared to a mother bird that clasps her young ones under her protective wings (Dabholkar 1999: 521, 529).<sup>19</sup>

## 5. Identification of Sai Baba and his devotees with particular animals

I already mentioned how the saint purposefully identified himself with all types of animals. Not only did he often refer to animals in his tales—delightful is that of a lizard that had come to Shirdi from Aurangabad to visit her sister (Dabholkar 1999: 244-246, 870; Frembgen 1996)—but he also liked to surround himself with them. Indeed, many modern and contemporary Sufis are well-known for their love of animals (Kuehn 2024). Sai Baba's devotee Shantabai Joshi recalls:

The Dwarka Mai<sup>20</sup> was a place of refuge for the stray animals of Shirdi. Often he [= Sai Baba] would place a kid (young goat) on his lap and caress it. If it bleated he would give it a drink of water with his own hands. Dogs and cats sought refuge at his feet, and Baba had a special fondness for dogs. Then there was a black cow with white stripes; she and her calf had literally made the Dwarka Mai their home, and Baba would feed the cow and pat her on her back (Chitluri 2014: 30).

I now focus attention on a few cases of the saint's identification with animals. In what appears to be one of the rare autobiographical statements of his, Sai Baba compares his *guru* to the mother tortoise, who 'feeds her little ones on her loving glance.' This glance is said to 'nourish and fatten the offspring' and thus the little ones, *i.e.* the *guru*'s disciples—among whom was Sai Baba—'need do nothing else.' The hatchlings are nurtured on the loving glance of their mother who is 'their sole nourishment,' *i.e.*

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<sup>19</sup> Jesus' saying in *Luke* 13:34 comes to mind: 'Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing.'

<sup>20</sup> Lit. 'many-gated mother.' The Hindu name that Sai Baba gave to his mosque.

‘the nourishment of Self-rejoicing.’ The gaze filled with love of the tortoise/master, which is ‘a shower of nectar,’ is reciprocated by the hatchlings/pupils that are ‘always intent on the mother’ and result in the oneness between the *guru* and his disciples (Dabholkar 1999: 305, 309, 570). Here Sai Baba emphasizes the supreme value of *guru-bhakti*: if such intensity of pure love is present—in which the initiative lies with the *guru*, i.e. is an act of grace—the disciple doesn’t need to do anything else but to reciprocate his love in order to achieve divine communion (Dabholkar 1999: 521-522).<sup>21</sup> It is a fact that tortoises, unlike other reptiles, have very good vision. Moreover, they are popularly believed to express their affection by staring.

Sai Baba had lustrous eyes and his piercing gaze was most powerful, bringing about ecstatic trances in whomever it transfixed (*Shirdi Diary of the Hon’ble Mr. G. S. Khaparde* n.d.: 46-47). In the *Shri Sai Satcharita* we read that his eyes “shone in the daylight, like those of a cat in darkness” (Dabholkar 1999: 402).<sup>22</sup> The transforming power of a saint’s look is well-documented in Sufism and it is known as *nazar*.<sup>23</sup> The *faqīr* would gaze at people and even at animals and inanimate objects such as his portrait or photo, ‘enlivening’ them by his glance. Mrs. Tarkhad offers the following testimony:

There was such power and penetration in the glance that none could continue to look at his eyes. One felt that Sai Baba was reading him or her through and through. Soon one lowered one’s eyes and bowed down. One felt that he was not only in one’s heart but in every atom of one’s body .... He was the *Antaryami* [Inner Ruler], call him God or Satpuruṣa [Perfect One] .... In his presence, no doubts, no fears, no questioning had any place, and one resigned oneself and found that was the only course, the safest and best course (Narasimhaswami 2006: 67).

Sai Baba used to beg his food from five households of Shirdi every day (Satpathy 2024: 110-111, 115; Olivelle 2005). The *Shri Sai Satcharita* defines his way of requesting alms as *mādhūkārī*, meaning ‘to beg like a bee,’ which in Hindu asceticism is regarded as the ideal method of begging (Dabholkar 1999: 130, 379, 632). As a bee gathers nectar a little at a time from different flowers, so an ascetic begs a little food at a time from several houses. And as a bee does not injure the flowers, so the ascetic obtains just a

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<sup>21</sup> Sai Baba insisted on the need of a *guru*: ‘The guide will take you straight to your destination, avoiding wolves, tigers and ditches etc. on the way,’ Rigopoulos (1993: 172-173). See also Narasimhaswami (1942: 60).

<sup>22</sup> The mother cat and the kittens that suckle at her teats are extolled in the *Shri Sai Satcharita* as the celebration of a mother’s love; Dabholkar (1999: 238-239).

<sup>23</sup> The saint’s *nazar* is daily celebrated when his morning (*kākaḍ*) *ārtī* is sung; Briz-Kishore (2000: 93).

mouthful from each householder, without becoming a burden on any of them (Olivelle 1992: 104, 304).<sup>24</sup> Sai Baba maintained his *mādhūkārī* begging habits all his life, until his very last day.

Another insect with which the *Shri Sai Satcharita* identifies our saint is the *kātīṇ* that is similar to a spider and makes a hard and bright-shining cocoon: it spreads no web for flies, has long legs and a little black body. The *kātīṇ* is assimilated to Sai Baba due to its proverbial industriousness. Thus, Dabholkar writes that even after his *niryāṇ* or passing away “Sai Baba’s *leela*<sup>25</sup> knows no rest, even for a moment, like the insect *Kateen*” (Dabholkar 1999: 739). On several occasions, the *faqīr* assured his devotees that he would be active and vigorous from the tomb also (Rigopoulos 1993: 243, 376). Furthermore, the *kātīṇ*’s cocoon is a symbol of death and resurrection, i.e. of Sai Baba’s immortality.

Especially meaningful is the *faqīr*’s identification with dogs since these animals are considered utterly impure by Hindus. When a devotee of the saint who was preparing food at her home saw a dog coming near her she flung burning fuel at it, perceiving the dog to be unclean and polluting, and was later scolded by Sai Baba since she had been cruel and had not recognized his presence in the dog (Narasimhaswami 1942: 155). The mention of the dog is frequent in the *Shri Sai Satcharita* where it recurs twenty-one times. The *faqīr* would frequently highlight his oneness with dogs, emphasizing how feeding a hungry dog amounted to feeding him. He himself gave the example by feeding them, as all living creatures experience the same hunger.<sup>26</sup> It is even reported that he cured a devotee of malaria by ordering him to feed rice and curds to a black dog near the local temple of goddess Lakṣmī (Dabholkar 1999: 142-143, 206, 216, 698-699, 870). Once Sai Baba gave a spectacular proof of his oneness with a dog. As I was told by Uddhavrao Madhavrao Deshpande, an old villager of Shirdi whom I interviewed back in October 1985:

One day, when ... Mhalsapati was taking his lunch meal, a dog came to his house, waiting and crying. But Mhalsapati didn’t feed the dog; instead he beat it with a stick, wounding it on its head and mouth. The same day, in the evening, devotees went to the *maṣjid* to meet Baba and saw he was wounded. They asked him what had happened. Mhalsapati was present and Baba told him: ‘I came to your house today to beg and you beat me like this.’ Mhalsapati protested: ‘But when did you

<sup>24</sup> Hindu texts on renunciation specify that the food should be begged from five or seven houses at random. Sai Baba, however, used to beg his food from the same households of Shirdi.

<sup>25</sup> Lit. ‘sport,’ ‘play,’ i.e. his miraculous deeds.

<sup>26</sup> If people brought to Sai Baba things to eat and flies and ants ate them, he would say that he had eaten them; Narasimhaswami (1982: Vol. 4, 163). See also Narasimhaswami (1942: 73-74, 125, 262).



come? I didn't see you.' Then Baba said: 'Didn't that dog come to your door?' Thus Mhalsapati understood the lesson (Rigopoulos 2020: 183).<sup>27</sup>

For what concerns Sai Baba's devotees, the *Shri Sai Satcharita* identifies them particularly with the Chatak (*caṭak*) and Chakor (*cakor*) birds. The Chatak, which is mentioned ten times, is said to eagerly wait for the monsoon rains to quench its thirst and it is a symbol of spiritual longing. It is associated with the Jacobin cuckoo (*Clamator jacobinus*), a partially migratory bird that is viewed as a harbinger of the monsoon rains due to the timing of its arrival. Dabholkar identifies all devotees and listeners/readers of his opus as thirsty Chataks who wait for the 'cloud of compassion,' i.e. Sai Baba, to rain the pure water of grace/bliss upon them (Dabholkar 1999: 234, 244, 289, 432, 540, 673, 713, 784, 817, 842). The Chakor, which is mentioned eight times, is said to slake its thirst on the nectarine beams of the moon. It is identified with the Chukar partridge (*Alectoris chukar*), the national bird of Pakistan. Thus the Chakor, i.e. the devotee, is happy only when it can gaze at the moon, i.e. the shining face of Sai Baba, who showers his blissful nectar upon him/her (Dabholkar 1999: 303, 406, 474, 542, 648, 814, 817, 842).

Sai Baba used a charming simile to refer to his devotees: he said they were like sparrows that even if they flew far away, beyond the seven seas, he would bring to him by tying a rope to their legs and pulling it (Dabholkar 1999: 452, 459, 836).<sup>28</sup> He also referred to his Muslim disciple Abdul,<sup>29</sup> who served him for thirty years, as a 'crow' since he 'pecked,' i.e. inadvertently but providentially stepped on, a devotee's swollen leg and thus caused the rupture of his abscesses curing him from his painful illness (Dabholkar 1999: 560-561). Sai Baba's calling his servant Abdul a crow may be symbolic of the latter's humility and detachment (*vairāgya*).<sup>30</sup> As pointed out by Śaṅkara (c. 700 CE), the major exponent of Advaita Vedānta, one should look at everything, good or bad, with detachment, as no better than the excreta of a crow (verse 4 of the *Aparokṣānubhūti*, 'The Direct Experience [of Brahman]').

The saint would ask his devotees to always be gentle and never 'bark' at people (Dabholkar 1999: 312). When he 'left the body' on 15 October 1918, the *Shri Sai Satcharita* describes the desperation of the

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<sup>27</sup> See also Narasimhaswami (1942: 117-118); Chitluri (2008: 4). When the horse Shyamsundar was beaten up by his trainer it is said that the wounds instantly appeared on Sai Baba's back; Williams (2004: 54-55). Similarly, when a devotee beat a cat who drank his curds, the saint showed a weal on his shoulder, corresponding to the stroke on the cat's shoulder; Narasimhaswami (2006: 179-180); Narasimhaswami (1982: Vol. 4, 164).

<sup>28</sup> Jesus mentions the sparrows as an example of how God values all creatures in creation. As we read in *Luke* 12:6: 'Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten by God.'

<sup>29</sup> He arrived in Shirdi in 1889 and wrote a notebook in Deccani Urdu recording the saint's utterances (Warren 1999: 261-333).

<sup>30</sup> On the intelligence of this bird, see Heinrich (1999).



people of Shirdi by saying that they were like fish that toss and turn in agony when the water in a pond dries up, and like the calves of a cow that have lost their way (Dabholkar 1999: 713).

Ironically, Dabholkar writes that when confronted with *Brahman* even great scholars are just like “glow worms before the sun,” and that once *Brahman* is attained “the web of empty words fades away” (Dabholkar 1999: 831).<sup>31</sup> And yet, though scholars are portrayed negatively, Sai Baba is said to have been one of them at least on one occasion—albeit having the capacity to reject their merciless behavior. Thus in a tale in which he figures as one of the protagonists, the saint pointed out:

We, the learned, the scholarly, knew no kindness nor pity. Being rich (but miserly), nobody bothered to shoo away the crow with the unwashed hand. But this Vanjari,<sup>32</sup> without any learning or authority, of a lower *varna* [social category] and a Vanjari by caste—and yet, how much natural affection he had in his heart, that he should say, ‘eat some bread and vegetable!’ He who loves in this way, without any expectation, only he is a true Jnani [sage] and I felt that to show him respect is the most exquisite way of gaining supreme Knowledge. Therefore with great respect I ate the quarter piece of bread that the Vanjari gave me and drank some water. And lo! What a wonderful thing happened! Quite unexpectedly, Gururaj<sup>33</sup> appeared.... (Dabholkar 1999: 520-521).

## 6. The Islāmic element

If Dabholkar repeatedly states that Sai Baba was ‘neither Hindu nor Muslim’ (Dabholkar 1999: 75, 105, 159, 692, 720), he is nonetheless forced to acknowledge his Muslim identity when quoting his words:

Dada, remember, his *guru* is a Brahmin, and I, a Muslim. Yet, regarding me to be the same as his own *guru*, he offered me *guru-puja* [*guru* worship].<sup>34</sup> Not once did the doubt arise in his mind that “I am a Brahmin, pure and holy and he, an impure Muslim. How can I worship him?” (Dabholkar 1999: 171).

To be sure, our *faqīr* was constantly engrossed in the recollection (*dhikr*) of Allāh and his sovereignty: the name Allāh Mālik, one of Allāh’s beautiful ninety-nine names, was always on his lips. It is noteworthy that Dabholkar narrates that the saint would eat mutton on occasions, provocatively

<sup>31</sup> Analogously, the firefly is symbolic of worldly life: in the ‘light of the sun’ of Sai Baba’s grace it ‘fades away and is completely lost;’ Dabholkar (1999: 764).

<sup>32</sup> A trader and carrier of grain, salt, etc. The Vanjaris appear to have originated in Rajasthan.

<sup>33</sup> Lit. ‘the king of *gurus*,’ Sai Baba’s own *guru*. The meaning seems to be that he recognized that the Vanjari was none other than his *guru*.

<sup>34</sup> This ritual worship involves the presentation of vegetarian and other offerings, and their return to the worshipper in the form of consecrated food (*prasāda*).

asking one of his Brahmin devotees to purchase the meat, and that he himself ‘poured the pieces of mutton’ into the cooking vessel (Dabholkar 1999: 630-631).<sup>35</sup>

Though Dabholkar states that Sai Baba needed no animal to sacrifice (Dabholkar 1999: 176), yet he writes that he once put to the test his devotees by asking them to kill in one stroke a goat that was on the verge of death and to offer it in sacrifice, as is customary in Islām. While several of them refused to do so, the Brahmin Hari Sitaram Dixit took courage and was about to execute the saint’s command when at the last moment the saint stopped him, preventing him from cutting the throat of the goat that soon after died a natural death (Dabholkar 1999: 380, 382-385, 388, 872; Satpathy 2024: 106).

In the Marāṭhī milieu, at least from the 16th century onward, Hinduism has tended to integrate saintly figures of Sufi background through the synthetic icon of Dattātreya, accommodating Islāmic mysticism with nondual Vedānta. For instance, in Marāṭhī sources the *guru* of the poet-saint Eknāth (1533-1599), *i.e.* Janārdan Svāmī/Chānd Bodhle, appears as a *faqīr* of Muslim background and is understood to be an *avatāra* of Dattātreya. In modern iconography, Dattātreya is represented standing with three heads (*trimukhī*) since he incorporates the triad of Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva. In his six arms he holds the emblems of the *trimūrti*: the water pot and prayer beads of Brahmā, the mace and conch of Viṣṇu—his focal identity—the drum and trident of Śiva. He is surrounded by three or four dogs, symbols of extreme impurity but nevertheless said to represent the *Vedas*, as well as by a cow, symbol of Kamadhenu and of Brahmanical purity. Dattātreya’s connection with dogs is old, dating back to the 13th century in Mahānubhāv literature (Rigopoulos 2011; Tulpule 1991).

In the *Shri Sai Satcharita* Sai Baba’s oneness with Dattātreya is repeatedly stressed (Dabholkar 1999: 6, 57, 539, 866, 868, 877, 882), and there is no question that the saint’s frequent link and identification with the ‘impure’ dog resonates with the belief that he is an *avatāra* of Dattātreya, the supreme ascetic (*avadhūta*) who is beyond *dharma* and *adharma*, pure and impure (Rigopoulos 2021: 226-228). There are echoes in the *Shri Sai Satcharita* of Purāṇic references to Dattātreya and his twenty-four teachers (*Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 11.7-9, corresponding to *Uddhavaḡītā* 2-4)—among whom are several animals—as when Dabholkar states that the meditator becomes one with the object he/she meditates upon, as it happens to the insect that becomes the black bee,<sup>36</sup> and as when Sai Baba is reported saying that the

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<sup>35</sup> From time to time, Sai Baba would distribute food with meat in it; see Dabholkar (1999: 630).

<sup>36</sup> The idea is that one can assume the form of another by focusing one’s mind on it. In *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 11.9.22-23 we read: “On whatever a man focuses his entire mind through love, hate, or fear, he attains its form. A worm, contemplating the wasp who has brought him to his hive, O King, becomes like a wasp without losing its former shape” (Olivelle 1992: 185 n. 36).

deer,<sup>37</sup> the elephant, the moth, the fish and the black bee find their ruin due to their strong attraction to sense objects (Dabholkar 1999: 500, 651, 741, 773).

Last but not least, our hagiography associates the pig with the dog. The pig is regarded as filthy and ritually impure by Hindus and Muslims alike,<sup>38</sup> and it is well-known that the consumption of its meat is *haram*, i.e. prohibited by the Quran. The pig (together with the sow) is mentioned a considerable number of times in the *Shri Sai Satcharita*, i.e. twelve, and the fact that our *faqīr* identified himself with it saying that feeding a hungry pig smeared with mud was tantamount to feeding him (Dabholkar 1999: 143, 698) proves that he had no taboos and made no differences whatsoever. Through his life and teachings, Sai Baba communicated the mystical recognition of the unity of being, of reality as a unified whole (*waḥdat al-wujūd*, *advaita*):

To experience the oneness of the Self in all beings is the utmost limit of all Knowledge. Emancipation and Bliss are really born from such Knowledge (Dabholkar 1999: 311).

I am formless and everywhere. I am in everything. I am in everything and beyond. I fill all space. All that you see taken together is Myself. I do not shake or move.

All that is seen is my form: ant, fly, prince, pauper.

I am in the water, in dry places, in woods, amidst crowds, and in the solitary wilderness. I am in the fire and in ether. I am not limited to any place.

Feeding the hungry bitch is feeding me. I have the feeling of my hunger being satisfied, when hers is satisfied.

I am still belching with the heavy feeding you gave the dog this morning. I am also in the mire besmirched pig (that you did not feed, though it came to you). To serve me, give up differentiation.

Sometimes I come as dog, sometimes as pig. The devotee who recognizes me in each form and treats me adequately is blessed (Narasimhaswami 1942: 11-12).

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<sup>37</sup> In Hinduism, the deer (*mṛga*) is the animal most associated with the ascetic lifestyle; see Olivelle (2008: 94).

<sup>38</sup> On the symbolic use of pigs in contemporary South India by the Hindu right as well as the Dalit right, see Narayanan (2023).



Figure 1. Excerpt from *Sai Baba. Amar Chitra Katha*, n. 225, edited by Anant Pai. Script: Shobha Gangolli; Artworks: C. M. Vitankar. Bombay: India Book House, n.d., 6 [Fair use; no permission needed].



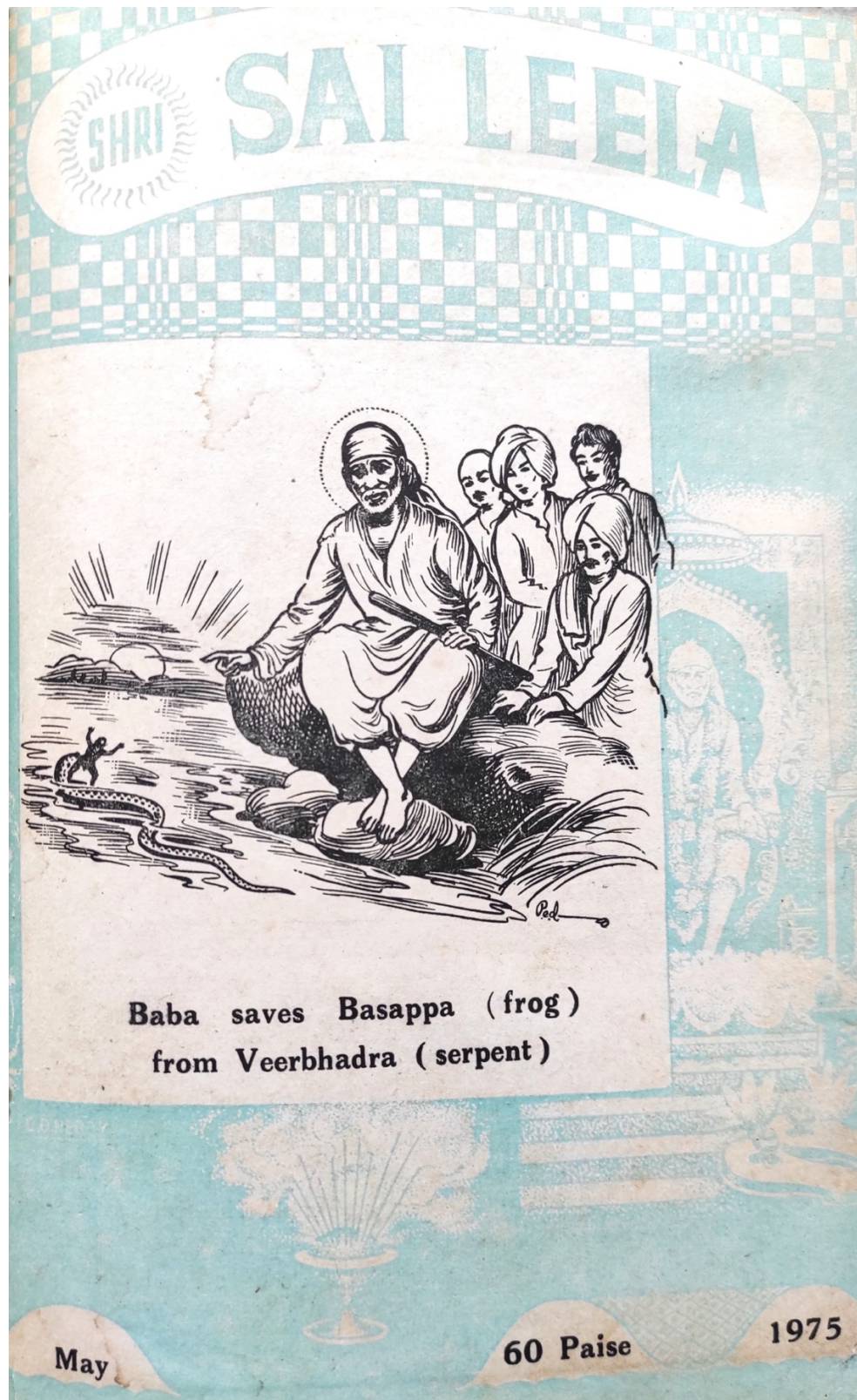


Figure 2. Sai Baba's story of the frog and the snake; *Shri Sai Satcharita* 47.66-194 (Dabholkar 1999: 769-779). Cover of monthly magazine *Shri Sai Leela*. Official Organ of Shirdi Sansthan, May 1975 [Public domain; no copyright].



A darvesh had tamed a tiger who used to do certain tricks and thus maintain himself and his master. As the tiger grew old, he could no longer play his tricks. Naturally, he and his master both had to face starvation. Ultimately, the tiger became mad and uncontrol-



lable. As he was approaching his end, the darvesh brought him to Baba for a last grace. Baba asked the darvesh to release the animal who at once became quiet. Approaching Baba he prostrated himself at Baba's feet and as Baba was stroking his back, the tiger opened his jaw and breathed his last. Baba said, "This was a great bhakta of Lord Shiva. He has gone to Kailasa. Now bury his mortal remains in front of Shiva".

It was done. Today his tomb can be seen in Shirdi.

Figure 3. Sai Baba and the tiger; *Shri Sai Satcharita* 31.125-166 (Dabholkar 1999: 510-513). Excerpt from D. D. Parchure, *Children's Sai Baba*. Paintings: Shri G. D. Pednekar; Blocks: D. D. Neroy. Shirdi: Shri Sai Baba Sansthan, 1983, 25 [Fair use; no permission needed].



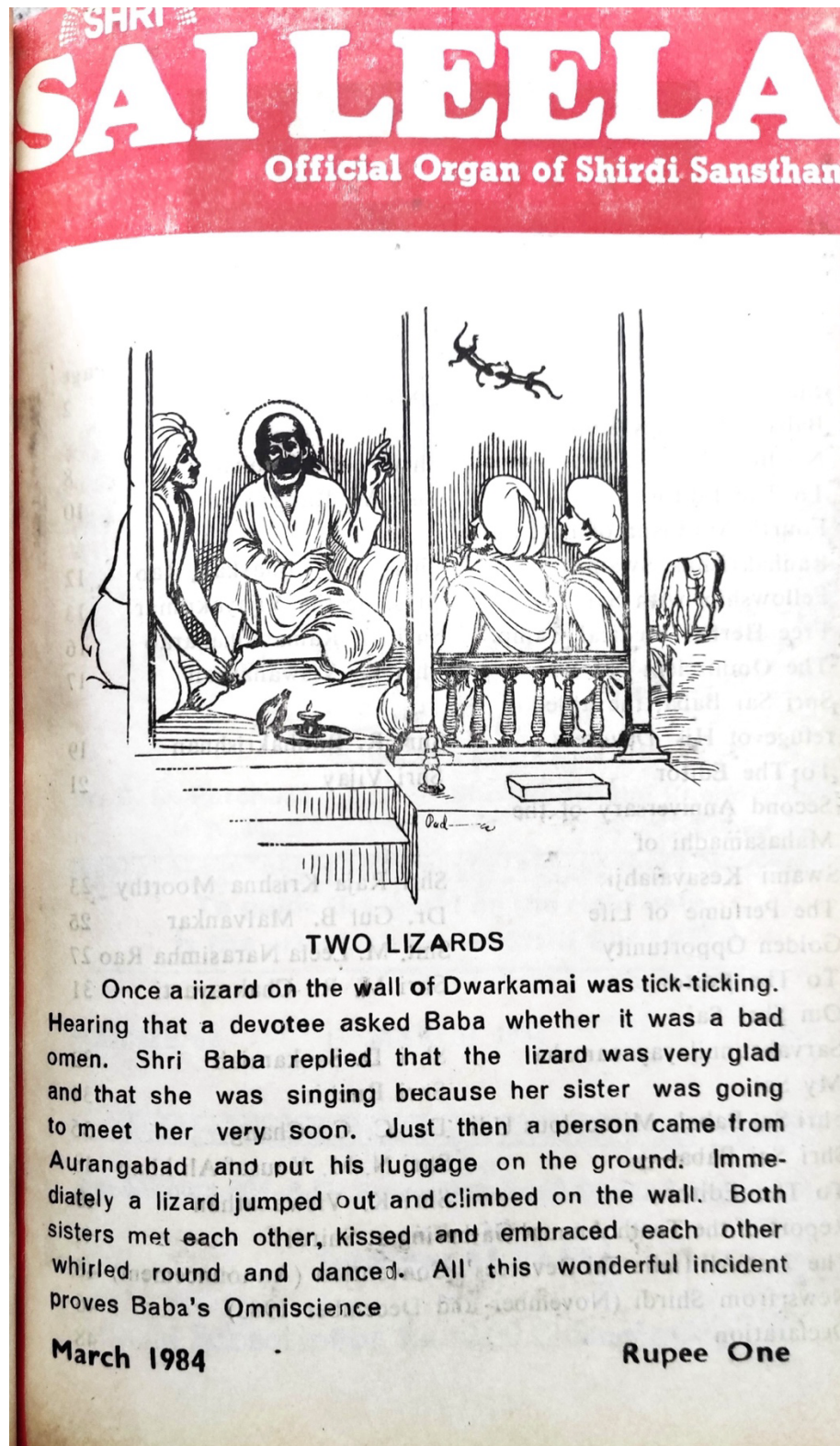


Figure 4. Sai Baba's story of the lizard; Shri Sai Satcharita 15.82-104 (Dabholkar 1999: 244-246). Cover of monthly magazine Shri Sai Leela. Official Organ of Shirdi Sansthan, March 1984 [Public domain; no copyright].



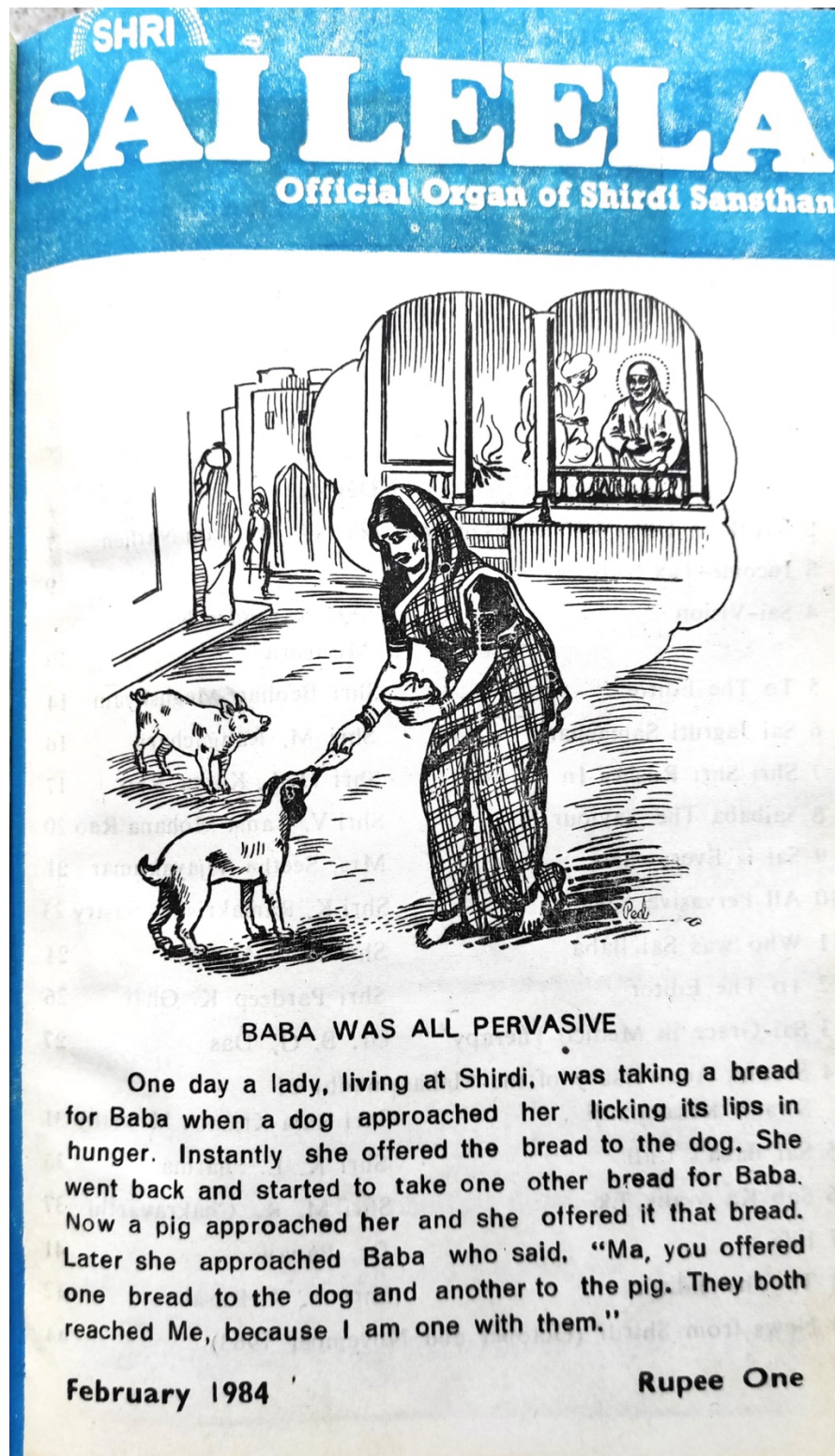


Figure 5. Mrs. Tarkhad, a lady devotee, feeds a hungry dog and a hungry pig. Sai Baba praises her compassion and tells her that by feeding them she has fed him; *Shri Sai Satcharita* 9:116-131 (Dabholkar 1999: 142-143). Cover of monthly magazine *Shri Sai Leela*. Official Organ of Shirdi Sansthan, February 1984 [Public domain; no copyright].

## Appendix 1

### Complete list of animals in the *Shri Sai Satcharita*\*

- 1.76 (creatures)
- 3.81 (never reject dog, pig or fly: without some special bond from previous birth, no one comes to us), 3.85, 3.106 (worm, black bee), 3.110 (Rohilla compared to buffalo), 3.145-146, 3.148 (worm, ant), 3.149, 3.164-165 (animate and inanimate creation)
- 4.40 (animate universe), 4.76 (donkey)
- 5.7-14 (story of lost mare), 5.28 (bullocks)
- 6.26 (variety of moving creatures)
- 7.9 (horses), 7.21 (fish, dog), 7.29 (deerskin), 7.49 (cow's milk), 7.57 (goat)
- 8.10 (dogs, pigs), 8.11, 13 (dogs), 8.14 (bees, dogs), 8.21 (worms, insects), 8.31 (every living being), 8.40 (fish), 8.45 (mobile creatures, immobile beings), 8.50 (varied species of created beings), 8.51 (other species), 8.55 (birds, animals, worms, insects), 8.57 (creature), 8.89 (all beings), 8.100 (crows, dogs), 8.102 (cats, dogs), 8.148 (Sai Baba's *mādhūkārī* practice; *pañcasūnā*, i.e. five things in a house by which animal life may be accidentally destroyed: fireplace, slab for grinding condiments, broom, pestle and mortar, waterpot)
- 9.2 (*pañcasūnā*), 9.3 (all beings), 9.14-15, 17-19, 31-32, 37 (horses), 9.54-62 (*pañcasūnā*, cow-dung), 9.116-117 (hungry dog), 9.117 (hungry pig), 9.126-127 (feeding hungry dog and pig is feeding Sai Baba), 9.128 (dogs, pigs, cats), 9.129 (dog, pig, cow, cat, ant, fly, aquatic creature), 9.130 (all beings), 9.158 (all creatures)
- 10.13 (tiger, goat; Sai Baba is a trusted refuge), 10.19 (fly, worm, ant: Sai Baba assumes their forms), 10.20 (fly), 10.22 (worms, ants, pigs, dogs, birds: Sai Baba looks at them equally), 10.72 (Sai Baba saw *Brahman* in all creatures), 10.91 (Sai Baba is a worm in the faeces of devotees), 10.101 (goat), 10.112 (those who don't believe in Sai Baba are like frogs)
- 11.12 (bee hovers around the *guru*), 11.46 (flies), 11.101-104 (killing of goat), 11.115 (birds and animals stricken with fear), 11.118-119 (cattle, calves), 11.124 (Sai Baba needed no animal sacrifice, of goat or cock), 11.136 (birds and animals took heart), 11.137 (cattle, calves, birds), 11.138 (cattle)
- 12.9 (compassion of Sai Baba for all creatures), 12.163 (Sajan killed animals for a livelihood)
- 13.85, 91-97 (black dog fed on rice and curds), 13.156 (Sai Baba is well-disposed toward all creatures), 13.166 (snake's head)

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\* All deities and their animal vehicles have purposefully been omitted.

- 14.6 (black dog fed on rice and curds), 14.18-19 (animal: derogatory for man who does not make the best of this opportunity of human life), 14.21 (serpent of death), 14.55 (the *ātman* dwells in all creatures), 14.65 (horses), 14.66 (alligator of great worry), 14.74 (living beings), 14.186 (oneness of all beings), 14.201 (whole creation, animate and inanimate, is pervaded by Sai Baba), 14.208 (listeners as thirsty Chatak birds)
- 15.12-17 (cat and kittens that suckle at her teats), 15.70 (Sai Baba abides in the hearts of all creatures), 15.72 (insect, ant and creatures living in water and moving in the sky, land animals, dog, pig: Sai Baba pervades them all), 15.77 (Chatak bird), 15.82-104 (story of the lizard)
- 16.20 (greater than Kamadhenu is the *guru*, the divine cow), 16.84-85 (delusion and disappearance of oyster shell), 16.99 (silver of the oyster shell and serpent in the rope are optical illusions), 16.134 (the *ātman* dwells in all creatures), 16.151 (nonduality between God and creatures)
- 17.6 ('swans' of the Manas lake), 17.8 (seeking of animals by dull-witted people), 17.11 ('swan' separating milk from water), 17.19 (illusion of silver in oyster shell), 17.31-33 (ten sense organs as wild horses), 17.62 (*māyā* as snake), 17.67 (mind engrossed with animals), 17.68 (crocodiles of arrogance and envy), 17.122 (crocodiles of passions; *timingil* fish), 17.124, 127 (parrot that holds fast to the perch within the cage)
- 18.61 (Chatak bird)
- 19.13 (oyster shell as scintillating silver, coiled rope as serpent: these are illusory perceptions), 19.14 (illusion of seeing a rope as a snake), 19.44 (Sai Baba, the 'cloud of knowledge,' rained to quench the thirst of the Chakor birds, i.e. his devotees), 19.68, 70-71 (as a mother tortoise feeds her little ones on her loving glance, so was the way of Sai Baba's *guru*), 19.111-113 (loving glances of mother tortoise nourish the offspring), 19.130 (the *guru* dwells in all beings), 19.133 (recognition of the *ātman* in all beings is the outmost limit of all knowledge), 19.134-136 (description of an elephant to a blind man: an impossible task), 19.139 (Sai Baba dwells in all beings), 19.141 (due to the tie of previous birth, one should not shoo away a man, beast or bird), 19.143 (one should never 'bark' at people), 19.151 (creatures live so long as they breathe), 19.204-205 (village sow feasting on excrements), 19.254 (goddess Sarasvati compared to black bee), 19.256 (Dabholkar bows humbly at the feet of living creatures)
- 20.1 (steadfast devotees compared to 'swans'), 20.75 (Jñāneśvar made a buffalo recite the *Vedas*), 20.114 (God dwells in the hearts of all beings), 20.116 (God fills both the living and non-living realms), 20.119 (creation made up of living and non-living creatures is insignificant in itself, i.e. is *māyā*; God alone is One without a second)

- 21.37 (buffalo as sole means of transport), 21.38 (horses, buffalo), 21.39-41, 62 (buffalo), 21.87 (allegorical tale of a horse), 21.91, 94, 100 (horse is God's grace and the nine lumps of its dung are the nine types of devotion)
- 22.3-7 (rope in semi-darkness mistaken for a snake), 22.8 (the thousand-headed cobra, king of serpents, praises Sai Baba with all his mouths and yet cannot understand his real nature), 22.25 (one must give up the ego and bow before all beings), 22.30 (spirit in all beings is one and the same), 22.52-53, 78, 80, 82-87, 99-100, 102-103, 164, 168-171 (story of snake), 22.172 (snakes, scorpions), 22.175 (all beings are equal: nonviolence toward all is the one common rule), 22.176 (scorpion, snake), 22.178-180 (scorpions), 22.195-206 (story of scorpion), 22.207 (snakes, scorpions, other venomous creatures), 22.209-231 (story of snake), 22.231-232 (snake, scorpion), 22.233 (one must love all creatures), 22.235 (goat)
- 23.7 (Sai Baba saw in all creatures God's presence), 23.22 (pig), 23.23-30 (story of parrot in cage), 23.24 (frog in a well similar to parrot), 23.33 (long snake), 23.36-66 (story of snake that bit Shyama's little finger, with Sai Baba "scolding" the venom), 23.74 (goat), 23.98 (Sai Baba's *mādhūkārī* way of requesting alms), 23.108-111 (story of the goat that Sai Baba asked his devotees to kill and offer in sacrifice), 23.126 (loss of animals), 23.128-169 (story of goat continued), 23.156 (beast), 23.197-199 (story of goat concluded)
- 24.129 (eyes of Sai Baba shone in daylight like those of a cat in darkness), 24.142 (may devotees savour the sweetness of the story, as a bee savours the sweetness of the flower)
- 25.12 (devotees like the thirsty Chakor bird), 25.67 (Sai Baba knew the secret desires of every creature)
- 26.1-2 (this whole creation is an illusory scene created by *māyā* and exists only in the mind), 26.8 (rope mistaken for snake), 26.74 (cow fearing tiger runs away only to meet a butcher), 26.124 (bullock cart)
- 27.4 (Chatak bird awaits eagerly the raindrops from the cloud, as devotees await this nectar-sweet story), 27.13 (only one who sees God in all created things can overcome *māyā*), 27.159 (Mrs. Khaparde was a well-fed cow in a previous birth), 27.171 (ant intent on the sweetness of the jaggery will not let go of it)
- 28.1 (Sai Baba dwells in all things, even in insects as tiny as an ant or fly), 28.15 (Sai Baba compares devotees to sparrows), 28.62, 69 (devotees absorbed at Sai Baba's lotus-feet as bees in a lotus), 28.99-100 (devotee as a little sparrow, pulled by the string and brought to Shirdi by Sai Baba)
- 29.34 (as peacock dances at the sight of clouds and as the Chakor bird is happy on seeing the moon, so was the devotee in her love for Sai Baba)



- 30.100 (horse is useful for visiting Sai Baba with a *ṭoṅgā*, a two-wheeled cart drawn by a horse), 30.123 (ferocious tiger was given refuge at Sai Baba's feet)
- 31.4 (ferocious tiger was given refuge at Sai Baba's feet), 31.6 (insects become bees; Jaḍabharata in his next life became a deer out of his love for the young one of a deer), 31.115 (devotee compared to a buzzing bee hovering around the pollen), 31.125-166 (ill tiger at Sai Baba's feet), 31.127 (bullock cart), 31.143 (worm, insect, tiger)
- 32.3 (tiger), 32.26 (the creatures of the two sexes are the branches of the tree of life), 32.42 (Sai Baba pervades this entire universe), 32.62 (crow), 32.75 (*guru* as mother bird that clasps her young ones under her wings), 32.166 (bird compared to the mind caught in the bewilderment of *māyā*)
- 33.45 (scorpion bite), 33.82 (*ārtī* of Sai Baba: he is the giver of happiness to creatures; meek Chatak bird wishes only for the pure water of bliss), 33.95, 97-98, 102-103, 105 (good horses of a *ṭoṅgā*), 33.112 (nectar before a thirsty Chakor bird), 33.130 (Sai Baba pervades this creation, animate and inanimate), 33.175 (horses of *ṭoṅgā* are ill)
- 34.48-90 (Doctor Pillai, infected with guinea worms, is cured by Sai Baba), 34.73, 82-85 (Sai Baba's servant Abdul identified with a crow), 34.164 (cobra fed with milk by devotee)
- 35.14 (cobra regarded as Sai Baba), 35.17 (the little ones of a tortoise are nurtured on the loving glances of their mother), 35.54-58 (sparrows, one alive that flew away and two dead), 35.201-215 (story of cattle and cobra; Mr. Nevaskar identifies a cobra with Sai Baba and offers it milk)
- 36.7 (Sai Baba as 'swan')
- 37.8 (ability to see God in all creatures), 37.15 (creatures move about fearlessly when there is no fear of death and there are no restrictions), 37.16 (the same divine principle fills everything, both animate and inanimate), 37.22-23 (donkey associated to sensual pleasure), 37.31 (ties of sons, animals, etc. are due to *māyā*), 37.33 (oneness between God and creatures), 37.77 (as a calf does not want to leave the mother so our mind should be fastened to the *guru*'s feet), 37.87 (dogs and pigs roll in mire, feeding on excrements), 37.127, 140, 146 (behavior and ornaments of Sai Baba's horse Shyamkarna during processions), 37.139 (banners with eagle pictures)
- 38.16 (all creatures are born out of food), 38.29 (animal sacrifice sanctioned by *Shastras*; even Brahmins eat the leftover meat), 38.30 (Sai Baba got a goat to be slaughtered, as per the Quran), 38.53 (Sai Baba asks his Brahmin devotee Dada Kelkar to get him some mutton from Korhala to eat), 38.63 (mutton), 38.65 (Sai Baba poured pieces of mutton in cooking vessel), 38.70 (Sai Baba's *mādhūkārī* practice)
- 39.9 (story of the lost mare of Chand Patil), 39.53 (devotees as Chakor bird, gazing on Sai Baba's face as if it were the moon), 39.72 (illusion of snake in a rope), 39.84 (as horses are harnessed to a chariot)

- so are the sense organs to the body), 39.90-93 (story of animals who are attracted to sense objects and find their ruin: deer to word, elephant to touch, moth to form, fish to taste, black bee to fragrance)
- 40.32 (Sai Baba is omnipresent and needs no horses or carriages), 40.39, 41 (Sai pervades everything, animate and inanimate), 40.43 (a propagator for *gośāla*, a shelter for cows), 40.47 (horse), 40.51-53 (cow protection), 40.100 (cow protection, feeding of cows), 40.171 (Chatak bird entreats the cloud for its selfish purpose)
  - 41.33 (Sai Baba's oneness with all beings), 41.154 (cow with milk-filled teats; leech that clings to the teat obtains impure blood), 41.155 (whereas the frog is left with mud and mire the bee drinks the lotus' nectar)
  - 42.39 (peacock feathers; flags with eagle pictures), 42.95 (Sai Baba's oneness with dogs and pigs), 42.100-104 (Sai Baba feeds a hungry dog; all creatures experience the same hunger; he who feeds any creature feeds Sai Baba), 42.115 (Sai Baba fills everything, the animate and the inanimate), 42.149 (superimposing silver on oyster shell)
  - 43.73 (Sai Baba pervades the whole creation), 43.94, 98 (fish that toss and turn in distress when the water in a pond dries up), 43.97 (Chatak bird), 43.99 (calf of a cow that has lost its way)
  - 44.101, 107, 109, 114, 176 (Sai Baba pervades the whole creation), 44.168-169 (all creatures are one with the *guru* who is all-pervasive)
  - 45.17 (the insect *kātīn*: Sai Baba's *līlā* knows no rest), 45.37 (presence of God is felt in all creatures), 45.38 (meditator becomes one with object meditated upon, as happens to the insect that becomes the black bee), 45.41 (God is seen in all beings by repeating the *guru*'s name), 45.55 (God dwells in the hearts of all creatures)
  - 46.40, 43 (bullock cart), 46.87 (elephants as a symbol of wealth), 46.91 (Sai Baba looks upon all creatures as equal and is one with them), 46.92-135 (herd of goats met by Sai Baba: story of two goats and of Sai Baba's compassion for them who had been greedy men in their past lives), 46.109 (Sai Baba sees God in all creatures)
  - 47.3 (firefly of worldly life), 47.14 (story of goats), 47.24 (rebirth in movable and immovable realms), 47.39 (bullock carts), 47.41-42, 48-49, 52-53, 56, 58-59 (frog), 47.53, 56-57, 60, 63-64 (snake), 47.66-194 (story of Basappa, reborn as frog, and of Veerabhadrapappa, reborn as snake), 47.122 (deer, cobra, moth)
  - 48.22 (elephant as worldly life), 48.37 (Chatak bird), 48.139-140 (Sai Baba is the whole creation)

- 49.35, 96 (*ṭoṅgā*), 49.68 (chameleon), 49.114-15 (horse), 49.143 (God fills the universe), 49.156 (Sai Baba as the indweller of all hearts), 49.178, 181 (sense organs as horses), 49.185 (the *sadguru* or supreme *guru* runs this creation)
- 50.1 (intestinal worm: fortunate not to be born as one), 50.9 (the *guru* is all-pervading), 50.10 (devotees as Chakor birds), 50.30 (oyster shell and its pearl), 50.51 (Chakor and Chatak birds, i.e. Sai Baba devotees), 50.70 (pure consciousness is present in all creatures), 50.83 (the multitude of beings is full of ignorance), 50.86 (God dwells in the heart of creatures), 50.98 (all animate beings are enveloped by beginningless ignorance), 50.100 (leeches fond of impure blood), 50.101 (frog feasts on mire, black bee flits amid the fragrant pollen), 50.120 (God is in all beings), 50.121 (the sacrificial animal represents the separateness between God and his creatures), 50.131 (as a moth is attracted to a lamp so a pseudo-sage forgets to discriminate between good and bad), 50.137 (desire and anger swallow up creatures), 50.138 (the coils of *kālasarpa*, the ‘serpent that is time,’ i.e. deadly ignorance, is at the root of the sandalwood tree, i.e. knowledge), 50.140-141 (the serpent of death/ignorance must be destroyed), 50.164 (a rope appears to be a snake, an oyster shell seems to contain silver: this is caused by ignorance), 50.183 (a garland appears as a snake due to the fading light of the evening, i.e. ignorance), 50.191-192 (a rope appears as a snake due to dim light, i.e. ignorance), 50.200 (great scholars as glow worms before the sun)
- 51.28 (devotees as sparrows that Sai Baba draws to him), 51.43, 70 (exhibition of horses), 51.56, 89 (*ṭoṅgā*), 51.98, 100 (Chakor birds long for the moon; Chatak birds long for the cloud), 51.102 (death puts an end to the life of every creature), 51.233-234 (the horse Shyamsundar/Shyamkarna)
- Epilogue. 52.25 (Sai Baba fills this whole creation), 52.33-34 (crocodiles of anger, envy, etc.), 52.34 (aquatic creatures of censure, jealousy, scorn, etc.), 52.39 (may Sai Baba’s presence be seen in all creatures), 52.77 (can a fly ever lift the Meru mountain or a lapwing suck the ocean?)
- Epitome. 53.20 (Sai Baba can make even a fly lift the Meru mountain), 53.53 (feeding rice and curd to a black dog), 53.60 (story of the lizard), 53.72 (Baba averted the calamity of snakebites), 53.73 (Sai Baba averted the danger of a scorpion bite and of snakebites), 53.74 (Sai Baba’s cure of a snakebite; story of the killing of a goat), 53.96 (upliftment of a devotee, who is like a black bee in Sai Baba’s lotus feet; upliftment of the cruel tiger), 53.99 (friend of Narayan Jani bitten by scorpion), 53.103 (Doctor Pillai afflicted by guinea worms), 53.131 (previous birth of two goats), 53.132 (past lives of a frog and a snake), 53.173 (Dabholkar as black bee hovering around Sai Baba’s lotus feet), 53.195 (Sai Baba destroys the snake of the fear of worldly life)

## Appendix 2

### Number of occurrences

Total number – 423

Animal / Animate being / Beast / Creature (general term) – 106

Horse / Mare – 30

Snake – 29

Dog – 21

Goat – 13

Cow – 12

Pig / Sow – 12

Chatak bird – 10

Scorpion – 9

Worm – 9

Bird – 8

Chakor bird – 8

Fly – 8

Insect – 8

Tiger – 8

Ant – 7

Bee – 7

Black bee – 7

Fish / Aquatic creature – 7

Frog – 7

Oyster (shell of) – 7

Buffalo – 6

Cat / Kitten – 6

Cobra – 6

Bullocks – 5

Deer – 5

Elephant – 5

‘Swan’ (Bar-headed goose) – 5

Calf – 4

Cattle – 4



Parrot – 4  
Sparrow – 4  
Crocodile – 3  
Crow – 3  
Moth – 3  
Mutton – 3  
Tortoise – 3  
Donkey – 2  
Eagle – 2  
Guinea worm – 2  
Leech – 2  
Lizard – 2  
Peacock – 2  
Alligator – 1  
Chameleon – 1  
Cock – 1  
Firefly – 1  
Glow worm – 1  
Intestinal worm – 1  
*kātīṇ* insect – 1  
Lapwing – 1  
*timīṅgil* fish – 1

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Antonio Rigopoulos is Professor of Sanskrit in the Department of Asian and North African Studies at the Ca’ Foscari University of Venice. His main fields of research are the ascetic and devotional traditions of medieval and modern Maharashtra, the *Bhagavadgītā* and its commentarial tradition, Hindu hagiographies and hagiographers, and the Sai Baba movement. He is the editor-in-chief of the journal *Annali di Ca’ Foscari – Serie orientale*. Latest publications: *Behind Kṛṣṇa’s Smile: The Lord’s Hint of Laughter in the Bhagavadgītā and Beyond*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2024 (with Gianni Pellegrini); “Dattātreya.” In: *Oxford Bibliographies in Hinduism*, editor-in-chief Tracy Coleman, 1-14. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2024; “S. Kuppaswami Sastri and the Exegetical Principles of *eka-vākyatā* and *samanvaya*: Their Influence on S. R. Ranganathan’s Epistemology.” In: *The Universe of Knowledge: Celebrating Shiyali Ramamrita Ranganathan (1892-1972)*, edited by Fausto Freschi and Andrea Cuna, 75-107. Udine: Forum, 2024; “Hagiographic Connections between Shirdi Sai Baba and Sathya Sai Baba: Venkusha, Venkavadhuta, and the Integrative Icon of Dattatreya.” In: *Devotional Spaces of a Global Saint: Shirdi Sai Baba’s Presence*, edited by Smriti Srinivas, Neelima Jeychandran and Allen F. Roberts, 49-68. London and New York, NY: Routledge, 2022.

Antonio can be contacted at: [a.rigo@unive.it](mailto:a.rigo@unive.it)