DEVOTIONAL SPACES OF A GLOBAL SAINT

SHIRDI SAI BABA'S PRESENCE

Edited by Smriti Srinivas, Neelima Jeychandran,
and Allen F. Roberts

The recent decades have seen a burgeoning scholarship in "guru" studies but less a sustained and detailed look at how the charisma of a "saint" actually travels through space and time in its specificities— textual, material, and visual. This remarkably diverse and fascinating volume of essays shows us how this happens in the case of Shirdi Sai Baba, the well-known South Asian holy figure who remains uncontained by rigorously drawn religious boundaries and identities not just in the subcontinent but in the global religious landscape. A pleasure to read, the book is an important contribution to how we might think through the cosmopolitanism of sacred presence.

—**Srilata Raman,** *Professor, Department of Religion, University of Toronto*

This anthology makes an important and welcome addition to the scant scholarship on one of the most intriguing and enduringly influential spiritual figures of the early twentieth century. Though he lived and died in an obscure village in central Maharashtra, Sai Baba of Shirdi has acquired a global and still-growing reputation as an accessible and compassionate master whose teachings and following transcend religious categories. A dozen distinguished scholars representing a range of disciplines and area specializations consider Baba's legacy in South and Southeast Asia, Africa, and beyond, giving special attention to the two- and three-dimensional icons that both embody his "message" and provide a conduit for his ongoing and often miraculous interventions in devotees' lives.

—**Philip Lutgendorf,** *Emeritus Professor of Hindi and Modern Indian Studies, University of Iowa*

The essays in this volume reveal an enigmatic yet familiar figure: Shirdi Baba, the "bearer of our burdens," whose presence connotes both enchantment and promise. As he moves from framed picture to icon, his charisma keeps pace with the changing nature of lives and fortunes, landscapes, and labor. Beyond religions, and yet of them, constitutively hybrid, he fosters and nurtures fraternity.

—**V. Geetha,** *Independent Scholar and Historian, Chennai, India*

Devotional Spaces of a Global Saint

Devotional Spaces of a Global Saint focuses on the presence and contemporaneity of Shirdi Sai Baba (d.1918), who has a vast following in postcolonial South Asia and an ever-growing global diaspora. Essays consider the saint's influence on everyday life and how visual, narrative, textual, sensorial, performative, political, social, and spatial practices interpenetrate to produce multiple terrains of devotion.

Contributions by twelve scholars of several academic disciplines explore eruptions and circulations of sacred materials, spatialities of devotional practices, visual and digital imaginaries, transcultural narrativizations, and material affects and effects of Sai Baba. The presentation transcends routine scholarly discussions about sainthood, cultures of worship, religious objects, Hinduism, and Islam. Shirdi Sai Baba's presence conveys inspiration and healing energies, and he accepted the entreaties of people of all castes and creeds, offering an alternative to communal ideologies of his time—and the present. Considerations of Shirdi Sai Baba's milieus of devotional praxis situate and localize debates about the meaning of nation and religion, past and present, urbanization, and class identity in transitions from colonial to postcolonial/global South Asia and beyond.

The book expands the boundaries of the study of Shirdi Sai Baba and makes important contributions to South Asian Studies, Inter-Asian Studies, Indian Ocean Studies, African Studies, Anthropology, Religious Studies, Global Studies, Urban Studies, Visual and Media Studies, and Cultural Geography.

Smriti Srinivas is Professor of Anthropology at the University of California, Davis, USA.

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Devotional Spaces of a Global Saint

Shirdi Sai Baba's Presence

Edited by
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In Shirdi Sai Baba's abiding presence:

For Mary "Polly" Nooter Roberts (1959–2018)

And our parents,

Nirmala Murthy and S. N. S. Murthy

Latha Jeyachandran and Jeyachandran Raman

Ruth Fraleigh Roberts and Sidney Hubbard Roberts

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Note on Transliteration

Although this edited book has several contributions on South Asia, it is also based on research and fieldwork conducted in other world areas. In the interests of its readership, therefore, we have not used a scholarly system of transliteration or diacritical marks for Hindi/Hindustani, Marathi, Sanskrit, Tamil, or other South Asian language words that appear in this work, but the most common and recognizable English forms. For instance, we have opted for Dvarkamai (Dvārkāmāī) when referring to Shirdi Sai Baba's mosque. We italicize those words derived from an Indian language when used frequently in the text such as *murti* (embodiment); to refer to a specific idea or term such as the exchanges of gazes between deity and devotee (*darshan*); or for texts like the *Shri Sai Satcharita* (*Śrī Sāīsaccarita*). For simplicity, plurals are indicated by adding "s" to the end of Indian language words (e.g., *murtis*). We also italicize words from any other language "foreign" to English such as *marabout* (French orthography for a Sufi holy man in Africa) but not those that might be familiar to an English-speaking audience or have entered the English dictionary such as "guru" or "fakir." For non-English words, we have retained diacritics for place-names (e.g., Côte d'Ivoire), names of our contributors, or where publications originally appeared with existing diacritics.

Contributors

Dušan Deák is an historian, ethnographer, and is currently Associate Professor of Religious Studies at the Department of Comparative Religion, Comenius University in Bratislava, Slovakia. He holds a doctorate in history from the University of Pune (2002). His primary research interest is social history and the ethnography of devotional cults with precolonial origins in the Marathi Deccan, but he has also worked on the reception of Indian ideas and practices in Central Europe. Apart from several shorter studies, he wrote a Slovak monograph *Indian Saints between the Past and the Present* (2010) and, along with Daniel Jasper, edited a collected volume *Rethinking Western India: The Changing Contexts of Culture, Society, and Religion* (2014). With Rowenna J. Baldwin, he prepared for publication a translation of an Indian diary of a Russian emigree to Czechoslovakia, Vera Luboshinsky (*Life in an Indian Palace: The Diary of Vera Luboshinsky*, forthcoming). He is currently working on a monograph on Muslim holy men and the communities of their devotees in the Marathi Deccan.

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Jonathan Loar received his doctorate in West and South Asian Religions from Emory University in 2016. His dissertation examined Shirdi Sai Baba's life story as told and retold in text, film, and social media in Marathi, Hindi, and English. He previously published "From Neither/ Nor to Both/And: Reconfiguring the Life and Legacy of Shirdi Sai Baba in Hagiography," *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 22 (2018): 475–496. Currently, he is a South Asia reference librarian in the Asian Division of the U. S. Library of Congress. The views expressed in his interleaf essay belong to the author.

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, Hindu hagiographies and hagiographers, termite mound mythologies, and the Sai Baba movement. Among his publications are *The Hagiographer and the Avatar: The Life and Works of Narayan Kasturi* (2021); *Oral Testimonies on Sai Baba* (2020); *The Mahanubhavs* (2011); *Guru. Il fondamento della civiltà dell'India* (2009); *Dattalahari. L'onda di Datta* (1999); *Dattatreya: The Immortal Guru, Yogin, and Avatara* (1998); *The Life and Teachings of Sai Baba of Shirdi* (1993); and "The Construction of a Cultic Center through Narrative: The Founding Myth of the Village of Puttaparthi and Sathya Sai Baba," *History of Religions* 54, no. 2 (2014): 117–150. He has authored the entries *Dattatreya, Maharashtra, Shirdi Sai Baba, Trimurti*, and *Vibhuti* in *Brill's Encyclopedia of Hinduism*, vols. 1, 5 (2009, 2013). He is the editor-in-chief of the journal *Annali di Ca' Foscari—Serie orientale*.

Allen F. Roberts is Distinguished Professor Emeritus of World Arts and Cultures at the University of California Los Angeles. Trained as a socio-cultural anthropologist (PhD, University of Chicago, 1980), he studies sub-Saharan visual and performance arts, local-level politics, and religious dynamics. Before moving to UCLA where he taught from 1999 to 2021, he was a professor at Albion College, the University of Michigan, and the University of Iowa. Aside from research, writing, teaching, and museum exhibitions undertaken with his late spouse Polly Roberts as listed below, he has written the prize-winning monograph *A Dance of Assassins: Performing Early Colonial Hegemony in the Congo* (2013) and was chief editor and principal author of *Striking Iron: The Art of African Blacksmiths* (2019). Among other "hats" he has worn, he undertook research on social impacts of photovoltaic applications in developing countries for the US National Aeronautics and Space Administration

(1979–1986), was a Peace Corps Volunteer in the Republic of Chad (1968–1970), and a gandy dancer on the Alaska Railroad (1964).

Mary "Polly" Nooter Roberts (d. 2018) was an Africanist art historian (PhD, Columbia University, 1990). She was Professor of World Arts and Cultures at UCLA (2009–2018), Consulting Curator for African Arts at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (2011–2018), Deputy Director and Chief Curator of the UCLA Fowler Museum (1999–2008), and Senior Curator of the Museum for African Art in New York City (1984–1994). She and her spouse Al Roberts undertook research, writing, teaching, and museum work together, including the traveling exhibitions and award-winning books, *Memory: Luba Art and the Making of History* (1996), *The Shape of Belief* (1996), *A Sense of Wonder* (1997), and *A Saint in the City: Sufi Arts of Urban Senegal* (2003). She also curated *Secrecy: African Art that Conceals and Reveals* (1993), *Inscribing Meaning: Writing and Graphic Systems in African Art* (2011), *Shaping Power* (2013), *Senses of Time* (2015), and *The Inner Eye: Vision and Transcendence in African Arts* (2017). Polly studied visual practices associated with Shirdi Sai Baba in the late 1990s through 2018, with research in Germany, Ghana, India, Mauritius, and the United States.

Dana Rush is an affiliated researcher at Dynamiques Européennes, University of Strasbourg. As an art historian (PhD 1998, University of Iowa), she has researched and written about Vodun religion in Bénin and Togo since the 1990s, publishing articles and book chapters in a diverse range of anthologies and journals. Her book, *Vodun in Coastal Bénin: Unfinished, Open-Ended, Global* (2013), presents Vodun as an ever-changing cultural synthesis that emphasizes process over product and efficacy over beauty. Her current book project, "Divine Reparation: Histories and Memories of Slavery in Togo," demonstrates how Vodun material culture, visual arts, songs, oral histories, and religious performances serve as repositories of slave trade histories and a means to make spiritual reparations for slaves of generations past. Her newest project focuses on time, space, and gender fluidities in Vodun. She is a contributing editor to *African Arts* and associate editor of *Material Religion: the Journal of Objects, Art, and Belief.*

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UNWTO (World Tourism Organization) to work on a comprehensive study of Buddhist tourism in Asia that covered sixteen countries. He was lead author, editor-in-chief, and author of South Asia monographs in this publication entitled *Buddhist Tourism in Asia: Towards Sustainable Development*. He is on the editorial board of the *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage* and *Journal of Tourism and Hospitality Education*. His educational qualifications include a PhD from Monash University, Australia; MSc from Asian Institute of Technology; MTech from CEPT University, India; and Bachelors in Architecture from Pune University, India.

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engagement with Asia. Her interest in Shirdi Sai Baba springs from the role of cross-religious discourses in contemporary India.

Joanne Punzo Waghorne, Professor in the Department of Religion at Syracuse University, studies new religious movements within Hinduism and the Hindu diaspora in South India but most recently within Singapore. She argues that such spiritual movements herald the return of new cosmologies at the state and personal level. Her most recent work, *Singapore, Spirituality, and the Space of the State: The Soul of the Little Red Dot* (2020) followed an edited volume, *Place/No-Place in Urban Asian Religiosity* (2017). Earlier work includes the award-winning *Diaspora of the Gods* (2004) and *The Raja's Magic Clothes* (1994).

Figure I.1 The matrix photograph of Shirdi Sai Baba by D.D. Neroy. Shirdi, India, 1911.

Source: Public Domain.

Introduction

Baba's Always-Present Presence

*Smriti Srinivas, Neelima Jeychandran,
and Allen F. Roberts*

The subtitle of this volume—*Shirdi Sai Baba's Presence*—offers a tantalizing apostrophe. As a contraction of the verb "is," the saint's eternal, ontological presence is recognized, while as a possessive, "Baba's" suggests that such presence is willfully his endeavor (Figure I.1). Both senses further refer to contemporary devotional milieus, for Baba's vast following in postcolonial South Asia is accompanied by an ever-expanding global diaspora extending to new constituencies. Such devotions are due to inspiration and healing energies from Baba's life lessons, teaching, and immanence, with these boons reinforced for many by the saint's defiance of religious communitarianism as he refused to self-identify as either Hindu or Muslim. In welcoming all castes and creeds, Baba offers an alternative to the divisiveness of his time *and* ours.

In this, Baba can be understood as a saint of edges, in-betweens, and multiple centers as he mediates social and cultural differences. Innumerable temples and shrines dedicated to him exist from Bangalore to Quatre Bornes, Accra to Sacramento (Figure I.2). Indeed, it can be argued that the saint himself is present around the world when, on celebrated occasions, he miraculously produces ash (*udi, vibhuti*) on his embodying images as a "calling card." The substance, treasured though humble, is carefully removed for use in protection and promotion. Somewhat similarly, through the exchange of gazes between deities and supplicants that Hindus know as *darshan*, Baba lives in websites, blogs, and tweets attesting to and fostering his blessings in transcontinental and transcultural networks of devotion.

In this volume, we pay attention to eruptions and circulations of sacred materials, spatialities of devotional practices, visual and digital imaginaries, transcultural narrativizations, and material effects of and about Baba. Such foci transcend routine scholarly discussions of sainthood, cultures of worship, religious objects, and specificities of Hinduism and Islam. We approach religion as a *form of mediation*, as "medium, middle ground and the means" (Vries 2001: 7) with which devotees constitute themselves using the semantic, corporeal, imaginative, and spatial resources and histories that religion provides.

Essays by twelve scholars from around the world and trained in several disciplines explore how Shirdi Sai Baba and his milieus of devotional praxis
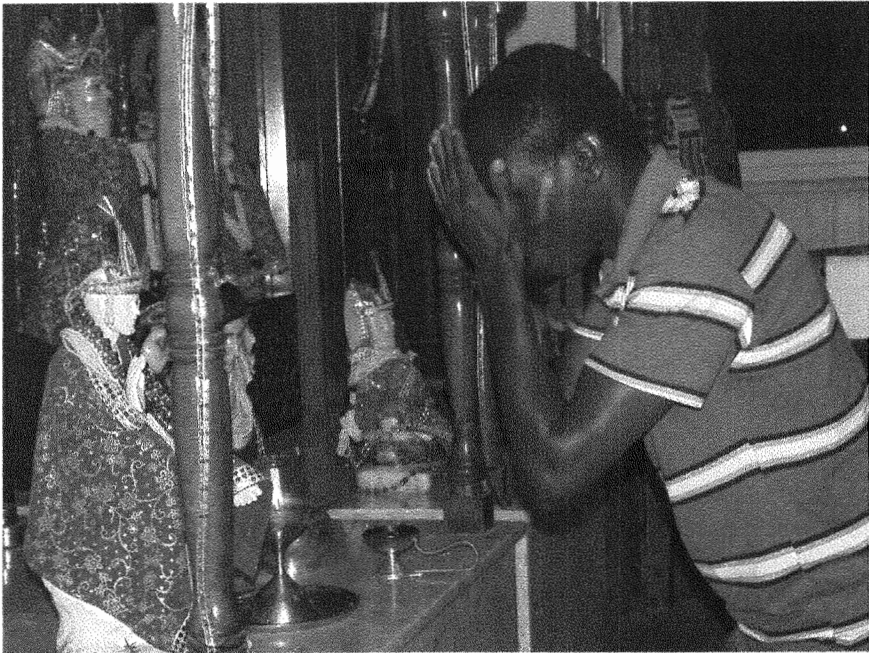
Figure I.2 A Ghanaian man offers devotions to Baba in the Hindu Temple of Osu,
a neighborhood of Accra, Ghana, 2012. Many holy persons are present,
including Hindu gods, Sikh gurus, and Jesus Christ.

Source: Photograph by Mary Nooter Roberts.

localize debates about nation and religion, past and present, urbanization
and social identity in transitions from colonial to postcolonial and global
circumstances. We consider media from cinema productions to posters, quo-
tidian images in roadside and wayside shrines and smaller venues to sculpted
epiphanies of the pilgrimage city of Shirdi and other significant temples. We
explore the emergence of specific practices, selves, and mobilities in the pub-
lic domain. As Christopher Pinney has argued (2004: 8), histories of images
and image-production offer adepts far more than a simple mirror of society,
for they may instigate novel identities complementary or contrary to those
elucidated through narrative processes. The visual is constitutive of social
and political realities and vice-versa, and we shall further argue for the need
to consider how visual, oral, embodied, performative, political, class, and
spatial practices interpenetrate and diverge to produce multiple terrains of
devotion derived from and impacting visualities.[1] Contributors also explore
connections and comparisons between Baba and contemporaneous saints/
gurus; Sufi, Muslim, and Dattatreya genealogies of Baba; incarnations
of Baba as healer, neighborhood protector, Muslim fakir (ascetic, mendi-
cant), composite saint, "India Spirit," and Hindu deity; the ever-expanding
pilgrimage-center of Shirdi; other urban forms and spaces of Baba devo-
tion; and his appeal to Asian as well as non-Asian constituencies.

Here we shall offer an account of key moments and features of Shirdi Sai Baba's life through and after his physical death in 1918. We consider his determinant indeterminacies (after Babb 2000: 190) that become the raison d'être for spatial, social, and religious transformations and translations of his life, form, and messages. We examine the theoretical and conceptual formulations of *haptic visualities* (e.g. Roberts and Roberts 2003, 2019), *spatial refabulations* (Roberts and Roberts 2008, 2016; Srinivas 2008, 2018), and *corporeal mobilities* (Jeychandran 2019, 2020; Srinivas 2015) that intersect with recent academic literatures. We ponder Baba's positionalities in trans-Asian and Indian Ocean worlds, hence possibilities for transfiguring-translating-transmigratory concepts, analyses, and methods.

Transfigurations of a Life[2]

Tree, Mosque, Temple

Shirdi Sai Baba was a mystic emerging from rich ascetic, renouncer, Sufi, and Bhakti contexts of Maharashtra and the Deccan regions of India. The *Shri Sai Satcharita,* understood by many as an authoritative (auto)biography, states that no one knew Baba's antecedents or could be sure who he was.[3] G.R. Dabholkar (1859–1929), named "Hemadpant" by Baba, had prayed that he might be permitted to write such a book. Placing his hand on Hemadpant's head and giving him sacred ash (*udi*), Baba asked him to collect stories, experiences, conversations, and talks, but reminded him that Hemadpant was only an instrument and that he, Shirdi Sai Baba, would write his own life (Gunaji 1972: 6; Kher 1999: 23).

Baba ate meat and fish with other fakirs and treated all Hindu castes and Muslims as equals. He encouraged the building of temples and celebration of Eid, Muharram, Gokulashtami, Rama Navami and other religious occasions; Brahmans and Agnihotris prostrated themselves before him (Gunaji 1972: 38–39; Kher 1999: 104–106). Hemadpant understood Baba to be a true teacher (*sadguru*) or avatar, although Baba often declared that "I am a slave in Allah's service" (Kher 1999: 371). His polyvalent persona was made explicit by Ganapat Rao Dattatreya Sahasrabuddhe (1868–1962), popularly known as Dasganu (or Das Ganu), who saw Baba as a manifestation of Vithoba (Vitthala), the resident deity of Pandharpur who was an important focus for Maharashtrian devotional traditions. One of Dasganu's Marathi verses begins, "Shirdi is my Pandharpur and the deity worshipped there is Sai Baba" (*Shirdi majhe Pandharpura Sai Baba Ramaavara*). In spite of his clear emphasis upon Baba's Hindu associations, Dasganu states in another verse that "Ganu is the broomstick of your mosque and you are our master Sai Baba" (*Apane masidakaa jhaadoo Ganu hai malik hamaare thuma Baba Sai*), underscoring Baba's undeniable links with Islam.[4]

According to the *Shri Sai Satcharita* (Kher 1999: 65, 152), Baba first appeared to residents of Shirdi as a lad of sixteen, sitting under a neem or margosa tree in meditation; Baba said the same tree was the seat of his own

guru. The neem (*Azadirachta indica*), as Haberman (2013) reminds us, has a long religious history in the Subcontinent, along with a few other trees such as pipal (*Ficus religiosa*) and banyan (*Ficus benghalensis*). Revered as the residence of a goddess or as the goddess herself (as Shitala, Yellamma, or Mariamma, for example), the medicinal properties of neem trees have also long been valued. Perhaps it is the healing properties of the neem that can be most closely associated with Baba's ministrations in Shirdi, as we shall see below. After three years in Shirdi, Baba left for some time to return at the age of twenty and stay in Shirdi for the next sixty years (Kher 1999: 152). He reappeared near the Khandoba temple of Shirdi with the marriage party of a Muslim gentleman called Chand Patil (Gunaji 1972: 22–23; Kher 1999: 74–75). The goldsmith Mhalsapati was the priest of the temple to Khandoba, a deity worshipped by hunters, shepherds, and warriors (Sontheimer 1997) but also a being held in high esteem by some rural Muslims of Maharashtra.[5] Mhalsapati is said to have addressed "this youthful fakir" with the words "Ya Sai" (welcome Sai) (Gunaji 1972: 23; Kher 1999: 75). "Sai" is probably from the Persian *saih* or *sayyah* (Rigopoulos 2020: 71; Warren 2004: 338) referring to wandering Muslim ascetics or Sufi fakirs (literally "poor men"). "Baba" or "father" can be an honorific and may have been used later in his life (Rigopoulos 1993: 3).

After his second appearance in Shirdi, Baba spent his time in the company of other ascetics and seekers, living in a resting place for fakirs. It was there that he tied jingling bells around his ankles and danced to the beat of a tambourine. In his younger days, he dressed like a wrestler, enjoyed and participated in wrestling bouts, and did not shave his head. He would go to Rahata and bring back cuttings of fragrant jasmine and marigolds that he planted and watered with unbaked earthen pitchers that he kept near the neem tree around which he created a garden. Baba sometimes sat under the same tree or wandered in the vicinity of Shirdi. His meager belongings consisted of a clay pipe (*chillum*), a tin pot that he used for collecting food, the robe that he wore (*kafni*), and a staff.[6] A gunny bag or sack-cloth served as his seat. He covered his head with a piece of white cloth and walked barefoot (Gunaji 1972: 23–27; Kher 1999: 75–81).

At some point, Baba began to live in a little-used mosque that was repaired around 1912, its floor paved and a porch added (Kher 1999: 81, 100). The name Dvarkamai for the mosque may have become popular after Baba's passing but it should be noted that Baba refers to it by that name in the *Shri Sai Satcharita*: "This is our own, our very own Dwarkamayee. When you sit on her lap, she gives you full protection, as to a child" (Kher 1999: 354).[7] Devotees remember that Baba often exclaimed *Allah Malik*, "God is Master," and offered a few other Muslim blessings. Although some sources suggest that he also had a Hindu guru whom he called "Venkusha" (see Rigopoulos, this volume), it is generally assumed that his first teacher was a Sufi or that he was under direct Sufi influence for a considerable time in his young years.[8] In many parables recounted in the *Shri Sai Satcharita*, Baba

refers to his teacher and to God Almighty as Fakir. Pathri, Aurangabad, Khulabad, and the Deccan region where Shirdi Sai Baba spent his childhood and youth were home to Chishti, Qadiri, and other Sufi brotherhoods (see Deák 2013; Eaton 1978; Green 2008). That Baba could not be identified easily with a single Sufi tradition seems another indication of his purposeful indeterminacy meant to open him equally to all devotees.

Baba alternated between sleeping in the mosque and in a village assembly building (*chavadi*). From 1909, people began to offer regular worship to Baba by bringing him in a procession from the mosque to the *chavadi* that included a chariot and palanquin, devotional singing, clapping, tambourines, horns, trumpets, cymbals, torches, the horse Shamakarna, and files of villagers and devotees (Figure I.3). A man named Bapusaheb Jog usually held an honorific umbrella over Baba's head. In the *chavadi*, Baba would be offered rituals, garlands, fine clothes, and ornaments (Kher 1999: 615–624). While a ritual celebration of a Sufi saint's death (*urs, urus*) was conducted at Shirdi for a while, in 1911, a Navami festival to celebrate the birth of Rama came to be held along with the *urus* (Kher 1999: 94–95).[9] Baba encouraged the performance of Ram recitations and gave permission to Muslims to conduct a *sandal* (powdered sandalwood or sandalwood paste) procession

Figure I.3 Baba's present presence as he is borne around Shirdi in a palanquin following his perambulations, permitting him to see beloved places via his iconic image, India, 2009.

Source: Photograph by Mary Nooter Roberts.

(Kher 1999: 104–105: 116). He also seems to have acquiesced to collective rituals following Vitthala worship in Pandharpur.

Increasing ritualization coincided with the expansion of Baba's renown (Rigopoulos 1993: 99). In December 1886, according to the *Shri Sai Satcharita*, he had an asthma attack. Baba told those closest to him: "For three days from now onwards, I shall go into *samadhi* [state of profound contemplation of the Absolute, union with the Divine]. Do not try to rouse me" (Kher 1999: 727). Baba asked his devotee Mhalsapati to protect his body and if he did not return, his body should be buried in the place he had indicated. After three days, Baba awakened (Gunaji 1972: 238; Kher 1999: 727–729).

In the beginning, villagers would come to Baba for the medicines he prepared as an herbalist or doctor (*hakim*) (Kher 1999: 108). His healing and miracles attracted people who traveled to Shirdi to gain his blessings toward the last decade of the nineteenth century. Sometimes Baba took upon himself the illnesses of others, as when Mrs. Kharpade's son contracted bubonic plague and she approached Baba, fearing that her boy would die. Baba lifted his *kafni* to show four huge swellings that he was suffering in place of her son. Devotees might be saved by actions at a distance as well: One time while sitting near his fire (*dhuni*), Baba suddenly thrust his hand into the flames until those with him pulled him back. He explained that the wife of a blacksmith was working the bellows at some distant place. Her husband called her, and forgetting her child for an instant, she ran to him. The child fell into his father's forge, so again Baba took suffering upon himself, this time to save an infant from grievous injury. At other times, cures were produced by mere speech: Bapusaheb Booty once suffered from dysentery and vomiting; Sai Baba sent for him and, waving a finger, ordered the vomiting to stop. Some healings were produced by esoteric actions, as when Bala Ganpat Shimpi came to Baba with a particularly malignant case of malaria. Baba told him to give a black dog some rice mixed with curds in front of the Lakshmi temple, and doing so would and did rid him of his malady. Others were healed through Baba's glance or presence. Ash (*udi*) that Baba distributed from his *dhuni* quelled a scorpion's poison, healed a woman of the plague, rid someone of fits, and assisted a woman's delivery. *Udi* might also be mixed into and so increase quantities of food prepared for guests. Among Baba's other powers were clairvoyance, an ability to grant children to infertile couples, and guidance of disciples along their spiritual paths. He also knew the previous births of human beings, animals, and even insects. On occasion, Baba controlled the elements. When a terrible storm struck Shirdi with thick black clouds and heavy rain, animals and people took shelter within Baba's mosque. Baba went outside and addressed the storm in a mighty voice, and in a short while, the squall ceased.[10]

Baba left no writings of his own, but his diverse ways of instruction included analogy, example, numerical symbolism, dreams, jokes, and provocations, some of which are offered in the *Shri Sai Satcharita*. Baba

also recommended study, meditation, the reading of scriptures such as the *Gita* or the *Jnaneshvari,* and chanting the names of Vishnu and Allah. He explained the meanings of certain sacred formulae personally or through visions and dreams, and sometimes he sent followers to visit various temples to learn from living saints (Srinivas 2008: 35).

There is little record of Baba's interest in specific Islamic texts or his comments on the *Quran,* but a manuscript left by Abdul Baba (1871–1954), Shirdi Sai Baba's Muslim disciple, devoted servant, and a long resident in Shirdi, notes that his master possessed a large-format Quran and would offer exegeses when Abdul read to Baba from it (Warren 2004). Baba was also familiar with Deccani Sufi lineages, and throughout his lifetime at Shirdi, he was in contact with many fakirs and other Muslims, some of whom sought him out as a master.[11]

From Fakir to Guru

The transformation of public perceptions of Baba as a humble fakir to his congregational worship as a guru in the early twentieth century paralleled an economic shift in the surrounding region including cash-crop sugarcane cultivation, the emergence of Bombay as a manufacturing magnet drawing labor from a vast hinterland, and the fairly steady growth of an urban population in Maharashtra (Srinivas 2008: 37). Yoginder Sikand (2003) suggests that the eclipse of Baba's Sufi background occurred within the context of Brahmanical Hinduism's growing assertion in Maharashtra from the late nineteenth century.

In a related vein, Partha Mitter (2003: 3, 25) states that the rise of mechanically produced print media in India's colonial period "created a new 'iconic' society" and "a new sense of... nationhood," and that Maharashtra and Bengal, as centers of pronounced economic development in the 1880s to the 1900s, were "flashpoints for early revolutionary Hindu nationalism." Growing production and circulation of "calendar arts" and chromolithographs through commercial enterprises and as widely accessible popular images meant that *darshan* of the divine was available to broader publics (Jain 2007; Pinney 2004). Here we may recall David Morgan's assertion that a sacred image "is not an essence, but an *activity,* a historically evolving process that emerges as a configuration of forces, predispositions, and practices" (2012: 68, emphasis added). In the context of such broad-based political, commercial, religious, and aesthetic sharing, Maharashtra and Bengal were also locations for complex devotional regimes given to sainted figures such as Shirdi Sai Baba and Ramakrishna Paramahamsa who eluded or were complementary to Hindu nationalism (Srinivas 2008: 24).

The *Shri Sai Satcharita* offers ample evidence that a diverse constituency was attracted to Baba: clerks and other district officials, traders, businessmen, doctors, pleaders, advocates, magistrates, commission agents, and priests. Muslims, Brahmins, Kayasthas, Prarthana-Samajists, Agnihotris,

Hajis, Parsis, and Irani gentlemen were in the throngs, and Congress Party members and some Europeans began to visit Shirdi during the last decade of Baba's life. Devotional geographies extended to Pandharpur, Nasik, Nanded, Thane, Bombay (now Mumbai), Poona (Pune), Nagpur, Amravati, Kalyan, Jamner, Sholapur, Bikaner, Madras (Chennai), and Goa. Most bureaucratic and business strata of those given to Baba were urban, and many of the Hindus belonged to Brahmin, Kayasta, and Bania communities. They had some knowledge of English, were in contact with centers in other parts of the country through the press and the railway, and were exposed to the benefits of "modern" education as well as opportunities through the British Raj (Srinivas 2008: 37–38).

The attraction to Baba for such upwardly mobile persons is comparable to that of Ramakrishna Paramahamsa in colonial Bengal. Ramakrishna "subverted the distinctions between adult and child, male and female, work and play, which the 'civilizing' mission of the west was making more rigid" (Sarkar 1998: 303). Such a subversion proved appealing to those excluded from independent entrepreneurship or political and military office, and who were relegated to lowly clerical jobs, bourgeois time and discipline. Shirdi Sai Baba's polyvalent background and his acceptance of several religious traditions and practices also proved a powerful draw for the emerging Indian middle class, providing categories and practices that could be interpreted differently within many communities and traditions. At the same time, Baba's acts of healing and miracles contravened or interrogated Eurocentric bourgeois rationality that exerted increasing power over Indian society.[12]

Baba passed away on the ninth day of Muharram, 1918, which coincided with the final day of the Dassera festival (Kher 1999: 691).[13] The *Shri Sai Satcharita* records Baba's devotees' great grief. Some Muslims and other devotees wished him to rest in an open piece of land in Shirdi, while Hindus—as the majority of Baba's followers—preferred a recently completed building (*vada*) where a Krishna *murti* was to have been placed (Gunaji 1972: 236–237). Some argued that Baba had indicated that his body should be placed in the building and "Hindus and Muslims agreed to this plan" (Kher 1999: 722–725). Another source suggests that the matter was more fraught, and that a revenue officer was called to settle the matter through a plebiscite decided in favor of the majority (Gunaji 1972: 237).

What is often overlooked in discussions about Baba's religious identity and the aftermath of his life is that Baba was buried and not cremated. The early arrangement of the grave (*qabar*) with a marble grille surrounding it (*jali*) at the site suggests that despite the debate on where Baba should be placed, there was a consensus on how the grave should be arranged. While sannyasis and yogis are usually buried, the *qabar* and *jali* provide evidence about the majority's respect toward Muslim aesthetics with regard to the last place of Baba's rest.[14]

After Baba's death, his grave was covered with a rich textile on which flowers were placed following practices at the Muslim grave of a revered person (*dargah*) (Warren 2004: 346). A painting of the saint by Shamrao Jayakar was

placed nearby. "Although Baba's form is no longer before the eyes, it is seen again in the *darshan* of his portrait" (Kher 1999: 732).[15] Abdul Baba became the grave's custodian until 1922 when his authority was challenged upon creation of the Shirdi Sai Sansthan, a trust formed by an order of the Ahmednagar district court in 1921. The progressively all-Hindu Sansthan effectively eliminated Muslim influence over the shrine (now called the Samadhi Mandir) among other infrastructural and institutional changes it instituted in Shirdi. In 1954, the Sansthan installed a *murti* as a living embodiment of Baba positioned behind his grave in the south-west corner of the Samadhi Mandir, facing northeast (Warren 2004: 338, 346–347; Gunaji 1972: xvi). With Baba's intercession, the Bombay-based sculptor Balaji Vasant Talim realized the work in the finest Italian marble (see Polly Roberts, this volume). After a few years, the *murti* was given a silver throne and an umbrella with words above it identifying Baba with Rama. In 2002, a grand silver throne weighing 205 kg was installed for the *murti* (see Shinde, this volume).

While most of the approximately eight million annual visitors to Shirdi are Hindus (Shinde and Pinkney 2013; see also Shinde, this volume) and its pilgrimage economy proliferates Baba's presence far beyond Shirdi (Figure I.4), one might still argue that rich oral, visual, and performative

Figure I.4 One of many shops in Shirdi permitting devotees to purchase two- and three-dimensional "embodiments" of Baba to bring the saint home with them, India, 2009.

Source: Photograph by Mary Nooter Roberts.

traditions in India regard Baba as a Sufi connected to other Muslim ascetics, past and present (see Deák, this volume). Shirdi also offers reminders of Baba's varied heritage through its sacred geography, such as the neem tree under which he sat, the pillar against which he used to rest in the Dvarkamai mosque, his perpetual fire, and other objects and sites associated with Baba's life. For many who visit Shirdi, Baba speaks from his tomb, and immediacy of contact with such a sacred site, especially through touch and sight, brings direct blessing.

Universes of Narration and Translation

"If a Muslim, his ears were pierced; but if a Hindu, his circumcision proved it to be otherwise. Neither a Hindu nor a Muslim—such was this Sai" (Kher 1999: 105). Such deliberately ambiguous sentiments in the *Shri Sai Satcharita* are an example of "edification by puzzlement," for they remind us that instead of categories constructed from the perspective of religious essentialisms and nationalisms, we should position Baba within a very long genealogy of cultural translations and Islamicate and Indic interactions.[16]

Scholars have demonstrated the imaginative and cultural contexts and processes through which South Asian Hindu and Muslim communities assumed today to be discrete have long interacted with each other. Similarly, literary communities translated philosophical vocabularies, concepts, and material objects from one cultural world into other, and so reimagined terms and ideas across literary worlds or elite and vernacular registers.[17] For instance, Srilata Raman (2006) shows that Shrivaishnava religious works from the mid-twelfth century onward were indebted to both Sanskrit and Tamil, and such linguistic blurring acquired new dimensions embodied in the *Manipravala* language used to compose the literature. Nair (2020) demonstrates how the Persian translation of a Sanskrit text represents a confluence of multiple philosophical currents from Arabo-Persian and Sanskritic intellectual worlds. Another example is Dakhni, the vernacular of Deccani Muslims that, through links to Persian, north-Indian, and Deccan contexts, became a vehicle for literary production from the fifteenth century CE onwards (see Eaton 1978: 155–164; Eaton 2005: 141–145).

The location-specific nature of religious practices and identifications, the mutability and overlapping of religious identities in lived realities, and the diverse drives of persons engaging in such interactions at courts, *dargahs*, markets, shrines, or in social movements, also frustrate or preclude essentialist categories (see Deák, Rigopoulos, Waghorne, this volume). Similar processes continue among individuals as well as religious communities. In his study of Colonel Henry Steel Olcott (1832–1907) as founder of the Theosophical Society and an American who converted to Buddhism, Prothero (1996: 9) writes of Olcott's "creole" faith: "While the lexicon of his faith was almost entirely Buddhist, its grammar was largely Protestant." The musical manifestations of Indian Christian theology that acquired

widespread influence from the colonial period onward show evidence of code-switching and blending (Sherinian 2002). The Sathya Sai Baba movement deploys musical, linguistic, architectural, somatic, and religious codes and styles from several traditions so that while the movement has "roots" in devotions to Shirdi Sai Baba and more generally in devotional Bhakti movements that grew in South Asia from about the sixth or seventh century onward, Sathya Sai Baba's followers develop conjunctions with other religious traditions, New Religious movements, and New Age ideas (Srinivas 2008). Contemporary healing rooms, *dargahs* and shrines, popular performances and festivals, and the devotional spaces and practices of specific gods, goddesses, saints, gurus, and other holy beings in South Asia must also be seen as operating within worlds of religious "heteroglossia" (Bakhtin 1981) that live alongside the claims of territorial and religious nationalisms.[18]

In this volume, we consider Shirdi Sai Baba's genealogy within South Asian universes of translation and narration as well as the continuing "lives" of such processes within and beyond South Asia. Baba dwells in stories told about him via filmmaking to social media posts, and his presence is experienced through diverse electronic and digital mediums. Narratives about Baba's sainthood, journeys, miracles, and blessings continue to accumulate and circulate (see Loar, this volume). As they actively reveal stories of Baba's lifetime, internet communities elaborate upon and even generate Baba's philosophies, prayers, and blessings. Online discussions about the originality and haptic visualities of his photographic presentation also reveal how different people and communities are invested in narrating stories about Baba's life, even as they create new genealogies of knowledge about him.[19]

Scholars contributing to this volume participate in these same acts of translation and narration concerning Baba, as well as the potencies and poetics of bodies and places of those devoted to him and to their sensory and social interchanges, openings, and exits. Together—linguistically, conceptually, ethnographically, methodologically, and disciplinarily—all such accounts cross-fertilize our understanding of Shirdi Sai Baba's presence at present.

Key Terms and Concepts

Synesthesia has long been recognized in South Asian religious studies, as in the sacredness of a mantra given by a guru, "remembering" and embodying the Holy Names of God through Sufi *dhikrs* and ecstasy-inducing music (*sama*), and the chanting of many devotional groups. The perception of a guru, Muslim holy man, or deity emerges not only through sight and sound but may include fragrance, dreams, waking visions, touch, taste, and tears. Indeed, "religious tactility" may involve binding, burning, moving, kinesthesia, laying on of hands, or otherwise handling "what cannot be seen or heard" (Chidester 2005: 62; cf. Roberts 2010). The senses are not separated from each other in any such transactions, and descriptions such as how

people are "touched by *darshan*" reflect the limits of language to articulate "the multi-directional interaction of the senses and of sensory ideologies" (Howes 2005: 9) through a complex alchemy that Christopher Pinney (2004) has termed "corpothetics."

Of such idioms, in this volume we explore *haptic visualities* that connect what is *beheld* with tactile and other sensory experiences (Figure I.5). The exchange of gazes between deities and devotees is a crucial spiritual act, for it is a form of knowing, revelation, and even transubstantiation by drinking in divine power through the eyes (Babb 1981; Eck 1981). Photographs, sculptures, and internet images foster exchanges of *darshan*, for they are

Figure I.5 Haptic visuality performed by touching Baba's iconic image at Shirdi temple to gain the saint's blessings, India, 2009.

Source: Photo by Mary Nooter Roberts.

icons bearing and conveying active sacred *presence* (Srinivas 2008; Polly
Roberts, this volume). For example, the hugs given by Amma of Kerala to
devotees, regardless of their age, caste, gender, or ethnicity, make the divine
encounter an emotional embrace of love, surrender, and a mother-child rela-
tionship with the blessed woman.[20] Although religious sectarianism often
precludes recognizing commonalities, similar embodiments are found in all
faiths (Morgan 2012). The holiness and sanctity of Muslim holy men and
saintly figures (*pirs*) in Sufi traditions are associated with objects and spaces
as extensions of their bodies, particularly through their graves. Visiting
the *dargah* of a holy person brings the saint's blessing energies (*baraka*) to
bear upon individual needs and opportunities (Roberts and Roberts 2003:
231–243). Relics of various sorts are available with powers to transform,
such as the "apotheosis of dust" gathered on a grave and "metric relics"
through which people measure features of sacred places and their spatial
relationships (Flood 2009, 2019).

Exegeses to be presented and discussed in these pages speak to such expe-
riential convergences. For example, Baba is present in figural works called
murti, a term that bears a sense of dynamic "embodiment" (Davis 1999: 32).
As a celebrated Indian artist named Rajiv Talim holds, "Baba himself is
there" in the *murtis* of the saint that his grandfather and father have realized
and as he now does as well. "He is there to take care of everything. That
divine power is there…. It is something different, some extra power—*jagrut*,
it means 'alive' or 'awake'" (Polly Roberts, this volume). Indeed, "every dev-
otee who goes to the Samadhi Mandir [grave of Baba in Shirdi] feels that
Baba is looking only at him or her, no matter where they stand. In fact Baba
is not just looking at them but he is searching *for* them with his benevolent
gaze" (Chitluri 2009: 143). Because of Baba's presence, followers sometimes
speak of how the eyes of Baba experienced through photographs may blink
and twinkle, follow wherever one goes, and make it difficult to stare into
Baba's eyes without weeping. Through such haptic visuality, people assert
that taking *darshan* from Baba's *murtis* and portraits can produce goose-
bumps, "electrical vibrations" in one's fingertips, and cause one's hair to
stand on end. Some see Baba's lips move as he speaks to them from his
images, and such embodied performative engagements can heal and effect
other life-changing transformations.[21]

Such "first-voice" accounts raise a point of importance: From our vari-
ous interdisciplinary perspectives and purposes, we authors make explicit
efforts to offer truths known to Baba's devotees through "an excursion in
the anthropology of *credibility*" (Babb 1983: 116, emphasis added). In so
doing, we seek to decolonize the *credulity* ascribed to other people's reli-
gious thoughts and practices as is still found in many social-science and
humanities accounts. That is, we "take devotees' assertions about mira-
cles or their experiences of Baba's presence seriously, as descriptions of the
'hopeful' reality that they inhabit, rather than trying to prove what 'really'
happened or trying to excavate some 'true' presence" (Srinivas 2008: 16).

Relationships between spatiality and religiosity long recognized in South Asia are another focus of this volume. From the late first millennium BCE, Buddhist and Jain monastic centers arose in the suburbs of cities such as Taxila, Varanasi, or Anuradhapura. Centuries later, as temple-based worship became popular, cities were built around central shrines like that of Madurai or around multiple temple sites as in Varanasi, where quotidian life and sensibility were directed by temple rituals and the design of urban space. Even capital cities had to contend with competing nodes of power: Delhi, the political capital of South Asia's most powerful sultanate, was also the location of important Sufi shrines such as that of Nizamuddin Auliya. Urban sites emerged through forms of sacrality: Amritsar, founded in the sixteenth century as a center for Sikh learning and worship, would later become one of the largest cities of the Punjab. Pilgrimage sites, sometimes arising from worship of a deity (Pandharpur for Vithoba) or created around the charisma of a religious teacher (Puttaparthi for Sathya Sai Baba) became drivers of urbanization. Through an enormous pilgrimage economy (Figure I.6), Shirdi went from a village in Baba's time to a city within a relatively short span of time (see Shinde, this volume).[22]

Our authors contribute to discussions of *spatial refabulation*—that is, ways in which people re-world cultural topographies of their cities by replacing colonial names, monuments, and such with those of their own yearnings, histories, and collective imaginations.[23] The phrase further suggests that expanding boundaries, transportation arteries, and highways of contemporary cities are important means and arenas for recruitment of devotees and construction of habitats to house the religious (Larios, Srinivas, Waghorne, this volume). While the recent rise of religious nationalism has mobilized movements through urban socio-spatial networks and claims on temples, mosques, and procession routes, attention to spatial refabulation interrogates the tendency to define cities as either preeminent secular locations or sites of religion's violent presence. Instead, devotional activities are interpolated with urban terrains whose communities' aspirations, somatic lifestyles, and cosmologies represent shifting allegiances (see Vicziany, this volume).[24]

Corporeal mobilities are another point of reference, drawing upon *movement* and *blockages* as fundamental to structuring cultural institutions, spaces, and identities.[25] Corporeal mobilities imbricated with devotional life include transportation networks and roads; modes, processes, and performances of pilgrimage; investments, donations, and gifts. Mobile and travelling images and texts contribute to such social processes, as when Baba's *murti* is reverently promenaded around Shirdi (Figure I.3) or placed on a truck so that the saint can see the countryside while visiting devotees. Transversal collaborations between differently situated actors are similarly significant, as are movements of material, symbolic, or social value across space that result in shrine-building or other forms of commemoration (Jeychandran, Larios, Roberts and Roberts, Rush, Srinivas, Vicziany, Waghorne, this volume).

Figure I.6 As a measure of conviviality, Baba welcomes pilgrims of all backgrounds to dine together at the refectory of Shirdi through a living "embodiment" (*murti*), India, 2009. Just as Baba miraculously produced endless supplies of food from a pot he stirred with his arm, so shall they take their fill.

Source: Photograph by Mary Nooter Roberts.

We draw particular attention to communication media that have enhanced religion's potentialities over time. Videotapes and cassettes, for instance, have allowed charismatic figures to become "multilocational" (Babb 1990: 76). Films such as *Shirdi ke Sai Baba* (1977) that enjoyed enormous popularity in the Indian subcontinent (see Loar, this volume) show how it is possible to "assimilate new materials and media within long-established but far from uniform and rigid understandings of the status and power of *murti* [embodiments]" (Beckerlegge 2001a: 108). Through liberalization of

Indian television broadcasting and proliferation of satellite networks, particularly from the 1990s, programs with religious content have become fairly common, including Sony Television's *Mere Sai Shraddha aur Saburi* which began in 2017. The internet has created other potencies: A Google search for "Shirdi Sai Baba" on the internet on January 26, 2021, instantaneously brought up 7,430,000 results. Indeed, technological evolution has fostered digital spirituality and new forms of sacred beholding very different from traditional *darshan*. Nowadays, a devotee can undertake a digital pilgrimage to Shirdi and virtually witness rituals through livestreaming offered by the Sai Baba Sansthan, while other websites permit one to offer digital *prasad* (sanctified food) while prayerfully requesting Baba's intervention in personal problems.[26] Mobile applications and social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube have expanded spiritual immersions and interactions. New geographies of religious mediation have proliferated Shirdi Sai Baba's present presence.[27]

Such mobilities are corporeal in that they possess material/physical dimensions. At the same time, they offer new embodiments of the saint. To the question, can a TV series or the internet become a medium for exchange of *darshan* with Shirdi Sai Baba, the answer for most is in the affirmative.[28] The central issue is not so much individual receptivity as what cultural conventions enable communication between Baba and his devotees. Baba's eleven assurances include the proclamation, "If you look to me, I look to you."[29] *The Shri Sai Satcharita* also mentions that *darshan* of Shirdi Sai Baba through a photograph or a dream is the same as *darshan* in physical form (Kher 1999: 543–547). Thus, exchange can be through the saint's physical body entombed in Shirdi, his *murtis*, pictures, videos, or cyber-messages. Furthermore, when disciples are ready, the saint/guru appears through the convergence of inner and outer realities of form (*saguna*) and formlessness (*nirguna*). Thus, the virtual presence of the saint and electronic exchange are synchronous.[30]

Oceanic Transmigrations

In *Bombay Islam*, Nile Green draws a portrait of the religious economy of the western Indian Ocean between 1840 and 1915 coeval with Shirdi Sai Baba's life. Social conditions of industrialization in Bombay and its hinterlands were highly compatible with an Islam of holy men and their enchantments (Green 2011: 8). Baba presented similar options to the many castes, communities, and classes who sought his presence and intervention in Shirdi from the late nineteenth century onward. Oceanic and global transmigrations of Baba's life lessons and blessings, especially after the 1960s, have occurred through several repertoires and mobilities as well as via refabulations of spaces around the world. The vitality of such processes continues, as the essays of this volume articulate, creating new comparisons and juxtapositions between Baba and other saints (see Roberts and Roberts, Rush, this

volume). Global transfigurations and dynamic circulations of Baba devotion in the present are channeled through multiple terrains (temples, wayside shrines, mobile shrines), substances (sacred ash brought from Shirdi or that may spontaneously appear), media (films, visual imageries, digital means), and praxis (appearances and mediums of manifestations).

Such transmigrations are contemporaneous with other imaginaries, ritual and quotidian practices, and memoryscapes occurring in Indian Ocean worlds (Srinivas et al. 2020; Roberts and Roberts 2016), including gurus, saints, and deities who migrated with plantation workers, laborers, merchants, and professionals to new landscapes (Jeychandran 2019; Mahajan 2019; Srinivas 2008; Polly Roberts, this volume). In Singapore, for example, Tamil Hindu and Muslim worlds overlapped with Chinese ones and places of worship from South India were "transplanted, juxtaposed, translated" (Amrith 2013: 90), resulting in "globalization of more localized temple traditions" (Waghorne 2004: 172). With new waves of South Asian migration to sub-Saharan Africa, deities like Murugan, Ayyappa, and Baba have become incorporated into trans-religious spaces like the Hindu Monastery of Africa founded by the late Ghanaian guru, Swami Ghanananda (see Jeychandran, this volume; Shankar 2020). Such temple congregations have proved inviting to local people who bring their own heritage to bear on proceedings (Rush, this volume). As the present essays demonstrate, Baba shares intimacies with his devotees in many global contexts, whether diasporic Indian or not, making him extremely portable to new contexts.

The urban landscapes of such transmigrations are equally relevant. Consider the Shirdi Sai Baba *murti* that shares a space with Ganesha at the Shri Siddhi Vinayaka temple with its south Indian devotees in Sacramento, or the marble *murti* recently brought from India that is patronized by devotees from Fiji to India at Sai Seva Sadan in the same city (Figure I.7). One is housed in a building that looks like a northern California single story home and the other is in an office room within a business park. Both lie in liminal areas of Sacramento between the city's core and its affluent suburbs. "Set within a mottled urban fabric of both abandonment and redevelopment, these spaces are entwined with and sustained by informal, sometimes invisible, and transversal economic and social ventures and associated mobilities" (Hancock and Srinivas 2018: 458). Urban professionals and techies, grocery store owners and housewives, college professors and contractors, all fuel these new religiosities that provide "milieus of innovation" in urban spaces. Individuals and communities use their resources and imaginations to respond to otherwise resource-poor environments as they develop forms of spiritual conviviality and enchant new landscapes of urban migration. Similar forces shape day-to-day organization of Sai Baba temples from Quatre Bornes to Hong Kong that offer the conviviality of affective geographies and shared community charity (Figure I.8).

As powerful forces try to co-opt, reposition, or erase Baba's legacy and philosophy in the Indian subcontinent, the essays in this volume show how

Figure I.7 Devotions are offered to Baba at the Sacramento Sai Center, California, USA, by Nirmala Murthy and S.N.S Murthy (Smriti Srinivas' parents), 2017.

Source: Photograph by Smriti Srinivas.

Baba challenges rigid religious positionalities, simplified esoteric sacred knowledge, and democratized devotional cultures while contributing to his immense popularity in India and around the world. Along with composite sacred views, the simplicity that Baba presented and that is narrated through the *Shri Sai Satcharita* has fostered ever-growing global appeal for the saint. Across Indian Ocean and Atlantic worlds, South Asian and non-Indian communities locate the saint within their homes and temples. That Baba's *murtis* and icons are often placed adjacent to those of Jesus and the Virgin Mary and a host of other divine and holy beings attests to how comfortable constituencies feel with how Baba attracts or enfolds other personages into his aura (see Waghorne, this volume). The indeterminacies of Baba as a fakir, guru, healer, and protector suggest that he is a trans-religious figure who shares spiritual affinities and lineages with contemporary holy people and those who preceded him (Deák, Jeychandran, Roberts and Roberts, Rush, this volume). In our polarized world where divisive polemics often dominate discourse, devotional communities associated with Sai Baba are usually marked by the intertwining of different regional, trans-Asian, and subaltern cultural influences.

Figure I.8 A *murti* of Baba realized in black stone graces the mandir of Swami Vishwananda in Quatre Bornes, Mauritius, 2009.

Source: Photograph by Mary Nooter Roberts.

As they did during Baba's time, people around the world turn to Baba as they cope with the political and economic problems of everyday life, as well as the uncertainties and terrors of epidemics and personal affliction. Baba's present presence enacted through many media are *efficacious*: They are not passively illustrative or allegorical, although they may well be that in some circumstances. Instead, for many devotees, they are transactional, they bear transformative energies; they calm the tempests of worry; they do what is needed to find solace, solve problems, and affirm or discover purpose.

Accounts of Baba's intercessions enliven in person and online conversations, and those sharing such stories gain hope as they discover they are not alone in their misfortunes. As Navind Beeharrt holds,

> when suddenly the shock of suffering strikes, first you must solve the problem but second you ask "why me?" But then suffering gives you the opportunity to examine deeply. There is a *need* for suffering. If there is no salt, you won't know what is sugar. When Baba talks about faith and patience, if you're not patient you won't understand what you're getting because it's through that patience that you will grow, then you value something and the value is in that knowledge.[31]

More generally, as a contemporary devotee in Delhi has noted, "Baba is my free relationship counselor"—he assists interpersonal activities, that is, even as one can pray that he will intervene in one's own problems.[32] Similarly motivating are Baba's teachings about generosity and service. As a remarkable example, the industrialist K.V. Ramani has activated his commitment by building a Sai devotional space in coastal Chennai and founding Sai University of Chennai, a vast enterprise that opened in 2021.[33]

A last word then: Baba is like twine that binds people together in worthy pursuits, and we editors feel he has brought us together to realize the present publication. And just as Baba accorded Hemadpant (G.R. Dabholkar) permission to collect the materials that would become the *Shri Sai Satcharita* but told him that he, Shirdi Sai Baba, would write his own story, we editors feel that Baba has guided our project. We are not so presumptuous as to assert that he has written these words through us, but we do nonetheless feel Baba's inspiration and hope that readers will as well.

Notes

1 Foster (1999) remains a compelling discussion of vision and visuality. In the case of Shirdi Sai Baba, his icon and visual and spatial terrains in Bombay, see Elison (2014).

2 This account of Baba's life is largely based upon Kher (1999), the first full-length English translation of the Marathi text (which approaches the saint from a Hindu devotional perspective); and Gunaji (1972), an English adaptation of the original Marathi *Shri Sai Satcharita* (omitting material from the text and including some material not found in it). We also draw on Rigopoulos (1993, 2020), Srinivas (2008, 1999a, 1999b), and Warren (2004). We are grateful to Dušan Deák and Antonio Rigopoulos for their comments on this section.

3 The chapters of the *Shri Sai Satcharita* are largely based on materials from the last eight years of Baba's life. They began appearing serially in the *Sai Leela* magazine after Sai Baba's death in 1918 and were made into a book by 1929 (see Srinivas 2008: 25–28).

4 See Srinivas (2008: 28–29). Both verses are translated and cited in Narasimha Swami (1994: 138, 140).

5 Dušan Deák, pers. comm., July 8, 2021.

6 Some of these revered objects are conserved and displayed in museums in Shirdi; see https://www.shirdisaitemple.com/shirdi-article/id/94/shirdi-sai-museum, accessed April 2021.

7 Hemadpant states elsewhere in the *Shri Sai Satcharita*: "How glorious was that mosque…to which Baba always referred most resolutely, as '*Dwarka-mayee*'" (Kher 1999: 713). We are grateful to Antonio Rigopoulos for alerting us to these passages (pers. comm., July 8 and July 12, 2021).

8 Rigopoulos (1993: 284–297) notes that three stations of a Sufi path are attested in Baba's life: poverty (*faqr*), patience (*sabr*), and surrender (*tawakkul*). Sacred dance and music (*sama*) and the recollection of holy names of Allah (*dhikr*) fundamental to Sufi orders were also evident in his life.

9 Warren states that the *urs* was held as far back as 1897 (Warren 2004: 337).

10 The accounts described in this paragraph are from Gunaji (1972: 40–84, 180–204), Kher (1999: 108–113, 201–211, 532–588), Srinivas (2008: 34–35), and Warren (2004: 67–74). We present such truths as known to Baba's devotees via an "anthropology of credibility" (Babb 1983: 116) to be discussed below.

11 See Rigopoulos (2020) and Warren (2004).

12 Srinivas (2008: 38). Hardiman (2015) suggests that middle class attraction to Baba was a rejection of the scientific agenda associated with Foucauldian bio-power at one level; at another, it is an acceptance of the biopower agenda that individuals take personal responsibility for seeking cures for themselves and their families, including supernatural remedies.

13 Dassera, also called Dasara, or Dussehra, marks the triumph of Rama over the demon king Ravana who abducted Rama's wife, Sita. Symbolizing the victory of good over evil, Dassera is celebrated in Ashvina (September-October), the seventh month of the Hindu calendar, and coincides with culmination of the nine-day Navratri festival celebrating the Goddess (http://www.britannica.com/topic/Dussehra, accessed April 1, 2021).

14 We are indebted to Dušan Deák for these sentences and important reminders; pers. comm., July 8, 2021.

15 The painting was based upon a photograph taken of Baba seated on a large stone within the mosque, and is reputed to have been taken in 1911 by a photographer named D. D. Neroy (Chitluri 2009: 63). Rigopoulos (2020: 30) reports that the oil painting, executed around 1913, was in the possession of D. D. Neroy and was based on an original black-and-white photograph. Neroy gave Jayakar's picture to his guru, Kammu Baba, who gifted it to the Sai Sansthan. It is hoped that explicit historical research concerning the "matrix" photograph of Baba in his seated pose will be undertaken, whether or not taken by Neroy; see Polly Roberts (this volume).

16 "Edification by puzzlement" is from Fernandez (1986: 44–59). See Loar (2018), McLain (2016: 117), Roberts and Roberts (this volume), and Srinivas (2008: 38).

17 For example, see Dalmia and Faruqui (2014), Eaton (2005), Flood (2009), Gilmartin and Lawrence (2000), Khan (2004), Lorenzen (2004), O'Hanlon and Washbrook (2012), and Ricci (2011).

18 See Alavi (2008), Basu and Werbner (1998), Flueckiger (2006), Forsthoefel and Humes (2005), Lutgendorf (2006), Sikand (2003), Srinivas (2001), Taneja (2018), and Vicziany (2016).

19 Rush (this volume). On *Quora*, a question and answer platform, questions are posed about the authenticity of Baba's photograph; see https://www.quora.com/Who-took-original-photos-of-Shirdi-Sai-Baba, accessed June 13, 2021. Also see "Original photos of Sai Baba," in which Dr. Vinny Chitluri, a Baba devotee, explains the validity of Baba's photos; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qH8f0VTgt6Q, accessed June 13, 2021, as discussed by Polly Roberts (this volume).

20 On the blessings and world tours of the revered "hugging saint" Amma of Kerala, as Mata Amritanandamayi Devi is known, see Lucia (2014), Warrier (2005), and htttps://amma.org, accessed June 2021.

21 Vinni Chitluri, Rajiv Talim, and other persons in conversations with Polly Nooter Roberts and Neelima Jeychandran in India and others in Mauritius and Germany with Polly Roberts, all in 2009 (Polly Roberts, this volume).

22 On political aspects of contemporary pilgrimage to Shirdi, see Vicziany (this volume). For detailed discussions of how socio-spatial imaginaries in South Asia have long been mediated by religious practices and symbolic productions of communities, see Hancock and Srinivas (2008), Heitzman and Srinivas (2004), and Heitzman (2008).

23 See Roberts and Roberts (2003, 2008). The roundtable *Spirited Topographies* (Hancock and Srinivas 2018) contributed to senses of spatial refabulation by exploring reiterative, vernacular productions in and of urban spaces such as murals, improvised shrines, stories, or body cultures that incorporate idioms of devotion and sacrality.

24 We encourage exploration of relationships among cityscapes and ethical/ spiritual imaginaries examined through initiatives such as *Global Prayers* (2016), *The Urban Sacred* (Krech et al. 2017), and *Urbanizing Faith* (Simone 2016).

25 See Cresswell and Merriman (2016), Hancock and Srinivas 2018, Urry (2007), and the journal, *Mobilities*.

26 See the official downloadable application created by the Shri Saibaba Sansthan Trust available at https://apps.apple.com/us/app/shri-saibaba-sansthan-shirdi/id1345947242, accessed June 2021. For links to digital Prasad and other interactions, see www.shirdisaibabavirtualsaint.org, accessed June 2021.

27 See Babb and Wadley (1997), Beckerlegge (2001b), Højsgaard and Warburg (2005), and Meyer and Moors (2006).

28 See Srinivas (2008: 104–108) for a detailed discussion of electronic/digital media and *darshan* in the case of Sathya Sai Baba. For an overview on religion online, see Dawson and Cowan (2004).

29 This assurance resonates with Sufi phrases and the Quranic assertion (2:152) "So remember me, that I may remember you." Seeing and remembering, after all, are not that far from each other (Dušan Deák, pers. comm., July 8, 2021).

30 Cf. Prebish (1999: 230), who states that "*sangha* of the four quarters," which historically referred to the community of ordained Buddhist monks and nuns, now includes "cyber-sangha" transcending spatial boundaries as well as defined communities.

31 Paraphrasing from Polly Roberts' conversations with Navind and Monika Beeharry, Rose Hill, Mauritius, August 2009.

32 Neelima Jeychandran's conversation with a devotee in New Delhi, India, 2011.

33 K.V. Ramani is the Founder and Chancellor of the Sai University in Chennai. He is also the co-founder of the National Association of Software and Service Companies (NASSCOM) and steers several philanthropic initiatives at Shirdi and in Chennai. See: https://saiuniversity.edu.in/about/leadership/, accessed June 26, 2021. Neelima Jeychandran's conversation with K.V. Ramani, Chennai, 2014.

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1 Engaging Universalism

Sai Baba's Predecessors and Contemporaries

Dušan Deák

Ambiguity and Disengagement

Sai Baba of Shirdi is one of South Asia's most popular holy men.[1] Attesting are hagiographies, books, articles, poems, movies, and songs, as a product of and an impetus for the rising tide of pan-Indian piety and attention that the saint currently receives from his devotees. Baba's wide attraction can be traced to his personal charisma as a miracle-worker, helper, and guide.[2] He called for an intense devotion to one Lord as epitomized in his well-known words *"Sabka Malik Ek"* (The Lord of All is One) accompanied by insistence on faith (*shraddha*) and patience (*saburi*). This chapter points out some determining factors that preceded and enabled Baba's popularity, also illustrating how the history of his genealogy is an ongoing subject of debates and narrative strategies.

Sai Baba has been disengaged from both histories of monasticism and specific lineages in the Indian subcontinent as well as from religious categories such as Hindu or Muslim. Such disengagement, although allowing universalization of Baba, remains an unfinished process that reinvents monasticism and the lineages that it aims to overcome. Given that sacralization of holy men is a social process, I avoid discussing what Sai Baba allegedly said of his origins and focus instead on how he was treated by his followers and exponents.[3]

One of the dominant categories of reference for Shirdi Sai Baba's hagiographers is religion, especially Hinduism and Islam. The early testimonies of G. R. Dabholkar (d. 1929) and G. D. Sahasrabuddhe alias Dasganu (d. 1963) disengage Sai Baba from historically known religious collectives and their practices to highlight his exclusivity (cf. Loar 2018; McLain 2016). Indeed, the hagiographer's goal is to attribute extraordinariness to the saint, sometimes with philosophical substance. Witness this assertion:

> The maharaj [literally, great king] whom all his devotees call Babasai auspiciously arrived in Shirdi village. Nobody understands his whereabouts, his mind is always joyous. When somebody enquired "tell us the name of your place and where you have come from," in that moment maharaj answered excitedly as if a storm roared from the heavens and

kites descended upon the earth. "There's no such place, my origin is without any qualities. I have gotten my nature due to karmic bonds only. Such nature is called body and it has a specific name. However, my dwelling is the universe, and one should always understand it like this. Brahma is my father and Maya is my mother. Because of this my form exists and I have my body."[4]

Baba's early hagiographers express more than just ambiguity about the saint's religious identity in several places, but in a rather indecisive manner with the conveyed meaning depending on the particular context. Thus, Dabholkar makes a clear reference to Baba's Muslim identity and puts into Baba's mouth words that represent his Islamic vocabulary, while Dasganu calls him a "*veda pir*"—literally a mad pir—and a "fakir."[5] Moreover, by connecting Baba with certain predecessors, as seen in the words below, the hagiographer's poetics of devotion conveys universal over particularistic meanings:

> You are sadguru Macchindar, you are the very Jalandar, you are Nivrittinath, Jnaneshwar, Kabir, Sheikh and Nath! You are Bodhla and Savta, you are the very essence of Ramdas! You are Tukaram, o Sainath! You are Sakha and Manik Prabhu! This kind of appearance of yours is incomprehensibly beautiful! Nobody can recognize your inborn quality (*jati*)! (*Shri Sainath Stavanmanjari* 60–62).

These words refer to holy men known in the Deccan and particularly in Maharashtra. They include pan-Indian Nath yogis Matsyendranath, Jalandharnath, and (Maharashtrian) Nivrittinath; and the saints Sheikh Muhammad from Shrigonda, Eknath from Paithan, Mankoji Bodhla from Dhamangav, Savta Mali from Aran, Sakhar Maharaj from Loni (all from Maharashtra), and Manik Prabhu from Humnabad (Karnataka). Such holy persons of the Deccan serve as ideals and instruments of saintliness, and Baba is represented as incorporating all of them, just as he is seen in the form of different Indian deities in other writings.

Both Dabholkar and Dasganu belonged to a social milieu of modern, literate, high-caste, and middle-class followers who were instrumental in popularizing Sai Baba. Among them were Hari Sitaram Dixit, the man responsible for the creation of the Sri Sai Baba Sansthan; Narayan Govind (or Nanasaheb) Chandorkar, a deputy collector in Jamner who is credited with bringing to Shirdi many future middle class followers of Baba; the Shirdi-resident Madhavrao Deshpande, who was known as a helping hand of Sai Baba; and G. S. Khaparde, a lawyer serving as the assistant commissioner of Berar and a close associate of Bal Gangadhar Tilak, a well-known advocate of Indian independence. Khaparde also left valuable notes on his life in Shirdi and was behind arranging the meeting of Tilak and Sai Baba (see Rigopoulos 1993).

Religious nationalism, as a political and popular project that unified a multitude of socio-religious and monastic bodies under the umbrella of world religions, and particularly Hinduism and Islam (Van der Veer 1994), is a major feature of South Asian modernity. Sai Baba's high-caste followers' espousal of ambiguous narratives with regard to Baba's religious identity opens the question of to what degree such narrative strategies are related to religious nationalism and the rise of communal tensions.[6] Jonathan Loar (2018) distinguishes between the narrative of "neither Muslim, nor Hindu" espoused by early hagiographers and the narrative of "both Hindu and Muslim" in later ones. The latter is embodied in the work of Narasimha Swami, a Telugu Brahmin who became Baba's devotee after the latter's demise and was perhaps the most influential of his later hagiographers (see Rigopoulos and Srinivas, this volume).[7] Such narrative strategies allow ambiguity to become constitutive in disengaging Sai Baba from historical contexts and assigning his legacy to a socially utopian future by emphasizing a humanity and piety that transgresses sectarian and ethnic divisions.[8]

Renouncers, Monastic Institutions, and Modernity

The ambiguity of Baba's origin and the recorded hybridity of his practices and utterances create a saintly figure ready to be approached, in Indic terms, by all castes (*sarvajati*) and irrespective of religion. Holy men of South Asia's past bypass strict identitarian boundaries (see Bouillier 2015; Ernst 2005; McLeod and Schomer 1987) but the knowledge and practices that frame religious identities were also guarded and passed on through monastic institutions and lineages, often strengthened by initiation practices. Such monastic institutions (*sampradays, panths, maths,* or *tarikas*) could include those who bypassed and those who kept identitarian boundaries and—in contrast to the project of religious nationalism—were hierarchically organized.[9] They were also interconnected through networks of service, practice, and learning, but also tied by lineages, kinship, and socio-economic exchanges of instruction, honor, and material support, as Indrani Chatterjee reminds us (2015: 498). The social organization and functionality of these networks depended on their agents' relationships to religious ideas, means of exercising power, and management of economic resources (see Peabody 2006; Voll 1994). Hence, no single pattern constituted such religious communities. Monastic networks could claim and sacralize individuals who simultaneously appeared in lineages representing varying degrees of divinity. Sometimes, holy men from different religions claimed by different monastic communities populated a single lineage.

In late colonial times, monastic institutions could not resist increasingly identifying themselves as Hindu or Muslim. Religious, political, and cultural concepts (spirituality or service to the nation, for instance), global flows, and new forms of organization created collectives like *samaj* (societies), *sansthan* (institutes), or *sabha* and *anjuman* (associations) that catered

to new publics reconstituting social life (Van der Veer 1994, 2009; Watt 2005). A number of movements that sought, at least rhetorically, "a universal spirituality that is not bound to any specific tradition" (Van der Veer 2009: 1101–1102), seem to be behind the institutionalization of Sai Baba's popularity as well as the narrative strategy of "ambiguity and disengagement." Furthermore, the popular espousal of Vedantic monism, best represented by the religious reformer and early popularizer of Indian religions in the West, Swami Vivekananda (cf. King 1999: 118–142), triggered the transcendence of religious boundaries and lineage and monastic connections.[10] The idea of an eternal Spirit that constitutes and permeates all of existence, including the human self, enabled its upholders to claim that differences among religions reveal only incorrect understandings of the ultimate reality represented by a religious teacher of all. Indeed, Vedantic inspirations are clearly the basis for Narasimha Swami's constructions of "true faith," "self-realization," and Shirdi Sai Baba as the universal guru (McLain 2016: 101; Srinivas 2008: 227–233).

Literacy and socioeconomic capital enabled the middle class to employ print as a decisive carrier of this newly espoused ideology. In contrast to earlier *sampradayik* practices, such ideas of and about saints stimulated dissemination to general, non-sectarian audiences (Orsini 2015). Publication activities also participated discursively in national awakening and anti-colonial resistance through which both "unity and diversity" and religious parochialisms played decisive roles.

Marathi Hindus enthusiastically documented the voices and lives of saints they chose as their own, as is seen from the plentiful books covering both hagiography and saint poetry. Muslims in Maharashtra struggled to negotiate South Asian forms of global Islamic reformism with their regional traditions and tastes represented by ethnically and linguistically divided groups, as well as those subscribing to differences of caste and sect. In many ways, reformist ideas and efforts downplayed veneration of saints.[11] Muslims traditionally patronized sharing of Islamic learning in Persian (and later Urdu), rich in the preservation of Sufi saints' legacies. However, reformism considerably changed religious preferences of South Asian Muslims with regard to the ways of reverence to holy men. Muslim Marathi publishing, for the most part, avoided the saints, who were thus left to those educated in Urdu and Persian or to oral transmission, and instead focused on reformist goals of educating Muslim audiences in Islamic scriptures and history (cf. Mujawar 2018). Thus, the hagiographical rendering of Sai Baba remained predominantly an endeavor of his Hindu high-caste followers, while Muslim devotion to the saint remained local and fragmented.

High-caste and mostly Brahmanic popularizers of devotion to Baba were hardly his only followers, however. Sai Baba's reputation as a miracle worker commanded a vast public, since he resolved people's many concerns regarding health and healing. As David Hardiman (2015: 365) notes, early local perception of Sai Baba as *hakim*, "a term that designates both

a doctor and a philosopher," and his later fame as a miracle worker reveal how members of the Indian middle class came to embrace forms of healing and miracle cures distant from rationalist and biopolitical notions of the body and scientific remedies. Hardiman further argues that devotees moved "fluidly between nationalist politics and the propagation of an Indian spirituality," and suggests that Sai Baba's curative powers permitted his devotees to embed Baba in traditional discourses on the powers and wisdom of the holy men so important to nationalist narrative, while complementing Baba's abilities with those of modern practitioners (ibid.: 368, 374). Indeed, belief in the miraculous powers of holy men cuts across the tradition or modernity divide to create a hybrid, unfinished present (cf. Rush, this volume). Hence, in addition to narrative claims manifested in texts, the belief of Sai Baba's patrons, popularizers, and devotees in the saint's benevolence suggests practices and goals that transgress solely religious concerns, social status, and communitarian claims (cf. Bellamy 2011: 8, 18).

The Polysemic Fakir

Focusing on the multiple, often interchangeable meanings of terms for seekers of religious knowledge, experiences, and perfection in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Timothy Dobe highlights the polysemy of the term *fakir*. Although originating in a much earlier Islamic milieu, in the late colonial period, fakir "along with other vernacular terms as pir and yogi, ... reflects rich and fluid identities, which cannot be assigned to one religion" (Dobe 2015: 14). A fakir was considered an unruly, asocial, and reviled fellow who did not fit Victorian morals, as well as a seeker representing knowledge learned in a teacher–disciple chain. He embodied supernatural power through which he gained respect and devotion (*bhakti*), but was placed by moderns at the periphery of their ideas of religion (Ewing 1997: 46, 48). Other terms such as *siddha, baba, awliya,* or the often-used Marathi *maharaj* offer a "virtually unlimited form of reference" that "can incorporate the pluralistic web of figures, things, symbols and stories each, a potential resource for upstart saints" (Dobe 2015: 21). Furthermore, popular use of such terms does not necessarily reveal affiliation with religious institutions involved in veneration of these same holy figures, although participation in their veneration is clearly suggested (Bellamy 2011: 2).

What then seems to be the ambiguity and disengagement of Sai Baba himself may also be a deliberate choice and narrative tool employed to accommodate the saint to one's own collectivity. Indeed, the fakir "is only a veneer" (Loar 2018: 484). An early Marathi hagiographic employment of such is found in a story about *sant* Eknath from Mahipati's *Bhaktavijaya* that describes his meeting with a Malang fakir. Eknath of Paithan (d. 1599) was a Maharashtrian saint popular mainly among Vaishnava devotees of the god Vitthal from Pandharpur, who were otherwise known as Varkaris. Eknath was born in Paithan to a Rigvedi Brahman family and studied in

मला व जनार्दनस्वामी हे कुत्रीच्या दुधात भाकरी खातांना.
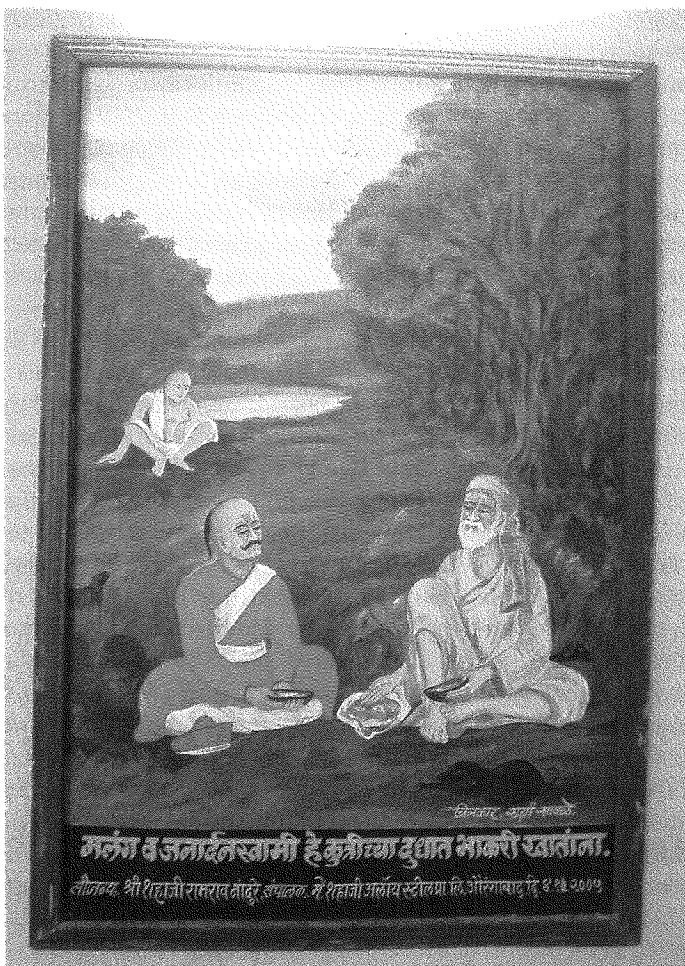
Figure 1.1 A picture by Surya Savle hanging at the Shri Datta Gham Suryakund Sansthan at Shulibhanjan, near Daulatabad, Maharasthra, India, 2013. Janardanswami and Malang are depicted sharing food with the worried young Eknath in background. The resemblance of the Malang and Sai Baba is striking.

Source: Photograph by Dušan Deák.

Daulatabad under Janardan Swami, a devotee of the god Dattatreya who was allegedly once employed by the Nizam Shahs of Ahmadnagar. In Eknath's meeting with the Malang fakir, according to the hagiographer, the latter's true form was revealed to be Dattatreya although young Eknath worried about his interaction with a Muslim-looking figure (see Figure 1.1). The story thus suggests how he was made to understand that an outward form is irrelevant for religious instruction.[12] Eknath's various compositions

and hagiographical traditions about him display his pedagogical engagement with social othering.[13]

Accommodating the figure of a fakir to the form of Dattatreya has a long history in Marathi hagiographic discourse (Deák 2010). Indeed, Datta appears suddenly, as a Marathi saying goes (*"Datta mhanun ubha rahne"*), as if from nowhere. He is considered Guru of all gurus, and is unpredictable and often divinely mad (*unmatta*). Hence, as teacher and unpredictable yogi, Dattatreya offered perhaps the most viable prototypical image for all those Hindus who would accommodate historical fakirs into their worlds of devotion.

Apart from its modern polysemy, for a long time the term fakir has also referred to a Sufi in South Asia. In its popular as well as modern Orientalist rendering in which scholars and intellectuals from the rising middle class participated, Sufism has come to represent an Islamic search for a mystical closeness, or even union with God. The high esteem of Sufis as powerful, helpful, and knowledgeable holy men also invited the participation of non-Muslims in their veneration (cf. Bigelow 2010; Eaton 1993). The monastic centers of Sufism organized through Sufi orders (*tarika*) and lineage chains (*silsila*) accommodated both individual seekers of mystical knowledge and those who came to adore the tombs that provided a Sufi's helpful powers. Importantly, the term "Sufi" came to accommodate many different Muslims whose sacralization and engagement with Islamic mysticism may or may not have been contemporaneous with their own lives (Eaton 1978: xxiv–xxviii; Schwerin 1981). Active participants in *tarika* activities, scholars, mystics, warriors, reformers, and people associated with state administration and policy, as well as various charismatics endowed with supernatural and often curative powers (Kakar 1982), could all be accommodated under the category of Sufi, making it similarly polysemic as fakir.

Sai Baba's Predecessors

In Shirdi Sai Baba's context, Marianne Warren (1999) proposes that his association with Sufism is indeed possible when "Bhakti-Sufi traditions of Maharashtra" are considered. Examining the poetical compositions of Maharashtrian Muslim saint-poets like Shah Bahmani/Brahmani Muntoji, Sheikh Muhammad from Shrigonda (both sixteenth and seventeenth centuries), and Shaha Muni (eighteenth century), Warren highlights their "efforts to see the essential unity of the Muslim concept of God, Allah, with the one Divinity underlying all the Names and Forms of the Hindu Pantheon." She further claims an "intense religious ferment [was] taking place in Maharashtra since the 16th century" (ibid.: 174, 385). However, such a reading oversimplifies the problems that this poetry poses and ahistorically exaggerates its meanings in order to show ideational connections between these Muslim saint-poets and Sai Baba.

According to Marathi Hindu hagiographers, Shah Bahmani, as the name itself suggests, is said to come from the Bahmani royal family. Unsatisfied with his life, he turned to wandering and found his guru in Sahajananda of Anandasampraday residing in Kalyani. His goal of being accepted among Brahmins, which was doubted by his ill-wishers, led to a fire ordeal that he passed successfully, after which he became known as Mrityunjay, the one who conquered death. Shah Bahmani, whose ideas are accessible through his Marathi compositions, resided in Narayanpur near Kalyani where his *dargah* stands, visited by both Hindus and Muslims. In a separate building near his tomb lies the body of his disciple Muddayya. After 1947, the *dargah* became a place of dispute between its Muslim and Hindu caretakers.[14]

What is known about Sheikh Muhammad (or rather Muhammad Baba, as he is popularly called), apart from his own compositions, comes from hagiographers like Mahipati and Dasganu who portray him as a Muslim saint most popular in the devotional Varkari *sampraday* (Bendre 1957). Sheikh is also popularly known as an avatar of Kabir. He was born in Dharur and spent his youth in Daulatabad. There he met the mysterious Chand Bodhle, who is said to be the same fakir Dattatreya who puzzled young Eknath. However, Sheikh spent most of his life in Shrigonda, today in Ahmadnagar district. It is believed that he was supported by Maloji Bhosle, grandfather of Maratha King Shivaji.[15] Sheikh also became famous due to his yogic powers that, in turn, have been instrumental in helping and sometimes curing the needy. His Muslim identity and involvement in Varkari devotionalism, however, caused a divide in his Muslim family that is clearly manifested in his two graves and disputes about his religious identity (Deák 2020).

In contrast, Shaha Muni is only known from sparse references in his own book *Siddhantabodha*. One learns that he was born in Pedgav in Ahmadnagar district, spent some time in Varanasi where he met his guru Munindraswami, possibly from Mahanubhav *sampradaya*. He wrote *Siddhantabodha* somewhere near Chambli in Satara district and died in Shahagad in Jalna district (both in Maharashtra). Khanolkar (1977: 361) places him among Rajputs, which is perhaps reflected not only in his name Shaha but also in the fact that his grave, nowadays sheltered under a temple-like structure, is located right in the middle of a small fort at the bank of the Godavari River. In addition, Dhere mentions five Muslim families that care for Shaha Muni's grave and accept blessings from the Mahanubhav *mahant* (leader), which sets them apart from other Muslims living in Shahagad (1994: 116). Overall, information about the lives of these saints is limited. Except for snippets deduced from their poetry, understandings come from later and rather ambiguous accounts that allow *sampradayik* accommodation but cannot prevent modern conflicts over their identities.

Bhakti or yogic vocabulary and images in the literary compositions of some Indian Muslims have been well documented, as have their religious practices that show embeddedness in local and regional religiosities.[16] Conversely, the participation of Hindus in veneration of Muslim figures has

usually been seen in terms of an ambiguous and politically framed "syncre-tism," largely avoiding consideration of Hindu motivations in the process (Bellamy 2011). Seen in this context, the poetry of Muslim Marathi saint-poets displays acculturation in the Bhakti traditions of regional *sampradays* (Varkari, Datta, Ananda, or Mahanubhav) and employment of pan-Indian Bhakti vocabulary (Dhere 1994). These poets clothe the idea of monotheism in Vedantic language popular with their local audiences as seen in terms such as *nirakara, nirguna, avyakta,* or *maya,* and at times identify Allah with Ishvara or Narayana.

Whereas a rich and plural monastic tradition of Sufism connecting its ide-ational framework and praxis to global Islamic world exists in Maharashtra (Green 2008; Kugle 2012), "Bhakti-Sufi traditions" can be identified with Sufi monasticism only to a limited degree. A clear difference exists between the *tarika*-affiliated and venerated Sufis employing local, sometimes Nath yogi, imaginations along with Sufi soteriological models (Ernst 2005), and those Muslim poets who criticized caste and call for reverence of the universal Divine Being. The former voices are framed by existing institutional and ideational networks of global Islam whereas Marathi Muslim poets' popu-larity has enabled creation and/or modification of devotional communities and networks like *sampradays.* Exemplifying this difference in the all-Indian context is Kabir, a saint-poet whose followers stand behind the network of Kabir-*panthis,* or Nanak, a saint-poet whose students (Sikhs) created a sepa-rate religion. Similarly, Marathi Muslim saint-poets have been thus accom-modated to *sampradays* in Maharashtrian contexts. Therefore, the historical lives of Muslim Marathi saint-poets are largely unknown to *tarika* traditions of the Deccan or to loose Sufi-fakiri networks.[17] This does not mean that there is no space for speculation, but drawing direct connections between these Muslim Marathi saint-poets and a global Sufi tradition is problematic.

Literate, modern, and often high-caste Maharashtrians equipped with new technological means for communicating ideas as well as with vocab-ulary stemming from religious nationalism reimagined Sufism and Muslim saints through textual Orientalist scholarship. To some extent, this con-trasted with Sufi practices and multilayered ways of Muslim engage-ment with the mysterious and experiential parts of religion full of locally formed expressiveness that took place "between texts, territories and the transcendent" (Green 2004). Furthermore, the reimagination of Sufism as a textualized generic category attempted to express in the eyes of the earlier Orientalists such as Arthur Arberry, Annemarie Schimmel, and many oth-ers, a more humane Islam that could render India more communally inclu-sive, as opposed to Islam's oft-emphasized strictness and militancy.

An example is Dhere's seminal and deeply detailed study *Musalman Marathi santkavi* (1967, republished as *Ekatmatece Shilpakar,* 1994), in which he developed his sense of Sufism through terms like *samanvay* (togetherness) and *ekatmata* (spiritual unity, oneness). However, attribution of unification of Hindus and Muslims to the works of saints of the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries CE betrays twentieth-century perspectives rather

than local Muslim narratives of their own times and concerns. Both Sheikh Muhammad and Shaha Muni posited their understandings of the relationship between Hindus and Muslims within the framework of caste. While Sheikh Muhammad criticized caste differences and hierarchies by resorting to the Islamic cosmogonic concept that all people are born as Muslims, Shaha Muni seems to have rejected his identity based on birth in favor of Krishna *bhakti*. Only Shah Bahmani clearly claimed that he united Hindus and Muslims through Vedantic philosophy.[18] These Hindus and Muslims are hardly identifiable with religions of the twentieth century. Finally, since their verses emphasize a single-pointed devotion in terms of the central idea of Islam, their Vedantic vocabulary can be seen more as the devotional articulation of local Muslims than as religious syncretism.[19]

The notes of Sai Baba's devotee Abdul (Warren 1999: 277–309) introduce additional problems to understanding holy men like Sai Baba. References to Baba in the third person (287–289) raise a question: Is the text conveying the saint's own thoughts or Abdul's knowledge and in an effort to synthesize Abdul's understanding with the idiosyncrasies of Sai's ideas? Abdul's notes are full of references to various Islamic practices and concepts like *kalima* or *roza* as well as to the Quran and a plethora of Sufi figures organized in several lineages or referred to within hierarchies of different upholders of an unseen realm (*abdals, autads, qutbs,* and *pirs*). However, Abdul's notebook also contains Vedantic ideas like the "inner controller" and generally Indic concepts of *dharma, prana,* and *avatar.* Overall, his notes offer an illustrative example of reading Sai's legacy in the light of localized Sufi and renouncer figures (cf. Mohammad 2013: 3). The plural content of the text that freely employs ideas and instructions within the Indic milieu may also be read as yet more evidence of Sai's Islamic identity and his knowledge of locally formed Islam.

Yet if Sai Baba as we know him from all the multifarious but secondary testimonies is rooted in any tradition, it is perhaps that of ascetics and renouncers for whom instruction and lineage matter much more than textualist concepts as modern renderings of Sufism offer. The connection of Baba's legacy with the Muslim saint-poets of Maharashtra is then tenable in the very general context of individual efforts to tread religious paths and seek those instructions that are available—e.g. Vedantic, Sufi, or yogic. Indeed, the Marathi Muslim saint-poets devote many verses to praise their preceptors.

Sai Baba's Contemporaries: Tajuddin Baba, Jangli Maharaj, and Sailani Baba

> What shall I, a humble man, say? No qualities and no form.
> Brahma, Vishnu, Maheshwara, whose completeness I do not hope to attain.
> However, I will sing whatever I know,
> and having no control of the inspiration from within,

I should accept service, devotion, and compassion, and greet with
love,
the One who is endless and imperceptible for others, who call this a
blind faith.
But this is just their ignorance. The butter is not seen in milk, yet it
exists right there.
Eternally without qualities always absorbed in itself,
self-knowledgeable, blissful, "neither that nor that,"
Parabrahma of the Vedas, Allah of Islam, "God" in English, evident in
everything.
.... An avatar, the great Tajnath, always emanating light, the Luminous!
A formless principle! Now, listen attentively with love to the powerful
story.
Know the jewel among the holy madmen (*awliya*)! An ornament of
avatars,
Tajuddin famous in all worlds, our Baba! (*Tajayan* 1–6, 23–25)

Exemplifying the previous discussion are these Marathi verses from
Tajayan (A Path of Taj) written by Bhayyaji Maharaj, a Hindu devotee
of Tajuddin Baba (d. 1925). Tajuddin was one of the holy contemporar-
ies of Sai Baba to whom our discussion will now turn. He was a typi-
cal representative of the modern cohort of holy men venerated by both
Muslims and Hindus through universalizing lenses. Born in Kamthi,
today a suburb of Nagpur (Maharashtra), Tajuddin came to be locally
known as a holy madman (*awliya*). His religious life was influenced by
meeting a fakir-preceptor of sepoys, Abd Allah Shah of Kamthi, as well as
by instructions from a Chishti Sufi, Dawud Shah (Green 2009: 120–126).
A former sepoy incarcerated in the lunatic asylum and whose fame spread
due to his performing miracles and cures, later in life Tajuddin was sup-
ported by Maharaja Raja Ragho Bhosle, a descendant of the Maratha
rulers of Nagpur. Today, he is seen by his Hindu followers as an Eternal
Avatar, dominantly but not exclusively, as well as a Sufi linked to a few
silsilahs by his Muslim devotees.[20]

Baba's contemporaries are often grouped together as Perfect Masters,
a concept introduced by Sai Baba's follower Meher Baba (McLain 2016:
102–103; Srinivas 2008: 47, see also Srinivas, this volume). A pentad of
saints—Sai Baba, Tajuddin Baba, Narayan Maharaj, Babajan, and Upasani
Maharaj—is linked through concepts of perfection and preceptorship that
both veil and disclose an Avatar of the age (in this case Meher Baba) as an
ineffable Divine Being in human form (see Munsiff 1998: 7). By deliberately
ignoring the problematic historical relationships among the five, the con-
cept disengages these saints from any possible histories linking them with
their preceptors and lineages. Instead, such a position espouses a philoso-
phy of a Divine Being incarnated for continuous revelation of knowledge
that is a testimony of the eternal existence of the Divine Being.

Such ideas are not new to South Asian religious discourse, and they may be associated with historical articulations of an original source of knowledge and/or a divine preceptor such as Krishna, Adinath, Dattatreya, or, in Sufi terms, Muhammad, Ali, or even the founders of *tarikas* (Sufi orders). However, in postulating the idea of a first divine teacher who is the teacher of all other teachers and who embodies and brings eternal knowledge, both the universalism of such knowledge and access to it stand for the inapprehensible eternity of such revelations, and so are, in a way, ambiguous. The idea renders holy men and sometimes gods in absolute terms and offers the seeker an individual choice of a teacher. The pentad of Perfect Masters, conversely, establishes a new framework that creatively employs and postulates one or more new lineages. By its very ambiguity, seeing Sai Baba as an Eternal Being manifesting in different divine guises (Rigopoulos 1993: 18–20) offers the possibility of his accommodation to different *sampradays*.

In such contexts, it is important to consider the ambiguity and disengagement of other often-overlooked contemporaries of Sai Baba like Sailani Baba of Bhadgav, Bane Miyan of Aurangabad, Jangli Maharaj of Pune, Gajanan Maharaj of Shegav, and Noori Maharaj of Thane. These and other holy men contemporary to or slightly preceding Sai Baba who found devotees among modern middle-class followers (but not solely) are often grouped together via particular lineages and corresponding narratives. Hence, today it is possible to see images in which Sai Baba is driving a cart along with Meher Baba, Hazrat Babajan, Tajuddin, Akkalkot Swami, and Gajanan Maharaj, with the figure of Dattatreya in the background as proverbial teacher of teachers (see Figure 1.2).[21] Alternatively, one can find Sailani Baba in the company of Tajuddin, Sai Baba, and Gajanan Maharaj or Indian Sufis from the past.[22]

Despite their differences, what brings all these holy people to a common platform is the downplaying of their specific origins and the hagiographical nature of their life stories, while elevating their supernatural and curative powers, putative universality, and the humane goals of their instructions. Their lineages are also reinvented in particularistic, *tarika*-Sufi, or Datta-*sampradayik* terms or in universalistic (*sarvajati*), trans-religious, communally harmonizing, and increasingly global terms.

For example, take Jangli Maharaj and Sailani Baba, two Muslim wrestlers turned saints.[23] Jangli Maharaj (Ahmadshah or Janglishah Muhammad, d. 1890) was an active wrestler who first became famous in southern Maharashtra. He became known as a helpful guru performing supernatural deeds, a yogi, and a *mantrika* skilled in using mantras. He was purportedly guided by both a Sufi, Shah Taher Qadiri Satari, and the famous Akkalkot Maharaj who is today considered an avatar of Dattatreya. While the former taught him the use of mantras, the latter is said to have engaged in a *mantrik* fight with him, which Akkalkot Maharaj won. Jangli Maharaj is also credited with building and repairing mosques and temples across

Figure 1.2 Sai Baba driving a cart with other saints. From left to right: Dattatreya, Hazrat Babajan, Akkalkot Swami, Tajuddin Baba, Sai Baba, Gajanan Maharaj, and Meher Baba.

Source: Popular poster in Dušan Deák's possession, artist unknown.

Maharashtra, as well as miraculously curing people. Indeed, Ai Saheb, his chief follower, joined him after he raised her son from the dead.[24] Muslims espousing popular reformism that shunned devotion to holy men largely ignored Jangli Maharaj's activities. His Hindu devotees, who renamed Ahmadshah as Jangli Maharaj because of his residence in a then remote part of Pune, Hinduized his veneration, seeing him as an Eternal Guru and often as Dattatreya.[25] This process of accommodation recently took another turn through the claim that Maharaj came from Baroda in the Indian state of Gujarat and the marketing of his legacy in terms of *Sabka Malik Atma*![26]

As a second example, Sailani Baba (Haji Abdul Rahman, d. 1906) is said to have been born in Delhi after a blessing from an unknown fakir. Fond of wrestling, he trained in Balapur in Northern Maharashtra. Later on, he wrestled an old man who appeared to be the same fakir who blessed his parents. The fakir advised Abdul Rahman to leave wrestling and use his abilities for people's benefit. Haji Abdul accepted and he met his preceptor in the person of the Naqshbandi Sufi Shah, Khairuddin Makhdoom Mujarrad. The Shah guided Haji Abdul, renamed him Sailani (Enquirer) Baba, and directed him to Bhadgav in Vidarbha, Maharashtra. Sailani Baba practiced yogic meditation there, passing his time in a *smashan* (crematorium), befriending wild animals, but mainly attending to people's needs (Bhagavat 2014: 12–19). Today, his *dargah* is visited by both Muslims and Hindus and is famous for miraculous cures of the mentally ill (Davar and Lohokare 2009: 261). Overall, aside from his miraculous powers, it is Sufism that clothes Sailani Baba's perception by Hindu and Muslim devotees (Bhagavat 2014: 9–11).

Conclusion

This chapter seeks to problematize and historicize universalizing discourses about Sai Baba. It recognizes ambiguity in his historical appearance and narrative disengagement from modern religious communities as a productive strategy espoused by Baba's followers and exponents. However, resorting to concepts such as an Eternal Guru, although a powerful narrative tool, is hardly unique historically. Moreover, such tactics cannot avoid the very sectarianism that they hope to overcome, as documented in the cases of saints who preceded Sai Baba or were his contemporaries. Recent accommodation of several Muslim saints to Dattatreya *sampradaya* and, previously, to other *sampradays*, as well as discursive universalization of their humane and social conduct, are not mutually exclusive processes. Modernity, its agents, their political claims, social and economic capital, and technologies of communication simply cannot transgress the very social embeddedness of human effort and traditions with which moderns seek to part. Thus, in order to answer people's needs and articulate their worldviews, avoidance of disputes over Sai Baba's religious identity accompanied by newly conceived ways of accommodation of holy men to the lives of their followers opens questions about social application of the universalism of religion itself.

Notes

1 Among the widely acknowledged academic works on Sai Baba should be counted White (1972), Rigopoulos (1993), Warren (1999), Srinivas (2008), and recently McLain (2016) and Loar (2018).
2 The hagiographical canon of Sai Baba includes the works of his earliest hagiographer Dasganu: *Santakathamrita*, 1903; *Bhaktalilamrita*, 1906; *Shri Sainath Stavanmaajari*, 1918; and *Bhaktisaramrita*, 1925. Also essential are the canonical life stories of the saint by R. G. Dabholkar *Shri Saisaccarita*, 1930; its English retelling as *Shri Sai Satcharita* by N. V. Gunaji, 1944; the

monumental work of B. V. Narasimha Swami including *Life of Sai Baba*, in four volumes, 1955–1960, *Sri Sai Baba's Charters and Sayings*, 1939, and *Devotees' Experiences of Sri Sai Baba*, 1949. One of the first popularizers of Sai Baba in the West, Arthur Osborne, wrote *The Incredible Sai Baba*, 1958.

3 In particular, I shall avoid the complex discussion about his Muslim or Brahmin identity or his alleged birth in Pathri.

4 *Bhaktalilamrita* 31: 14–20. All translations in this essay are mine and I take responsibility for all possible misreadings.

5 *Shri Saisaccarita* 11: 62, and passim; *Bhaktalilamrita* 31: 35, 41. The Marathi word "*veda*" stands for "*mad*," and "*pir*"—literally old, or senior in Persian—is a reference to an often-sacralized Sufi religious teacher who, in folklore, often also represents a semi-divine figure working miracles.

6 For instance, considering the role of the first Honorary Secretary of the Sai Baba Sansthan, H. S. Dixit, in neglecting the devotional preferences of Muslim devotees of Baba such as Abdul Baba (Warren 1999: 269, 347), and reading Dixit's Preface to the *Shri Saisaccarita* (2010: 1–2) suggests that ambiguity may have served his own preferences. Given that he wrote in times witnessing mutual alienation between Hindus and Muslims, one wonders how far the ambiguity narrative covered the public recognizing Baba as Muslim. Conversely, a recent case of demonizing Baba as a "jihadi" (https://scroll.in/article/991155/labelled-jihadi-sai-babas-idol-demolished-in-delhi-hindu-hardliner-exults-devotees-despair, accessed 14 June, 2021) reflects development of alienation to an exaggerated level.

7 Narasimha Swami's role in spreading the popularity of Sai Baba among the South Indian middle class (cf. Srinivas 2002, 2008) and his role in pan-Indian devotion to Baba (McLain 2016: 124–128) are other important facets of his activities. In this study, however, I shall omit their discussion. Other important authors whose narratives border on hagiographic genres are Swami Sai Sharan Anand (2002, originally published in 1962), Ekkirala Bharadwaja (1983, originally published in 1978), and Kamath and Kher (1991).

8 Rigopoulos reads the ambiguity and historical lacunae of early testimonies through the lens of "eclecticism" (1993: 377; cf. White 1972: 868), which leads to the "Hinduization" of Sai Baba's legacy (Rigopoulos 1993: 242; see also Warren 1999: 386–387). McLain (2016) discusses how institutionalizing devotion to Baba makes space for criticism of caste and mitigation of communal ideology. This has been achieved by seeing Sai Baba as a composite figure who is there for all and in all times, and so inserting him into perennial time as an eternal Sadguru (2016: 91–132). Similarly for Loar, the hagiographic testimony, while betraying its social context, allows creating "Sai Baba anew" to counter contemporary Hindu nationalism (2018: 493–494).

9 Generally speaking, all mentioned names refer to religious orders or networks of their devotees. The centers of these orders are often monastic in their character.

10 The potential of Vedanta as a catalyst of mystical philosophies coming from different religions is not a modern invention. See, for instance, Albiruni's appreciation of Vedanta in Sachau (1910: xliii).

11 See Robinson (2008) for more on Muslim reformism in South Asia.

12 Mahipati's *Bhaktavijaya* 45: 74–130. On Dattatreya see Joshi (1965), Rigopoulos (2000), and Rigopoulos and Rush, this volume.

13 On Eknath, see Keune (2015). Eknath became famous as a staunch defender of use of the Marathi language for religious purposes, as documented in his commentary on *Bhagavata Purana*. An oft-quoted Eknath composition is *Hindu-Turk samvad* (A debate between Hindu and Turk) that documents his experience with representatives of localized Deccani Islam; see Keune (2015).

14 Mahipati's *Bhaktavijaya*, chapter 41, *Purnanandacaritra* chapter 16, and the author's interviews with Hindu and Muslim caretakers of the Mrityunjay's tomb, Narayanpur, July 2015. Such disputes are known for several other South Asian holy men revered by Hindus and Muslims, and, indeed, they also took place in Shirdi (Rigopoulos 1993: 241–242).

15 Bendre (1957: 69–70) published a legal document in which Maloji Bhosle gives land to the Sheikh in Shrigonda and even calls himself his disciple. However, Sumit Guha suggested that this might be a later forgery (personal communication via email, November 5, 2020).

16 For instance, while analyzing the Hindavi Sufi romance, Aditya Behl suggests reading it in terms of "acculturation of a monotheistic faith and a literary model into a local landscape" (2012: 19). Similarly, Afsar Mohammad's ethnography exploring the Muharram practices and shared narratives of Telugu rural Muslims shows how Islamic tradition is manifested while employing "a repertoire of various inclusive religious practices that embrace diverse devotional traditions in one specific place" (2013: 3).

17 Cf. Nizami (1975); Rizvi (1978: 322–396). Shah Bahmani's Qadiri association comes from a single Hindu Ramdasi hagiography (Dhere 1994: 22) and is absent in the plethora of works attributed to him. Sheikh Muhammad's Qadiri association is clearly articulated only with the third generation of his descendants and is largely absent in his own compositions. Warren's quote (1999: 167) from Sheikh Muhammad's *Yogasangram* that purports to illustrate the Sheikh's words on who is a true Sufi strikes me as a misreading of the text (see Deák 2013). Shaha Muni's Sufi association is altogether missing (*Siddhantabodha* 1: 15, 50: 353–354).

18 *Yogasangram* 6: 8–15; *Siddhantabodha* 2:129–132; Dhere (1994: 23).

19 In terms of Afsar Mohammad's distinction between the local and localized Islam (cf. 2013: 3), the former is articulated through multifarious local agents, their narratives and practices, while the latter localizes outward established religious tenets and practices in our context of South Asian Sufism.

20 For example, https://www.tajbaba.com/qadri-affiliation.html, accessed July 2021.

21 Hazrat Babajan (d. 1931) was a female fakir and a spiritual consoler of sepoys and other locals who settled in Pune's cantonment after leaving her domestic place in Baluchistan. As seen from the inclusion of Babajan among the Perfect Masters, Meher Baba respected Babajan highly and praised her for helping him experience "indescribable bliss" (Green 2009: 127–132). Akkalkot Maharaj or Swami Samartha (d. 1878) is currently one of the most popular saints in Maharashtra and recognized by many as a yogi and avatar of Dattatreya. His origin is unknown, and similar to Sai Baba, depends on later conventions. Swami is well known for his strange (*unmatta*) behavior as well as for his miracles including cures, but also, like Sai Baba, for his appearances as different Hindu deities (Joshi 1965: 136–142). Gajanan Maharaj (d. 1910) became famous after his appearance in Shegav, which again renders his origin unknown. He is said to have remained in Shegav for the rest of his life. Again, he is known for his multifarious ways of providing benefits for followers, including miraculous cures. Also, by his practice of constantly smoking chillum and staying naked, Gajanan Maharaj stands for a divinely mad saint whose inapprehensible behavior confirmed his divine status. Similar to Sai Baba, he is known to have met with B. G. Tilak and his associate G. S. Khaparde, who was also his ardent devotee (Dasbhargav and Vaidya 2004).

22 A very insightful treatment of the visual representation of the lineage-cum-universality pattern that I am discussing is found in Amish Madheshiya and Shirley Abraham's essay, https://kjc-sv033.kjc.uni-heidelberg.de/essay-detail.php?eid=16&page=1, accessed February 2021.

23 Recall Sai Baba's wrestling (Rigopoulos 1993: 66–67)!
24 See Rege (2004). Another important follower of Maharaj was Appaseheb Pathwardhan, a ruler of Jamkhandi princely state.
25 In Rege's words, to determine his identity is *nirarthak*, meaningless (Rege 2004: 19).
26 http://vishwatmak.org/divine.html, accessed February 2021. *Sabka Malik Atma* well illustrates the shift from Sai Baba's One—and the emphasis on One, as is seen also with the Muslim Marathi saint-poets—to a very Vedantic Atma (soul). The relationship implicitly suggests a union between human (Atma) and divine (Brahma, i.e., Malik) soul. This group of Jangli Maharaj devotees, as many before, apparently capitalizes on Vedanta philosophy.

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2 Hagiographic Connections between Shirdi Sai Baba and Sathya Sai Baba

Venkusha, Venkavadhuta, and the Integrative Icon of Dattatreya

Antonio Rigopoulos

As is well known, there is no reliable evidence concerning the time and place of Shirdi Sai Baba's birth, the identity of his parents and family background, or his religious upbringing and training. The saint discouraged his devotees from investigating such matters, sometimes giving them mystifying answers such as when he told them that his father was Purusha, the Supreme Being, and that his mother Maya or Prakriti, possessed the power of illusion or matter (Narasimha Swami 1980–1985: [1]: 11). To pinpoint the details of Baba's origins was counter to his being beyond institutionalized religions, i.e., "neither Hindu nor Muslim."[1] Sai Baba's teaching of the oneness of god and humanity drew on a flexible, integrative culture that has been constitutive of the Deccan for centuries, generating overlapping, non-dual identities. As Sai Baba himself stated, the legacy of Kabir, the fifteenth-century poet and mystic of Benares, provides a paradigm for understanding his figure.

Sai Baba's Origins and His Allusions to Venkusha as His Guru

Sai Baba's followers have often addressed the "mystery" of his origins by proposing various hypotheses that are documented in devotional literature. An exception in this regard is Sai Baba's main hagiography written by Govind Raghunath Dabholkar (1859–1929), the *Shri Sai Satcharita,* which contents itself to say that "just as, by great good fortune, Gonai found Nama in the Bhima river, and Tamaal found Kabir in an oyster shell in the Bhagirathi, so also, Shri Sainath first appeared for his devotees, in the Shirdi village, under a Neem tree, at the tender age of sixteen" (Kher 1999: 65). Other texts report occasional utterances of his on supposedly biographical issues, such as when he said that his uncle had brought him to Shirdi from Aurangabad.[2] Quite late in his life, Sai Baba seems to have told Mhalsapati (d. 1922), the priest of the Khandoba temple and one of his closest devotees from the early days, that he was born in the village of Pathri in the Parbhani district of the then Hyderabad State. While he was still a tender child, his Brahmin parents handed him over to the care of a fakir (Muslim ascetic) who brought him up.[3] Because of Mhalsapati's reputation as a trustworthy

person, his testimony has been accepted by many, and it was upheld by B.
V. Narasimha Swami (1874–1956), who was the key figure in the populariza-
tion of Sai Baba's cult starting in the 1930s. Notwithstanding its historical
plausibility, what needs to be underlined is that Mhalsapati's testimony pos-
tulating that Sai Baba had Brahmin parents and an upbringing by a Muslim
fakir exemplifies an integrative scheme which simultaneously affirms his
"pure" Brahmin-ness and mirrors the hagiographical paradigm of Kabir.[4]

Concerning Sai Baba's guru, the most popular reconstruction was the
one offered by Narayan Dattatreya Sahasrabuddhe alias Das Ganu (1868–
1962), a Chitpavan Brahmin and noted *kirtankar* (performer of song-ser-
mons) who was instrumental in spreading Sai Baba's fame in western India.[5]
Das Ganu first met the saint in 1892 and claimed that he heard from Sai
Baba's mouth some notable autobiographical reminiscences. In an inter-
view he granted to Narasimha Swami in June 1936, he stated that "Baba
has several times said that 'Venkusha' was his Guru and that by the grace
of 'Venkusha' Baba had attained to his position" (Narasimha Swami 2006:
130). Quite naturally, Das Ganu interpreted the name Venkusha as a dimin-
utive of Venkateshvara/Venkatesha, the popular god of Tirupati in the state
of Andhra Pradesh. He added that Sai Baba told him that he came from
Selu, a locale fifteen miles away from Pathri and that "the brick he used as
a pillow at Shirdi and which is still retained as a relic of Baba ... was given
by his Guru to him, [and] that his Guru was 'Venkusha.'"[6] In his *Shri Sai
Satcharita* (chap. 44, verses 43–56), G. R. Dabholkar states that the saint
used to rest his head and elbow on this old brick at the dilapidated mosque
where he resided, while sitting in a yogic *asana* (posture). When it broke, the
fakir exclaimed that "the brick, in the company of which, I go into a state of
Self-absorption, and which was dearer to me as life itself—that companion
of mine is broken and I too, cannot remain without it. That brick, my com-
panion of a lifetime, has gone, leaving me behind" (Kher 1999: 726).

A unique testimony furnished by Das Ganu, to which he is said to have
been an eyewitness, pertains to Sai Baba's examination by a Commissioner
of the Dhulia Court, one Nana Joshi, who was sent to Shirdi to interro-
gate Sai Baba on a case of jewel theft. The answers that Sai Baba gave
to the Commissioner with regard to his identity are worth quoting:
"Commissioner: What is your name? B.: Baba. They call me Sai Baba. C.:
Your father's name? B.: Also Sai Baba. C.: Your Guru's name? B.: Venkusha.
C.: Creed or religion? B.: Kabir. C.: Caste or race? B.: Parvardigar (i.e. God).
C.: Age, please? B.: Lakhs of years."[7] Eventually, the saint was found to be
extraneous to the case.

While other followers and researchers are convinced that Sai Baba's
master was a Sufi (Warren 1999: 40, 73), the idea that Venkusha was Sai
Baba's guru remains the most widespread conjecture among devotees to
date. It is important to note the intensity with which Baba spoke about his
guru. For him the guru was all. In the *Shri Sai Satcharita*, he is reported
saying that

for twelve years I remained at the guru's feet. He reared me as a child till I grew up. There was no dearth of food or clothes and his heart abounded with love for me. He was the very image of devotion and love and had a genuine affection for the disciple. Rare indeed, is a guru like mine. I just cannot describe the happiness I enjoyed in his company.... As the mother-tortoise feeds her little ones on her loving glance, so was the way of my guru, who looked after the child with loving glances (Kher 1999: 304–305).

Das Ganu's Reconstruction of Sai Baba's Origins and Guru

The saint's references to Venkusha and Selu prompted Das Ganu to undertake a research trip there in 1901 to inquire about these issues with local villagers. Das Ganu wrote his poetic reconstruction of Sai Baba's origins as chapter 26 of his Marathi *Bhaktisaramrit*, which was published in 1925.[8] The essentials of this story are that Sai Baba was born in Manwath, near Pathri, to Muslim parents. His father is said to have been a fakir who passed away when he was five years old. Just before dying, the fakir requested that his wife take the boy to Selu and to hand him over to Gopalrao Deshmukh, a landowner and a merciful Brahmin revered as a great saint and miracle-worker by locals.[9] Gopalrao was especially devoted to Venkatesha (here spelled Vyankatesha) to the point of identifying himself with him, and this is the reason why Das Ganu inferred that Venkusha was the name under which he was known.[10] Gopalrao recognized the Muslim boy as Kabir reborn—Gopalrao himself being none other than Ramananda, that is, Kabir's guru—as per the revelation and prophecy that saint Suvag Shah had "spoken" from his tomb (*dargah*) in Ahmedabad when Gopalrao had visited it during a pilgrimage to various holy sites.[11]

Gopalrao's household and relatives, however, did not understand his favoring the Muslim boy. Instead, they despised him as a vile *yavana* and were jealous of him.[12] They thought that the fakir's widow, whom Gopalrao had accommodated in his compound and who died when the boy turned twelve, must have cast an evil spell on Gopalrao. Therefore, one day a group of men decided to kill the boy by hurling stones at him while he and Gopalrao were spending a retreat of four months in the nearby forest. By mistake, the stone hurled at the boy hit Gopalrao on the head which led to profuse bleeding, while the person who had thrown the stone immediately fell dead as a consequence of his evil act.

Before dying, Gopalrao transferred all his powers to his young disciple. He asked him to fetch some milk from a black barren cow that by his touch, the master transformed into the cow-of-plenty. Gopalrao told the boy to drink three seers (measures) of that milk, signifying *karman*, *bhakti*, and *jnana*—the three paths of action, devotion, and knowledge, respectively, leading to enlightenment (*moksha*). He would then attain supreme wisdom and wherever he would look, everything would appear as Vishnu Narayana

to him. Gopalrao entrusted the boy with his head cloth and the very brick that had hit him, still marked with his blood, signifying the transfer of his spiritual wealth to the boy who would become Sai Baba.[13] Gopalrao instructed him to remember that he was Kabir in a former birth, to remain a celibate, and to regard god and the world as one. He was further advised to practice silence or restrict himself to laconic utterances, remain in one place, and raise up those who would surrender themselves to him.

The evil men who wanted to kill the boy realized their sin and repented, and the boy, complying to their request, revived the one who had hurled the brick at him by applying the dust of his master's feet on the man's forehead. The next day, before dying, Gopalrao told his disciples that they would discover a four-armed image of Venkatesha under a particular tree and they should bury him at that very spot. He then gave the boy the cloth that he wore so that he might make his own robe (*kafni*) from it, and instructed him to leave Selu and go westward, following the southern bank of the Godavari river.

As a follow-up, in chapter 52 of the *Bhaktisaramrit*, Das Ganu told how the boy wandered in solitude around the areas of Aurangabad and Daulatabad and, one day, while sitting in a forest, met with Chand Patil, a Muslim who for the last four days had been searching for his lost mare. The boy, identified as a fakir, invited Chand Patil to rest a while and to have a smoke with him, miraculously producing fire by striking the earth with his pincers. He then exhibited his power of clairvoyance by directing Chand Patil to a hedge where he found his lost mare. Grateful, the man invited the prodigious fakir to his home and later accompanied him to Shirdi in the wedding party of his brother-in-law. The story of recovering the lost mare is popular among devotees, and the *Shri Sai Satcharita* links it to young Sai Baba's reappearance in Shirdi.[14]

Narasimha Swami appropriated and further popularized Das Ganu's reconstruction with a few embellishments and with one significant variant through which, following Mhalsapati, he presented Sai Baba as being born in Pathri to Brahmin parents who later entrusted him to a fakir in his infancy.[15] Over the years, however, Das Ganu's story has been subject to various criticisms, primarily because of chronological inconsistencies (Bharadwaja 1983: 248–250), and finally rejected by many.[16] If the identification of Gopalrao Deshmukh with Venkusha is historically untenable, Sai Baba's allusions to Venkusha (or perhaps Venku Shah), Selu, and the brick remain recurrent within sources.

It is important to note that Das Ganu identified Sai Baba with Kabir and Venkusha with Kabir's guru Ramananda. Sai Baba is presented as a composite character, i.e., a Muslim who had a Brahmin as his master. Venkusha represents the ideal Brahmin, who in his integrative mysticism welcomes a Muslim and leads him to god-realization. Thus, Das Ganu glorified Venkusha's and Sai Baba's universalist characters beyond the dichotomous strictures of caste and institutionalized religions. He explained that Sai

Baba's mendicant's robe and his headgear were Venkusha's gifts to his disciple. By dressing himself in his master's own clothes, Sai Baba identified with him, for the garments were the tangible expression of spiritual transmission.

Sathya Sai Baba and Venkavadhuta's Prophecy

Sai Baba never manifested the desire to promote any religious institution or monastic community and never nominated any successor. Rather, he assured his followers that he would always be with them and to some, he confided that after his death he would incarnate again, as he had done in the past. Apparently, he told a few devotees that he would manifest himself as an eight-year-old child, and the *Shri Sai Satcharita* interprets this to mean that he would reappear just as Krishna had, who at that age manifested himself before his mother Devaki (Kher 1999: 717; Narasimha Swami 1980–1985 [2]: 348). Many devotees came to believe that Sai Baba had "just gone on a journey and will come back again" (Kher 1999: 717). Such allusions led to claims by various persons to be embodiments of Sai Baba.

Ratnakaram Sathyanarayana Raju (1926–2011) from the village of Puttaparthi in the Anantapur district of Andhra Pradesh was the most successful in presenting himself as the reincarnation of Sai Baba (Srinivas 2008, and this volume). Even before his teens, Sathya, as he was affectionately called, offered proof of his abilities as a wonder-worker, especially through all sorts of "materializations," and he presented himself as a devotee of Sai Baba while at the same time identifying himself with him.[17] In his early years, Sathya also identified himself with Krishna, the paradigm of the juvenile god, while later on he identified himself with Shiva as well as with the goddess and virtually all the deities of the Hindu pantheon.

It was either on May 23, 1940, or, more probably, on October 21, 1943 (Padmanaban 2000: 146–149, 160 n. 64), that Sathya solemnly declared that "I am Sai Baba... I belong to Apasthamba Suthra[18]; I am of the Bharadwaja Gothra[19]; ... I have come because Venka Avadhootha and other saints prayed for my coming. I shall bless you and remove all that troubles you. Worship me on every Guru Var (Thursday, the day of the Guru). Keep your mind and homes pure" (Padmanaban 2000: 114). Soon afterward, with the words "I am no longer your Sathya, I am Sai Baba," he announced the beginning of his mission. Though few in Puttaparthi and surrounding areas knew about Sai Baba yet in time, by furnishing "proofs" of his identity through his powers, Sathya succeeded in establishing himself as Sai Baba among the growing community of his followers.[20]

The deity of Sathya's family (*kuladevata*) was Venkavadhuta, a figure to whom Sathya's grandfather, Ratnakaram Kondama Raju (1840–1952), was devoted.[21] He and his wife Lakshmamma had named their two sons Venka after him—that is, Pedda Venkama Raju (1885–1963), the future father of Sathya, and Chinna Venkama Raju. Venkavadhuta was well-known in the area, being revered as a divine embodiment in hundreds of villages even

beyond the Anantapur district. His name implies that he was an ascetic of a radical kind (*avadhuta*) and devoted to the god Venkateshvara. The holy man was believed to have hailed from Maharashtra, to have lived a long, itinerant life, and to have settled in Hussainpur in the then kingdom of Mysore in today's Karnataka. Pavagada Taluk, close to the border of Andhra Pradesh, is where he ended his days. His tomb in Hussainpur is located in the Venkavadhuta temple (Padmanaban 2000: 25 n. 11).

Ratnakaram Kondama Raju is reported to have had a memorable encounter with his beloved Venkavadhuta one afternoon in Puttaparthi, under a banyan tree.[22] After he had devoutly offered him some food, much to his amazement, Venkavadhuta told him that Vishnu Narayana would soon manifest himself in Puttaparthi to rescue Bhumi Devi, the earth goddess, who was in deep distress (Kasturi 1984: 13; Padmanaban 2000: 12, 25 n. 9). Ratnakaram Kondama Raju never forgot this prophecy and when his grandson declared himself to be Sai Baba, saying that he had come "because Venka Avadhootha and other saints prayed for my coming" (Padmanaban 2000: 114), he was immediately convinced that the young man was the fulfillment of Venkavadhuta's words. Indeed, Ratnakaram Kondama Raju is said to have been the first to realize the divine nature of his grandson when Sathya was still a child, years before his declaration (Padmanaban 2000: 42).

Sathya Sai Baba's biographer Narayan Kasturi (1897–1987), who, in the 1970s or even earlier, went to Hussainpur to gather information on Venkavadhuta, was told by people "that their grandparents believed that the Avadhoota had come to Andhra from the Maharashtra region and there are some who insist that he was indeed the Venkusha, under whose patriarchal care the Sai Baba of Shirdi had spent his boyhood" (Kasturi 1984: 13). As a consequence, Kasturi and many of Sathya Sai Baba's devotees came to believe that Venkusha and Venkavadhuta were the same person. In this way, a definite link between Sai Baba and Sathya Sai Baba was established, the mysterious guru of the former being none other than the family deity of the latter (Warren 1999: 41, 370–374). When I interviewed Kasturi in Puttaparthi in November 1985, he made this point to me.

Identification of Venkusha with Venkavadhuta, besides being upheld by many in Hussainpur and in Karnataka, is also shared by numerous followers of Shirdi Sai Baba. More recently, the idea that Venkusha and Venkavadhuta were the same individual has been reiterated by Professor Sanna Nagappa, folklorist of the RVP College of Hosakote. In 2003, after extensive research in Andhra-Karnataka border areas, he published a book on Venkavadhuta in Kannada (Nagappa 2003). Professor A. V. Narasimha Murthy, former head of the Department of Ancient History and Archaeology at the University of Mysore, who did his own research in Hussainpur, summarizes Sanna Nagappa's findings as follows:

Venkusha was born to a Marathi Brahmin family in the village Selu. The boy who subsequently became Shirdi Sai Baba selected him as his teacher. But local people who did not accept Shirdi Sai Baba began

tormenting both of them. Out of disgust, Venkusha left Maharashtra and, after wandering here and there as a monk of the Avadhoota Order, settled in Hussainpur, sixty kilometers from Pavagada. Because of his yogic powers, he attained the status of an Avadhoota and became famous as Venkavadhoota (Narasimha Murthy 2013).

The point of departure of these findings is a revised version of Das Ganu's and Narasimha Swami's reconstructions. Significantly, though the people of Selu are said to have tormented both Venkusha and his young disciple, in the end, Venkusha did not die. Instead, repulsed by their violent behavior, he decided to become a wandering ascetic, eventually settling in Hussainpur. His portrayal as a Brahmin and as a miracle-worker *avadhuta* exemplifying a life of poverty and service is instrumental to attuning him to Sai Baba's composite ascetic model, underlining his Hindu-ness while simultaneously highlighting his disregard for religious affiliations.

According to local tradition, sometime after Venkavadhuta's demise, his tomb was opened and he was found sitting in a meditative posture, as if alive. This is a motif that finds its exemplar in the legend of the Marathi poet-saint Jnandev (1275–1296) as told in the hagiography of Eknath (sixteenth century CE), and is meant to immortalize him.[23] Concerning Venkavadhuta's burial site, another source states that "a *Hawaldar* [army sergeant] came to the tomb, opened it and saw *puja* [worship] material laid out, with lamps burning! He closed the tomb and became a devotee" (Padmanaban 2000: 25 n. 11). This account brings to mind belief in the existence of a subterranean cell in Shirdi called the Gurusthan, which is revered as the burial place of Sai Baba's guru. The Gurusthan was purportedly discovered under the same neem tree that young Sai Baba had elected as his abode when he first arrived in the village. As Dabholkar narrates in his *Shri Sai Satcharita* (chap. 4, verses 128–129),

> the layer of bricks over, they found an underground cell with four metal lamps burning in it .... The cell was paved with limestone and contained a wooden seat, a *Gomukhi* with a beautiful rosary.[24] Then the god [Khandoba] said, 'For twelve years this boy undertook penance at this spot' (Kher 1999: 66–67).

Such stories conform to the hagiographic pattern of tracing an immortal yogi—or his "invisible presence"—within a tomb in an underground cavern/cell/shrine.[25]

Shirdi Sai Baba and Sathya Sai Baba as Avatars of Dattatreya

Venkusha's identification with Venkavadhuta, whom Kasturi quoting Ratnakaram Kondama Raju referred to as the legendary "Alone" and the "Idol of total Bliss" (1984: 12), brings us to an appreciation of the god Dattatreya, also known as Datta, paradigm of the *avadhuta* with whom

both Shirdi Sai Baba and Sathya Sai Baba are popularly identified (Deák, Rush, this volume). Dattatreya is a multifaceted deity, in origin possibly a Tantric antinomian yogi later adapted to the devotional milieu of the Puranas (Rigopoulos 1998). The son of the seer Atri and his wife Anasuya, Datta is magnified as an avatar of Vishnu (*Bhagavata Purana* 1.3.11) and as a great guru and yogi (*Markandeya Purana*, chaps. 17–19, 37–43).[26] Typically, Dattatreya is extolled as the highest renouncer, beyond all rules.

From his very inception, Dattatreya proved to be an assimilative god spanning and transcending dichotomies. Though he is represented as a manifestation of Vishnu, Datta manifests Tantric characteristics more attuned to a *shaiva* (devotee of Shiva) or even a *shakta* (devotee of the Goddess) background. As an alter-ego of Shiva, Datta figures as a lord of Yoga in the *Markandeya Purana*, imparting his art to his disciple Alarka while indulging in such impure behavior as drinking intoxicants and making love. Another Puranic source is the *Bhagavata Purana* 11.7.24–11.9.33, where we find a dialogue between King Yadu and a young Brahmin ascetic (*balavadhuta*) traditionally identified as Dattatreya.[27]

If the god's presence is traceable throughout India, Datta's heartland is the Marathi area.[28] Here the oldest testimony is in the literature of the Mahanubhavs, a thirteenth-century monastic community conceived as heterodox by Brahmanical authorities. The advent of the veritable *Dattasampradaya* ("the tradition of Datta [followers]") dates to circa 1550, when Sarasvati Gangadhar wrote the Marathi *Gurucaritra* or "Life of the Master." This hagiography presents the lives of the Brahmin gurus Shripad Shrivallabh (c. 1323–1353) and Narasimha Sarasvati (c. 1378–1458), the first "historical" avatars of Dattatreya.[29] The text emphasizes the need for unconditional surrender to the guru in order to earn his grace and focuses upon Brahmanical ritual orthodoxy.

Dattatreya's iconography incorporating the triad (*trimurti*) of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva emerges from around the sixteenth century. He is represented as an ascetic, often naked, either standing or seated in a yogic posture, with three heads and six arms holding the emblems of the three gods. He is surrounded by three or four dogs, symbol of impurity but nonetheless said to represent the Vedas, and by a cow, symbol of mother earth and of Brahmanical purity. The icon recapitulates Dattatreya's protean nature, embracing all polarities as the manifestation of divine fullness.

From nineteenth- and twentieth-century Maharashtra up to the present, several personalities have been identified as avatars of Dattatreya, both within and without the *Dattasampradaya*: *vaishnava* and *shaiva* ascetics as well as eclectic figures of Sufi background. Remarkably, Sufis throughout the Deccan honor Dattatreya as Shah Fakir or Shah Datta (Deák 2010: 501–532; Kher 2001: 61). All of these saints, often exhibiting an antinomian character, are believed to grant both liberation (*mukti*) and mundane enjoyments (*bhukti*). In a paradigmatic fashion, the god embodies the roles of the immortal guru, supreme yogi, and eternal avatar all in one. He is the

guru-god, and the foremost quality that his followers must cultivate is devotion to the guru.

Dattatreya is a composite deity par excellence. Over the centuries, he has been appropriated by a variety of religious groups that have re-elaborated his mythic origins and functions. Devotion to Datta cuts through social strata and sectarian affiliations. By utilizing the "Dattatreya tool," Hindus have sanitized figures that they thought to be impure or non-Hindu. Thus, it is widely believed that Dattatreya may incarnate in fakirs, precisely as has happened in the case of Sai Baba, and it is noteworthy that his devotees acknowledge the *Sri Sai Satcharita* as the modern *Gurucaritra*.

Sai Baba himself openly claimed to be Dattatreya.[30] Baba is reported to have told one of his devotees, "Are you puffed up? Where was male progeny in your destiny? (In answer to the prayer you offered before Datta at Gangapur) I tore up this body and gave you a son."[31] In order to appreciate his spirituality, one must contextualize it within the longue durée of the Deccan's integrative culture (Narasimha Swami 1980–1985 [4]: 99–111). On the whole, it comes as no surprise that the *Dattasampradaya* and groups that worship Dattatreya as their chosen deity exhibit ambivalent, even contradictory tendencies. If they express an inclusive religiosity which accommodates Islamic tenets, they are also the catalyst of Brahmanical pride and ritual orthodoxy, which from time to time has given rise to clashes with low castes, Dalits, and the Muslim "minority."

From his youth, Sathya Sai Baba spoke of himself as "the essential embodiment of the Trinity" of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva (Kondappa 2004: 14). In conversations with devotees, he occasionally identified himself as Dattatreya, even "materializing" images of the deity in order to confirm his oneness with "the symbol of the Unity of the Trinity in Hindu Mythology" (Kasturi 1980: 108–109, 165). While Sathya was a student in Uravakonda, he humbled a local pundit by correcting his understanding of the *Hamsagita*, also known as *Uddhavagita*, which contains a dialogue between King Yadu and a young *avadhuta* identified as Dattatreya (Padmanaban 2000: 100–101).

Several aspects of the guru's teachings assimilate him to this deity and recent scholarship documents the fact that many Hindus, especially in Andhra, regard him as a Dattatreya incarnation.[32] The first and most obvious similarity is Sathya Sai Baba's emphasis on the guru's role, given that he presented himself as the ultimate divine master (Kasturi 1982: 243–244, 270, 325). The worship of the guru-god is a foundational characteristic of Dattatreya theology. All devotees regard their guru as god incarnate and so as both the means to salvation and the goal. The *incipit* of the first devotional song (*bhajan*) that the lord of Puttaparthi taught at the inauguration of his mission is revealing in this regard: *Manasa bhajare guru-caranam | Dustara-bhava-sagara-taranam*, "Worship in thy mind the guru's feet: [these alone] carry over the ocean of existence, hard to overcome!" According to devotee M. L. Leela (1927–1999) who was a witness of Sathya Sai Baba's early years, the closing line of this *bhajan* originally ran *Om Shri Datta Anasuya-putra*

Sai Babaji Venkushara, "Om Lord Datta, the son of Anasuya, [who is] the Revered Sai Baba, [the son or pupil] of Venkusha."[33] If this is true, young Sathya Sai Baba would have identified Shirdi Sai Baba—and himself—with Datta and would have acknowledged Venkusha as Shirdi Sai Baba's guru from the early 1940s.

The theme of *gurubhakti* (devotion to the guru) has always been dominant in Sathya Sai Baba's teachings. It is no accident that he proclaimed himself to be Sai Baba on a Thursday, "the day of the guru" (*guruvar*), and that from then onward he commanded his devotees to worship him every Thursday. As in all Dattatreya circles, Thursday is the most sacred day of the week and on this day *bhajan* sessions and worship are held in Sathya Sai Baba Centers worldwide. Moreover, one of the most important festivals celebrated in the guru's ashram of Prasanthi Nilayam has always been Guru Purnima. Like Dattatreya, Sathya Sai Baba presented himself as a teacher of Yoga, although he himself was not a yogi for he had never engaged in any kind of contemplative practice. Nonetheless, as the ultimate avatar, he qualified himself as lord of yogis.

The raison d'être of Sathya Sai Baba's plethora of miracles from his early days is said to be the material and spiritual welfare of his devotees, that is, *bhukti* and *mukti* (Rigopoulos 2016: 3–28). Already by the end of the 1940s, Sathya Sai Baba's grandfather told Kasturi that he considered his grandson to be a special type of *avadhuta*: "This grandson too is an Avadhootha [like Venkavadhuta], but he is *in* the world, *for* the world" (Kasturi 1982: 85). The guru's daily "materialization" of miracle-working *vibhuti*—an off-white fine ash—is another quality which links him to Dattatreya, given that the deity, much like all ascetics, is fond of *vibhuti*. Chapter 29 of the *Gurucaritra* is devoted to the wondrous powers of *vibhuti*, usually made of cow-dung or taken from crematory grounds, and throughout the text the holy ash is used by Narasimha Sarasvati as a means to cure various illnesses. Likewise, Sathya Sai Baba's *vibhuti* is thought to cure all sorts of diseases, afford protection, and grant liberation (*moksha pradatam*). It may be recalled that Shirdi Sai Baba was in the habit of giving his devotees ash (*udi*) which he took from his ever-burning fire (*dhuni*), both as a token of grace and as a healing substance (Introduction, Roberts and Roberts, this volume).

On January 13, 1986, Sathya Sai Baba inaugurated a temple of Dattatreya within the compound housing the tombs of his parents. Through it, he wished to signify that he originated from the divine triad (*trimurti*), his human parents having been the chosen instruments of a divine plan. As mentioned above, the three-headed god bears the emblems of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva and is surrounded by three dogs and a cow, with the nine masters of the Navnath Sampradaya of whom he is considered the first teacher encircling him.[34] In the temple, Dattatreya is seated in an unusual pose, with his right leg resting on the left knee reminiscent of Sai Baba's characteristic pose[35] (Figure I.1). In his youth, Sathya Sai Baba had himself photographed in this same posture, in an effort to stress his identity with the Shirdi saint.[36]

Besides his eventful declaration of being Shiva-Shakti during Guru Purnima of July 1963, a parallel identification that Sathya Sai Baba constantly nurtured was that of the *trimurti,* which the icon of Dattatreya effectively recapitulates. The Shiva-Shakti and the *trimurti*/Dattatreya theological models coexist and, as Sathya often argued, they are to be understood as one. The guru's fondness for triads such as *sathyam-sivam-sundaram* (recapitulating his life) and *karma-bhakti-jnana* (recapitulating his teachings), and most importantly his theology of a threefold Sai Baba avatar— Shirdi Sai Baba, Sathya Sai Baba, and the future Prema Sai Baba—mirror Dattatreya's triune paradigm (Rigopoulos 2021: 177–262).

Coming Full Circle: Sathya Sai Baba's Narrative of Shirdi Sai Baba's Origins

One night in 1944 when he was seventeen years old, Sathya Sai Baba "disclosed" the story of Shirdi Sai Baba's origins to his Bukkapatnam Board High School teacher V. C. Kondappa, who in those days thought of Sathya essentially as a great devotee of the Shirdi saint. Kondappa rendered his narrative in Telugu poetry and published it that same year as the *Sayeeshuni Charitra* (2004). It was the first book to be written on the guru of Puttaparthi and his "previous incarnation."[37]

The main points of this tale can be summarized as follows: There lived in Pathri a Brahmin couple of pious devotees of Shiva, the boatman Gangadhara and his virtuous wife Devagiriamma, who were childless.[38] One day, Shiva came to their house in disguise as a guest. Wishing to test their devotion, he told them that he wanted a woman for his pleasure. Devagiriamma was startled at such a request but nonetheless went to look for a prostitute who might please their guest for the night. She could not find one. Gangadhara then told his wife that she herself should please their visitor and, having said so, walked out of the house. While Devagiriamma was in a quandary, wondering how she could fulfill her guest's wish without losing her virtue, a girl knocked at the door who was really the goddess Parvati in disguise, saying that she had heard she was looking for a woman and had come to offer her services.[39] Devagiriamma's joy knew no bounds and she accompanied the girl to the guest's room.

Shiva and his consort Parvati then revealed themselves to Devagiriamma and her husband and decided to reward them by granting boons. Devagiriamma asked Parvati that she bless them with a son and a daughter, and the goddess readily agreed. Moreover, Shiva announced that he himself would be born as their third child. As promised, a boy and a girl were born to them and soon Devagiriamma was pregnant with her third child. Just as she was about to give birth, Gangadhara decided to abandon worldly life and retire to the wilderness and Devagiriamma, as a loyal wife, followed him. She thus delivered her baby under the shade of a big tree and left him there. The child was found by a fakir who lived in Pathri and he and his wife, who had no children, joyfully adopted him and called him Baba.

When he was twelve, Baba played marbles with boys his age. One was a rich man's son, and when he could not find marbles to play with he searched his house and brought to the game a golden *linga* (the aniconic symbol of Shiva). When he hit it, it rolled off at considerable speed and Baba caught it in his mouth and swallowed it, to the amazement of all. When the boy told his mother that Baba had swallowed the *linga*, she immediately looked for him and asked him to open his mouth and return the golden *linga* to her. Yet when Baba opened his mouth, the woman was astonished to contemplate within it the ten avatars of Vishnu. This was how she came to realize Baba's divinity.

Baba used to worship the *linga* every morning and evening but when local Muslims discovered what he was doing, he was no longer allowed into their mosque, nor were his foster parents. As a result, Baba began visiting Hindu temples, but local Hindus did not want a Muslim to enter their precincts and became angry with him and his family. Seeing all the trouble that the boy was causing, the fakir became hard-hearted and drove him out of his house.

Baba left the place and roamed around in solitude for some years. One day along the banks of the Godavari, he met a Nawab Muslim nobleman who was in search of his horse. With his divine vision, Baba predicted that the horse would soon arrive from an adjacent village. When the horse duly appeared, the Nawab was impressed by this and Baba's other miracles and became a devotee, calling him Sai. The Nawab decided to stay with Sai Baba and wrote a letter to his two sons and son-in-law informing them of his decision. Another wonder that young Sai showed the Nawab was when he pointed to a lizard that was on the wall of the mosque where he was living, saying that the lizard's sister would soon visit from the Nawab's capital. Meanwhile, the Nawab's sons and son-in-law arrived, wishing to bring him back with them. Suddenly, a lizard emerged from their bags, rushed to meet the one on the wall and they merrily left together, all to the Nawab's amazement. In the end, his two sons and son-in-law also became devotees of Sai Baba and decided to stay with him. Eventually, Sai reached Shirdi when he was sixteen years old.

The story continues, presenting aspects of Sai Baba's odd personality and recounting a few of his famous miracles, as when he lit oil-lamps with water (see Loar, this volume). The story also refers to Baba's teachings and first and foremost the couplet of faith (*shraddha*) and patience (*saburi*), and how he taught both the Puranas and the Quran to demonstrate the unity of Hindus and Muslims. Sai Baba's Muslim servant Abdul (1871–1954) is also extolled as his greatest devotee.[40]

Sathya Sai Baba's narrative is reminiscent of a Puranic tale and presents some typical hagiographic motifs: barrenness that is miraculously cured; appearance of undercover deities; announcement of a deity's birth in human form; abandonment of a divine child who is raised by foster parents. Following Narasimha Swami, Sai Baba is said to have been born in Pathri to a pious Brahmin family, although he is no ordinary mortal but

n avatar of Shiva (in lieu of Kabir reincarnated). No reference is made to Gopalrao/Venkusha, nor to any training of the boy under any guru. The test to which Shiva puts the chaste Devagiriamma that she should please him sexually is reminiscent of the Puranic story of Dattatreya's mother Anasuya (Kondappa 2004: 1–2; Rigopoulos 1998: 5–8). Shiva's request of female company is a Tantric element that is akin to Dattatreya's portrayal, given that the latter is the patron of prostitutes.

While stressing the Hindu-ness of his previous incarnation, the guru articulates Sai Baba's composite background by upholding the motif of his abandonment soon after birth and of his adoption by a fakir and his wife. The episode of his swallowing the *linga* is meant to underline his identity as Shiva, while his granting a vision of the ten Vishnu avatars by opening his mouth, patterned on the story of Krishna giving the vision of his cosmic form to his foster mother Yashoda, is aimed at proving that he is also Vishnu, which resonates with Dattatreya's integrative paradigm.[41] That Baba's foster father ultimately decided to send him away, local Muslims not accepting his *linga* worship within their mosque, and Hindus prohibiting his entering/polluting their temples, are all instrumental in underlining Baba's being beyond institutionalized religions.[42]

Sai Baba's meeting with a Nawab during his wandering period and the episode of the lost horse, though differing from the *Shri Sai Satcharita* account, are undoubtedly based on that popular tale.[43] Sathya Sai Baba's detail that the Nawab was the first to call him Sai differs from the belief that the first to have called him Sai was Mhalsapati, the priest of the Khandoba temple in Shirdi.[44] The wonder that Sai Baba predicted to the Nawab in the delightful episode of a lizard coming to meet its sister in the mosque is also based on a tale narrated in the *Sri Sai Satcharita*.[45]

In the mid-1970s, Vinayak Krishna Gokak (1909–1992), the prominent Kannada litterateur and vice-chancellor of the Sri Sathya Sai Institute of Higher Learning, asked Sathya Sai Baba if it was true that Venkusha was Sai Baba's guru. Answering the question in the affirmative, Sathya Sai Baba ventured into a long narration confirming his earlier account to which he added Das Ganu's/Narasimhaswami's reconstruction of the Venkusha episode, albeit with some modifications.[46]

Variants of Sathya Sai Baba's earlier account can be boiled down to a few names, such as Ganga Bhavadiya, "Your Honor the Ganges," in lieu of Gangadhara. Mr. Patil is described as a Muslim in lieu of the anonymous fakir. Babu, a common name for a Muslim, is given instead of Baba. Details such as the *linga* substituted with a *shaligrama* (non-anthropomorphic symbol of Vishnu), are more consistent with his granting a vision of Vishnu-Krishna's cosmic form.[47] Baba's foster father dies when Babu is still a boy and thus Mr. Patil's widow decides to take him to an ashram for orphans in nearby Selu run by a holy man called Venkusha. Finally, no mention is made of Baba's meeting with the Nawab and of the episodes of the lost horse and the lizards.

With regard to the boy's stay with Venkusha, the main changes in Sathya's retelling are the following: Instead of a pious devotee of Vishnu and respected governor of a district, Venkusha is the *shaiva* guru of an ashram. In his fore-warning dream, Venkusha is told by Shiva that he himself (not Kabir) will soon be coming to him. It is not Venkusha's relatives who become jealous of the boy but rather other boys of the ashram. While Babu is in the forest fetching *bilva* (*Aegle marmelos correa*, Indian quince) leaves for worship, one of these boys hurls a brick at him, inflicting a wound on his forehead causing profuse bleeding and the opening of his third eye. That is, it is not Venkusha who gets hit in Babu's place, but it is the latter who receives the injury. The episodes of the boy milking a cow and of his resurrecting the evil one who had hurled the brick are not mentioned. The brick is said to have been most dear to Venkusha, being stained with his divine pupil's blood. Finally, Venkusha hands the brick to the boy when Babu leaves Selu.

The most important difference from Das Ganu's reconstruction is that Sathya Sai Baba does not say that Venkusha died. This is indeed crucial, given that if Venkusha had died it would be impossible to claim that the guru of Sai Baba and the family deity of Sathya Sai Baba's grandfather were the same person. Nonetheless, Sathya Sai Baba himself never explicitly stated that Venkusha and Venkavadhuta were one and the same.

In 1990, the guru offered some final details on Sai Baba's origins, pin-pointing the chronology of the events and somewhat adjusting his previous versions.[48] Thus, Sathya Sai Baba said that Shirdi Sai was born in Pathri on September 28, 1835, and that he was under the care of a Sufi fakir and his wife for four years.[49] The fakir then passed away and his wife, unable to handle the boy who sang songs in praise of Allah in Hindu temples and proclaimed "Shiva is Allah" in the mosque, gave him to Venkusha, who is portrayed as a high-souled scholar living nearby. The boy would have stayed at his ashram for twelve years and left one night in 1851, the other disciples being envious of him.

All in all, Sathya Sai Baba's narratives are clearly modeled on Das Ganu's and Narasimha Swami's accounts. Although presenting a few additions and variants, his tales reiterate the essential stages in the unfolding of Shirdi Sai Baba's early life: his birth at Pathri; his first tutelage under a Muslim fakir; his being taken to Venkusha at Selu by the fakir's widow; his second and longer period of apprenticeship under Venkusha; and his final departure with the brick as the guru's consecration (*gurudiksha*).[50]

Conclusions and Beginnings

To sum up, these narratives demonstrate the power of motifs and their per-sistence across time and space, while revealing the deep rootedness of the composite character of Deccani religiosity. Indeed, the enduring paradigms that portray Sai Baba's origins as appropriated by Sathya Sai Baba in his retellings do not depend upon historical facticity. All such accounts are built

upon concatenated motifs that are well-known and highly symbolic: childless couples and divine visitations, the miraculous birth of a Brahmin child and his being raised by a fakir, an unusual guru-disciple relationship, a violent sacrificial act that triggers the boy's realization and inaugurates his mission, ascetics in subterranean tombs, and the like. These themes find exemplars in Sanskrit and Marathi literature and notably in the figures of Kabir and Dattatreya and their integrative traditions. Significantly, Shirdi Sai Baba and Sathya Sai Baba identified themselves with either one or both of these figures long before their hagiographies were written as Dabholkar's *Shri Sai Satcharita* and Kasturi's *Sathyam Sivam Sundaram*. Nonetheless, the possibility that such accounts may conceal historical facts cannot be ruled out given that hagiographic literature exhibits an inextricable mixture of myth and history. Be that as it may, it is clear that these fascinating tales are not aimed at historical truth as might be understood from expatriate perspectives, but instead, they disclose locally understood truths and ultimate meanings.

Notes

1 Narasimha Swami (1980–1985 (4): 102–103). See also Narasimha Swami (2006: 34) and Kher (1999: 75, 105).
2 Narasimha Swami (1980–1985 (1): 11). On Sai Baba's coming to Shirdi, see Satpathy (2019: 21–36).
3 Mhalsapati's testimony first appeared in 1924 in an early issue of the *Shri Sai Leela* magazine; see Gunaji (1982: n. 39).
4 In hagiographic literature, Kabir is said to have been the son of a Brahmin virgin widow, born without a human father as a result of a blessing of saint Ramananda. The infant was later abandoned on a lake and rescued by a Muslim weaver couple, Niru and Nima, who became Kabir's foster parents.
5 A few of his hymns are famous, being sung daily in Shirdi at the close of congregational worship. The *Shri Sai Satcharita* narrates three main stories concerning Das Ganu (chap. 4, vv. 83–88, 102–107; chap. 20, vv. 12–105; chap. 22, vv. 19–23). Das Ganu breathed his last in Pandharpur on October 25, 1962, at age ninety-four. On Das Ganu, see McLain (2016: 54–90), Shepherd (2015: 221–226), and Narasimha Swami (1980–1985 (2): 122–154).
6 Narasimha Swami (2006: 139). Selu is also known as Sailu, Shelwadi, and Selawadi.
7 Narasimha Swami (2006: 128–129). This same exchange is reported in Gunaji (1982: xxiii). For an overview, see Shepherd (2015: 189–191).
8 Das Ganu wrote about Sai Baba also in chapters 52–53 of his *Bhaktisaramrit*, which he composed during the saint's lifetime, having obtained Baba's approval. Most other chapters, and presumably also the 26th, were written after Baba left his body in 1918; see Narasimha Swami (2006: 139). Earlier, Das Ganu had authored two other works: the *Santkathamrit*, published in 1903 that devotes chap. 57 to Sai Baba, and the *Bhaktililamrit*, published in 1906 that devotes chaps. 31–33 to Baba. Both were approved by the saint. In 1945, the seven chapters on Sai Baba contained in these three works were published as a separate volume titled *Sai Hari Katha*; see Ganu (2007).
9 Das Ganu writes that Gopalrao's father was Keshavarao, a Vishnu devotee from the village of Jambavavi. Vyankatesha himself blessed Keshavarao and his wife with offspring, saying that Ramananda would be born as their son.

When Gopalrao/Ramananda came to Selawadi, which he renamed Selu, he "obtained the good Deshmukh jaghir of Jintur Pargana by power" (*Bhaktisaramrit*, chap. 26, v. 4).

10 See v. 233. Gopalrao was in constant communion with his chosen deity. Near Selu is a Vyankatesha temple with a tall towered entrance said to have been built at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

11 Das Ganu writes that the tomb "began to perspire and burst into speech" (*Bhaktisaramrit*, chap. 26, v. 132). As he himself notes in verse 131, Suvag Shah is well-known in Marathi hagiography, being extolled in the *Bhaktalilamrit* (chap. 43, vv. 93–143) of Mahipati (1715–1790).

12 *Yavana* literally means "Ionian," i.e., Greek. From medieval times, this expression has been used in derogatory reference to Muslims.

13 Being hit in the forehead is often believed to be a turning point, bringing about divine knowledge. Such violent events are not infrequent in the lives of radical ascetics.

14 Kher (1999: 73–75). The Muslim gentleman Chand Patil was from Dhoopkheda, a village of the Aurangabad district; on this story, see Kher (2001: 21–28). For an overview of Das Ganu's reconstruction, see Kher (2001: 37–41).

15 Narasimha Swami (1980–1985 (1): 11–18). Also see vol. 2: viii–ix, 148–149, and vol. 4: 104.

16 Kher (2001: 43–48). Das Ganu's story and its historical implausibility, fused with that of Sai Baba's Gurusthan, were first voiced to me by a devotee of the saint in 1985; see Rigopoulos (2020: 89–93).

17 Kondappa (2004: 17). Young Sathya would frequently fall into trance during which he claimed he travelled to Shirdi, and he was fond of singing *bhajans* and enacting mythological plays. The sources emphasize his healing powers and his ability to grant visions.

18 The interpretive writings of sage Apastamba on the Vedas, i.e., his school of Vedic exegesis.

19 Sage Bharadvaja's spiritual lineage.

20 On Sathya Sai Baba's link and spiritual identity with Shirdi Sai Baba, see Padmanaban (2000: 455–491); Kasturi (1980: 177–218). In 1961, Sathya Sai Baba stated that what Shirdi Sai Baba had said was that he would be reborn after eight years, not that he would appear "as an eight-year-old-body" (Sathya Sai Baba 2008: 127).

21 On Ratnakaram Kondama Raju in the guru's own words, see Sathya Sai Baba (2014: 15–25, 167–176).

22 In 1998, Ranganathan Padmanaban was told by Rama Rao, priest of the Venkavadhuta temple in Hussainpur, that Venkavadhuta had gone into *jivasamadhi*, i.e., had willingly "left the body" about three hundred years ago. In such case, Ratnakaram Kondama Raju could have never met Venkavadhuta; see Padmanaban (2000: 25 n. 11). Prof. A. V. Narasimha Murthy, who visited the site in 2010, states that Venkavadhuta died in Hussainpur "more than a century ago," i.e., around 1900. If this is true, then Ratnakaram Kondama Raju, who was born in 1840, could have met Venkavadhuta sometime in the second half of the nineteenth century; see http://appmithistories.blogspot.com/2013/02/sri-venka-avadhoota.html, accessed June 2021.

23 The legend says that Jnandev asked Eknath to open his tomb in Alandi to be able to push aside the roots of a tree that encircled his throat, hindering his contemplation.

24 A glove shaped like a cow's mouth, which covers the hand in counting rosary beads

25 See the tale narrated by the fifteenth-century poet Harihara of the twelfth-century Lingayat saint Allama Prabhu, revered as an incarnation of Dattatreya (Ramanujan 1973: 144). See also Kher (2001: 61).

26 In the *Bhagavata Purana*, Datta figures as the sixth avatar in a list of twenty-two descents.

27 Corresponding to *Uddhavagita* 2–4.

28 With extensions in Gujarat, Karnataka, and Andhra Pradesh. On the Datta movement in Andhra Pradesh, see Krishnayya (2005: 171–183).

29 Shripad Shrivallabh was born in Pithapur in the East Godavari district of Andhra Pradesh, whereas Narasimha Sarasvati was born in Karanja in the Akola district of Maharashtra.

30 Warren (1999: 126, 146–149); Rigopoulos (1993: 18–19, 113, 147, 178). On Sai Baba's identification with Dattatreya in the *Shri Sai Satcharita*, see Kher (1999: 6, 57, 539, 866, 882). On the saint's identification with the deity and devotees' belief that he was a Datta incarnation, see also Narasimha Swami (1980–1985 (3): 30–31, 147).

31 Narasimha Swami (1942: 9, 153–154).

32 Krishnayya (2005: 178). In a recent hagiography of Shripad Shrivallabh from Andhra Pradesh, Shirdi Sai Baba is presented as a Datta avatar by utilizing Sathya Sai Baba's Bharadvaja myth and Shiva-Shakti portrayal.

33 Leela (n.d.: 132). The closing line in current *bhajan* books is *Omkaram Baba omkaram Baba omkaram Baba om namo Baba.*

34 Rigopoulos (1998: 89–90, 99–100, 197–198, 250–252). On the hypothesis of Sai Baba's link to Nathism, see Rigopoulos (1993: 18, 39 n. 119) and Shepherd (2015: 309–315).

35 For similar poses in the deity's iconography, see Rigopoulos (1998: 96). See also http://www.kamat.com/indica/faiths/gods/13040.jpg, accessed June 2021.

36 See Sathya Sai Baba's photos in Kasturi (1980: between pages 64 and 65); Padmanaban (2000: 164, 192, 200, 202, 306).

37 It is reported that when Kondappa's book was released, the guru asked M. L. Leela to read portions of it aloud, and "when the section on the life of Shirdi Sai was being read, Baba's form changed to that of the Sai Baba of Shirdi" (Leela n.d.: 55).

38 Devotees of Sathya Sai Baba do not fail to point out the similarity between Pathri and Parthi, i.e., Puttaparthi. Gangadhara means "Bearer of the Ganges" as an epithet of Shiva who holds the Ganges in his locks of matted hair. Devagiriamma is "The Mother of the Divine Hill." Devagiri is also another name of Daulatabad.

39 Devagiriamma's dilemma was due to a conflict with a host's duties. A guest is sacred and must be given all for which he/she asks.

40 Verse 79 of the *Sri Sai Sathakamu* extols Abdul as the one who always kept Sai Baba's name in his heart; see Kondappa (2004: 18). In 1946, Abdul told Krishnaswamy, the son of Arani Rajamma who was the sister of Rani Lakshmi Bai of Chincholi, that in a year his royal family would be blessed by Sai Baba's *darshan* (vision, sight of a holy person); and in 1947, Krishnaswamy's mother and her sister M. S. Seethamma had their first *darshan* of Sathya Sai Baba in Bangalore. See Padmanaban (2000: 457–459). In a speech he delivered in 1961, Sathya Sai Baba stated that "Abdul Baba was also informed that in seven years [from Sai Baba's demise] this [*Mahashakti*] will appear in Madras State" (Sathya Sai Baba 2008: 127). On Abdul and his precious notebook, see Warren (1999: 261–333) and Shepherd (2015: 123–125).

41 This story is told in *Bhagavata Purana* 10.8.

42 The *Sri Sai Sathakamu* (vv. 12, 43, 50, 53) magnifies Shirdi Sai Baba's composite character, ensuring friendship between Hindus and Muslims to ward off discord. See Kondappa (2004: 12, 15–16), and the Introduction to this volume.

43 A tale of a lost mare is reported also in Sathya Sai Baba's early life; see Padmanaban (2000: 127–130).

44 Kher (1999: 75). The term *sai*, with nasalization of the *i*, is derived from Persian *sa'ih* and is commonly applied to Muslim ascetics.

45 Kher (1999: 244–246). Herein the lizard's sister gets to the mosque through a man who came on horseback from Aurangabad for the saint's *darshan*: she emerged from the horse's feeding bag.

46 Gokak (1983: 61–66). The next day, Gokak asked Sathya Sai Baba if he could add more details, but the guru responded that "it is not very pleasant to be talking about oneself. I will talk about some other saint" (ibid.: 66). See also Gokak (1985: 236–240) and Fanibunda (1987: 1–2).

47 A *shalagrama* is a rounded stone containing the spiraling shell of a fossilized ammonite regarded as imbued with Vishnu himself.

48 Sathya Sai Baba (1990: 290). Sathya Sai Baba delivered this speech on Shirdi Sai Baba's supposed birthday.

49 There are discrepancies, however, given that according to another source, the guru said that Shirdi Sai Baba was born on September 27, 1838.

50 Sathya Sai Baba mentioned Das Ganu three times in his early public discourses. In February 1961, he observed how Das Ganu and other devotees had only seen the fringe of Sai Baba's sublimity, and in October of that same year, he stated that word was sent to Das Ganu and Mhalsapati that Sai Baba would manifest himself again; see Sathya Sai Baba (2008: 8, 127). In a speech he delivered in 1964, two years after Das Ganu's demise, Sathya Sai Baba offered quite a detailed portrayal of him; see Sathya Sai Baba (2012: 260–261).

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Interleaf A: Shirdi Sai Baba's Lamp-Lighting Miracle in Text and Film

Jonathan Loar

Shirdi Sai Baba has a reputation as a powerful yet approachable religious figure who strives for the world's benefit. Truly, devotees not only find much inspiration in his teachings of virtue and peace, faith and perseverance (*shraddha* and *saburi*), but Baba is also an on-demand religious figure capable of addressing an individual's very specific problems, from health crises and financial troubles to visa applications and school exams. Books, films, websites, and social media offer many accounts of the saint, for example, curing an individual's life-threatening illness, protecting someone from danger, or bringing about an emotional change of heart. In addition, Baba performed awe-inspiring feats such as his occasional practice of *khanda yoga* (the practice of separating one's limbs at will) and his return to life after seventy-two hours in a state of *samadhi* (deep meditation).[1] While all are instances of Baba's *chamatkar* (something that astonishes or surprises), one miracle stands out as both beloved by devotees and iconic of Baba's spiritual power: The time when he fueled the lamps in his mosque with water instead of oil (Figure A.1).

Scholarship on Baba consistently identifies the lamp-lighting miracle—an event that took place around 1892—as the catalyst for the saint's rise in popularity in Shirdi and beyond (Kamath and Kher 1991: 8; Warren 2004: 254–255). An account appears in G.R. Dabholkar's *Shri Sai Satcharita* (2008 [1930]), but it is not the first iteration of the miracle story, for G.D. Sahasrabuddhe (alias Das Ganu Maharaj) mentions the moment in the thirty-first chapter of his *Bhaktililamrita* (2010 [1906]), a compendium of Hindu saints in the Marathi-speaking areas of the Bombay Presidency in colonial India.

Although Das Ganu noted that he could not describe all of Baba's innumerable miracles (*aganit chamatkar*), he started with the lamp-lighting (Das Ganu 2010 [1906]: verse 31:22). Baba would routinely visit shops in Shirdi to beg for oil to fuel the lamps of his mosque. One day, the grocers lied about the availability of oil to avoid giving alms. Baba knew the truth and was stunned by how easily they lied to him. He returned to the mosque, mixed some water with a smidgen of leftover oil in his tumbler, and drank the mixture after offering it to his inner soul. Then, Baba added fresh water
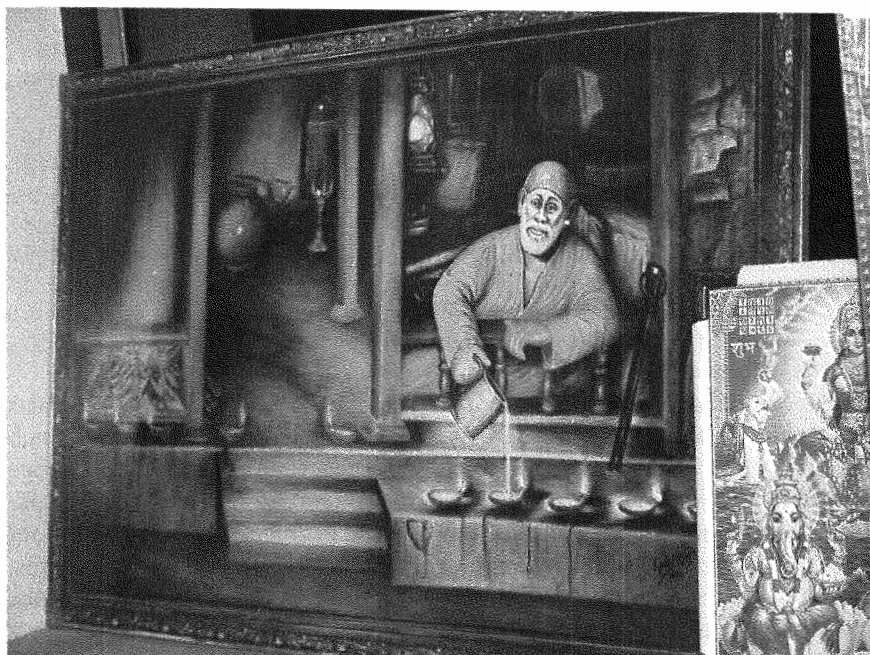
Figure A.1 Photograph of a print of a 1995 painting by Jyothi Raja showing Shirdi Sai Baba using water to fuel the lamps in the Dvarkamai mosque in Shirdi. Photograph taken in Shirdi, India, 2009.

Source: Photo by Mary Nooter Roberts.

to his tumbler, filled the earthen saucers of his lamps, and used a match to light the wick in each saucer. In the words of Das Ganu, this impossible action was one of the saint's many unfathomable miracles (*agadh lila*).[2] The shopkeepers and other villagers who had previously thought Baba a madman (*vedapir*) apologized for their dishonesty and harkened to Baba's telling them to uphold the truth (*satya*), be kind to others, and spend their wealth virtuously (Das Ganu 2010 [1906], verse 31:50–53).

Several decades later, a slightly different version of the lamp-lighting was presented in Dabholkar's *Satcharita*. After describing the grocers' regret for angering Baba with their lie, Dabholkar clarified that the saint harbored no ill feeling toward anyone: "[Baba] had no enemy and no friend; to him all creatures were equal" (Kher 1999: 82). For Dabholkar, the miracle was less an explicit lesson about the importance of honesty than a demonstration of Baba's equanimity.

Consider the Marathi adjectives used in Das Ganu's text, *aganit* and *agadh*, both of which point to the difficult task of describing miracles that are innumerable and unfathomable. Similar adjectives appear in Dabholkar's *Satcharita*, where Baba's miraculous deeds are presented as "improbable"

(*aghatit*) and "inconceivable" (*atarkya*).[3] The perceived opacity of Baba's actions presents an invitation to search for underlying meanings. Indeed, the inexplicable quality of the lamp-lighting miracle has generated a century of multiple, non-competing interpretations in text and film.

In particular, something novel appears in Ashok Bhushan's Hindi film production *Shirdi ke Sai Baba* (1977), considered "one of the last great religious films made in India" (Dwyer 2009: 152). The work is a milestone in Baba's popularization beyond Maharashtra in the latter half of the twentieth century, as it introduced him to legions of filmgoers throughout India.[4] The miracle in Bhushan's film has a new and noteworthy beginning: A young Dalit girl named Vidya asks an ornery Brahmin named Kulkarni for help obtaining oil for Sai Baba's lamps before Diwali.[5] Kulkarni angrily shoos the girl away, and visibly upset, Vidya returns to the mosque, explaining the situation to Baba and sobbing at the prospect of being unable to celebrate the Festival of Lights. The girl's tears fall into a pot of water, which prompts Baba to declare that tears of faith (*shraddha ke ansu*) will make this water capable of fueling his lamps. He pours the tear-water into a lamp and lights it with a torch and then tosses the rest of the water into the air, causing more and more lit lamps to appear along the mosque's railing. This is the cue for Asha Bhonsle's song "Dipavali manai suhani" about a beautiful Diwali made possible by magic water (*jadu ka pani*).

In Bhushan's film, the request for oil is refused on the eve of a major Hindu festival; in comparison, Dabholkar mentions in the *Satcharita* that Sai Baba celebrated Diwali but does not confirm that the lamp-lighting miracle occurred *on* Diwali (Kher 1999: 82). Most important, Bhushan exchanges the public dimension of the miracle and collective prevarication by members of a particular community (the grocers) and resituates the miracle as resulting from the personal connection that Baba has with the Dalit girl. Bhushan reframes a miraculous feat communicating the importance of honesty (*satya*) into a demonstration of an individual devotee's power of faith (*shraddha*). At the same time, *Shirdi ke Sai Baba* introduces a new element of caste into the story by portraying the saint as a friend to people from lower-caste communities.

The lamp-lighting in Bhushan's film presents haptic visuality to appeal to the audience: A plopping sound of Vidya's tears falling into the pot of water; dinging sounds with each lamp miraculously lit; kaleidoscopic special effects with swirling circles of lit lamps that fill the screen; and close-ups of Vidya and other characters' awe, joy, and reverence at Baba's miracle. In doing so, Bhushan's film does not simply engage the viewer optically but it invites an immersive experience, as if creating a one-on-one rapport between Baba (through the actor Sudhir Dalvi) and the film's audience. Dalvi's Baba also frequently turns to speak either slightly off camera or directly into the camera to the audience at large. When the saint meets Vidya some years later and learns that she has two children, he looks into the camera and asserts, "When the family is small, it is good" (*ghar-samsar jab chhota ho, to accha*

lagta hai). This recalls the Indian government's public campaign, especially pronounced in the 1970s, valorizing the two-child family and its use of the slogan, "a small family is a happy family" (*chhota parivar, sukhi parivar*). The synesthetic quality of Bhushan's film thus intersects with the historical context of its 1977 release as this Sai Baba speaks to the audience about important socio-political issues of *their* day.[6]

A number of verses in the *Satcharita* speak to the transformative power of reading or hearing Baba's life story, and haptic qualities are rich for exploration. Here, we emphasize that Bhushan's film, like Das Ganu's *Bhaktililamrita* and Dabholkar's *Satcharita*, engage Baba's lamp-lighting miracle in various ways. Other works, as well, add new characters and dramatic situations to enrich the telling of the lamp-lighting miracle.[7] For insights, one may refer to Andrew Quintman's (2014: 3) study of the Tibetan saint Milarepa in such productions resulting in a "gradual process of embodiment," an accretion of information and significance attached to a holy person's life and legacy. In the case of Baba, the lamp-lighting can be a story about honesty, egalitarianism, or faith—or it can be about all of these at the same time. Noting such twists and turns is to place the study of Shirdi Sai Baba in conversation with scholarship on other South Asian religious figures such as Mirabai (Hawley 2005), Namdev (Novetzke 2008), and Swami Rama Tirtha (Rinehart 1999). Lively questions are raised concerning history and hagiography as authors and filmmakers alike reshape a miracle story, or even a saint, through new hermeneutical frameworks. For now, it suffices to remember that all acts of interpretation are provisional and unfold according to the times, places, voices, and mediums of interpreters. And one can see how all accounts deepen senses of Baba's gifts to those looking to him.

Notes

1   For more on Shirdi Sai Baba's practice of *khanda yoga* and the seventy-two hours of *samadhi*, see chapters seven and forty-four, respectively, in Dabholkar's *Shri Sai Satcharita*.

2   Das Ganu (2010 [1906]: verse 31:33). Here, Das Ganu refers to Baba's miracle as *lila* (also written *leela*, a divine figure's playfulness). In Marathi-language accounts, both *lila* and *chamatkar* refer to Baba's miraculous doings, while the term *lila* can also refer to stories about his life more broadly.

3   Dabholkar (2008 [1930]: verses 26:142 and 11:132). In the *Satcharita*, Dabholkar describes an improbable event (*aghatit ghatani*) in which Baba prevents the suicide of Gopal Narayan Ambadekar, an employee in the excise department of the colonial government. In this story, Baba is the motivating force behind a chance meeting between Ambadekar and one of Baba's devotees, Sagun Meru Naik, who points Ambadekar to a religious text that ameliorates his depression. Also in the *Satcharita*, Dabholkar describes Baba's miraculous ways (*vindan*) as inconceivable (*atarkya*). Reference is made to the time that Baba protected everyone in Shirdi during a terrible thunderstorm. In the midst of strong winds and driving rain, he yelled and yelled at the storm with his own forceful roars, which caused the violent weather to abate.

4 While the impact of Bhushan's Hindi film cannot be underestimated, it is important to note that Kumarsen Samarth's Marathi film *Shirdi che Sai Baba* (1955) was the first cinematic work on the saint's life. Notably, Samarth's film reemphasized the conflict between Baba and the grocers who deny him oil. After Baba fills his earthen saucers with water, the flames from the lamps burning in the grocers' store miraculously detach and travel over to the saucers filled with water in Baba's mosque, where they remain lit.

5 In Bhushan's film, the character of Vidya says that her family is not allowed to enter Shirdi's Khandoba temple because people call them *achut*, for which the subtitles use the word "untouchable."

6 Elison (2018: 110) notes that *Shirdi ke Sai Baba* portrays the saint as a proponent of Congress-style secularism in another song in this film.

7 In Sunit Nigam's *Sai Baba ke chamatkar* (2013: 90–94), a mischievous, anti-Baba Brahmin known as *Pandit ji* plots to turn public opinion against the saint but always fails. *Pandit ji* convinces the grocers to lie about the availability of oil so that Baba's mosque will remain dark and so displease the goddess Lakshmi on Diwali. Nonetheless, Baba lights his lamps, celebrates the festival, and distributes miraculous water to everyone in Shirdi, including the repentant grocers and even *Pandit ji*, who refuses the blessing and remains in darkness.

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3 From Sai Baba of Shirdi to Shirdi of Sai Baba

The Making of a Contemporary Pilgrim-Center

Kiran Shinde

Like thousands of my generation who grew up in Pune (a metro city in India), I had heard of, read about, and seen movies and television serials about Sai Baba. At our home, we had a large photo-frame of Sai Baba, and every Thursday we would go to the Sai Baba temple recently built in our neighborhood. I was experiencing the Sai Baba movement about which many scholars have written. Sai Baba was present everywhere, but visiting Shirdi, as the abode of Sai Baba, was a divine experience in the company of Baba and his hundreds of thousands of devotees. Many of our family members and friends visited Shirdi regularly—almost every three to four months or when a friend had his prayers answered. Most of our requests at that time were to pass university exams or obtain employment. In the mid-1990s, we celebrated our New Year's Eve in the large queues at Sai Baba's shrine, hoping that his grace should fall upon us on the first day of the next year. Sai Baba's eternal presence in Shirdi was tangible. Shirdi became the most sacred place for us.

This chapter, however, is not about my devotion or experiences which were pretty much like those of other devotees of Sai Baba. It is about the place called Shirdi and how it has evolved into a major pilgrimage site in a short span of time. While many studies discuss Sai Baba and the Sai Baba movement from different perspectives, most present Shirdi as a village that provided the backdrop or setting for the miracles of Sai Baba.[1] With the increased popularity of Shirdi and influx of visitors and pilgrimage activities (Ghosal and Maity 2010; Shinde 2017; Williams 2004), it is timely to expand the focus from Sai Baba of Shirdi *to* Shirdi of Sai Baba. As a scholar, I might look to conceptual frameworks that would help to theorize such transformations, including Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* (1992) that has proven fruitful to my research on Hindu pilgrimage sites and other similar conceptualizations (Shinde 2020, 2012). And yet, here presented is a more personalized and reflective narrative on Shirdi's becoming a contemporary pilgrim-center. As a devotee, I dedicate this chapter as a *seva* (act of selfless service) to Sai Baba in creating knowledge about contemporary Shirdi. The present volume encourages pursuing such an approach as it draws attention to contemporary, humanistic issues related to the Sai Baba movement.

Although I have been visiting Shirdi since 1994, my first opportunity to translate my interest and experiences there into a systematic study came in 2009, when I was working on a larger research project that involved a comparative analysis of six major pilgrim-towns in the state of Maharashtra (Shinde 2020). I was again in Shirdi in 2009 and 2011, but as a geographer-planner conducting fieldwork that involved interviewing a range of stakeholders including key personalities, officials from the Shri Sai Baba Sansthan Trust (SSST), government agencies, hotel owners and managers, journalists, and political leaders. Highlights included speaking with descendants of a family closely related to Sai Baba, the longest serving Sarpanch (village headman) of Shirdi who was seventy-three years old, a former President of Shirdi Nagar Panchayat, and many more with long-term memories and who provided deep insights into the transformation of Shirdi. I stayed in a SSST pilgrim-lodge and with the help of influential members from the local community, I participated in rituals and ceremonies taking place in the Samadhi temple. I reviewed SSST reports and publications, government documents, protocols, newspapers, and biographical research. For the present narrative, I focus on events and activities that significantly influenced the growth and recognition of Shirdi as one of the most popular pilgrimage centers in India.

The Sacred Core of Shirdi

Most pilgrim-towns in India have *sthal-mahatmya* or place-stories that eulogize material and physical elements by connecting them to divine and sacred sources (as in a presiding deity). Something like that is hard to find in Shirdi, and yet most visitors find the miracles of Sai Baba in Shirdi to be foundational in similar ways, thanks to vivid descriptions in the *Shri Sai Satcharita,* a powerful text composed in 1929 that serves as an account of Sai Baba's lifetime and especially his time in Shirdi. Consisting of fifty-three chapters and 9308 verses, the book was written in Marathi by one of Sai Baba's closest devotees named Govind Raghunath Dabholkar, alias Hemadpant, and is now translated into many languages. The other reason is that, in a physical sense, Shirdi is retained in visitors' imaginations as a village where everything is so close by. The close-knit arena of Sai Baba's activities forms the sacred core of Shirdi. It is only recently that this core has been researched, mapped, and described in painstaking detail and presented aptly as *Experiencing Sai Baba's Shirdi: A Guide* (hereafter "guidebook"). Alison Williams (2004) prepared this guide as a tribute to her guru Sadguru Sri Sainathuni Sarath Babuji, an ardent devotee of Sai Baba. One may consider Williams' guidebook to be as close as one gets to a *mahatmya* for Shirdi, albeit in English.

The guidebook opens with descriptions of Shirdi during the times of Sai Baba as a rustic hamlet of about a 1000 people (mostly laborers and artisans), with approximately 200 houses, one village well, a few shops selling

basic provisions, and some small, rather run-down temples. The village was partially bordered by prickly cactus, and the present area of the Lendi Gardens was a wasteland with a grove of trees and two streams running through it (Williams 2004: 2).

It is in these settings that most miracle-stories of Sai Baba are situated. As such, the sacred core of Shirdi comprises six main places: The Samadhi Mandir, Gurusthan, Dvarkamai, Lendi Gardens, the Chavadi, and the Khandoba Temple. Most visitors recognize and are familiar with these. Except for the Khandoba Temple that is about half a kilometer from the Samadhi Mandir, all the main sites in Shirdi are within a few meters of each other and within the Sai Baba temple complex that is owned and managed by the SSST (Figure 3.1).
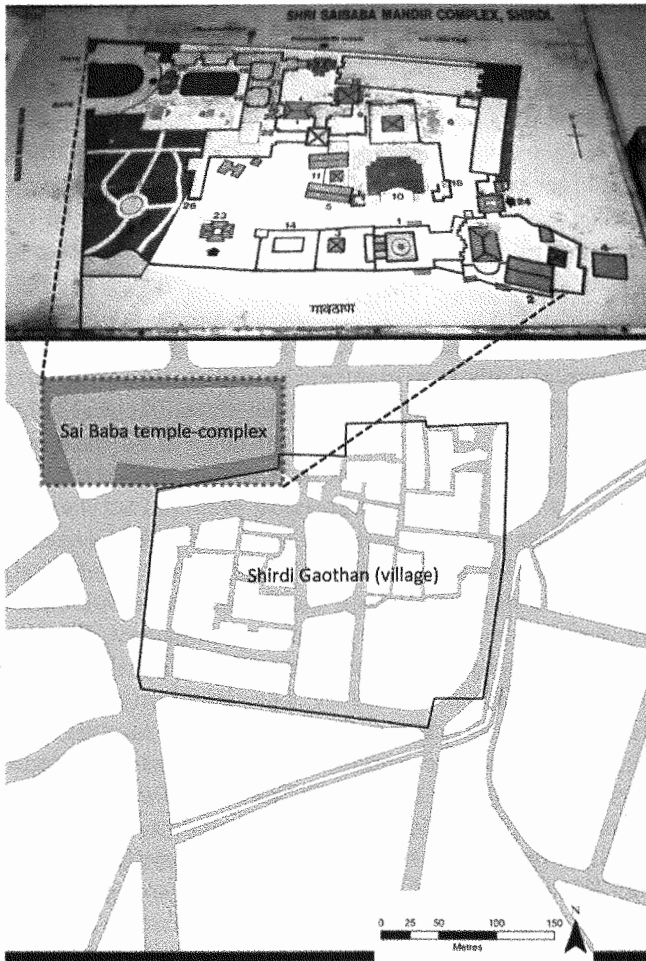
Figure 3.1 The Sai Baba temple complex and sacred core in Shirdi, India, 2010.

Source: Photograph by Kiran Shinde.

Williams' guidebook provides insights into the finer details of the smaller shrines, tombs, trees, and worshipping places within the temple complex and vicinity, and links them to stories of miracles experienced by devotees. The work also explains activities and rituals performed in these places. An update on the houses of Sai Baba's earliest devotees and the ones from whom Baba took *bhiksha* (the act of collecting food as alms) is a significant inclusion. In doing so, Williams (2004) expands the sacred territory beyond the temple complex. As expected of a guidebook, also included are information and tips necessary for visitors to facilitate their visits.

Although the focus of the guidebook is the sacred places related to Sai Baba, Williams' passing remark about present-day Shirdi cannot be overlooked:

> Though still not much more than a village, Shirdi these days is filled with hotels, lodges, places to eat, travel agencies, booths broadcasting devotional music, and small shops selling flower garlands, incense, puja materials, books on Sai Baba, cards of Sai Baba, pictures of Sai Baba, statues of Sai Baba … and an ever-expanding variety of souvenirs: in short, everything to facilitate a pilgrim's visit—for life in Shirdi revolves almost exclusively around Sai Baba (Williams 2004: 3).

Clearly, the bustle of a great many activities and facilities seem to belie idyllic descriptions of Shirdi as a "village."

Evolution of Shirdi's Growth as a Popular Pilgrimage Center

Visitors have been flocking to Shirdi since Baba's time. Several scholars have noted the rituals of worship and celebration of festivals dedicated to Baba (Rigopoulos 1993, 2020; Ruhela 1994; Shepherd 1986). It is well known that Sai Baba himself used to prepare and distribute food every evening and took care of his devotees. One of his "favorite" disciples named Tatya Kote Patil shouldered the responsibility of providing for visitors and for that Baba, from his alms, used to give him "thirty-five rupees a day (a government employee's average salary was about this amount per month!)" with a clear instruction to use it "properly as capital and not to squander it" (Williams 2004: 107).

Sai Baba was reluctant to institute any improvements to the places where he stayed despite constant pestering by his devotees. However, moved by their persistent faith and efforts, he allowed some renovation. One notable effort was by a devotee named Anna Chinchanikar who sponsored refurbishments of the Dvarkamai and Chavadi where "the mud walls were neatly plastered, huge mirrors were hung, glazed tiles replaced the mud floor and glass chandeliers were suspended from the ceiling" (Williams 2004: 65). Baba had blessed construction of three houses (*wadas*) to provide accommodation for his devotees: Sathe Wada (1908), Dixit Wada (1910), and Booty Wada (1915). Each resulted from a divine vision that a devotee had of Sai

Baba (for details see the *Shri Sai Satcharitra*). On the significance of Sathe Wada, Williams writes:

> It was built on Baba's instruction and was the first of its kind. Moreover, it was during preparations for its foundations that Baba revealed that this was the place of his guru.... It was here that Khaparde wrote part of his informative Shirdi Diary, that Jog did daily *parayana* [reading scripture] as asked by Baba, that Dada Kelkar lived, and where Hemadpant had his first darshan of Baba standing outside; arati to Baba's picture was conducted regularly at the wada. By providing what was, at that time, the only accommodation for visitors to Shirdi, Sathe rendered valuable service to pilgrims (2004: 111).

Dixit Wada was constructed by another wealthy devotee close to the *gurusthan,* the location that Sai Baba recalled as his guru's place. The most significant structure, however, was the Booty Wada built by Gopalrao Booty, which was "originally intended as a resthouse and *Mandir* [temple]" (Williams 2004: 85). Also known as the *dagadi* (stone) *wada*, Baba breathed his last in this house and it was here that, when "the burial was completed ... the tomb [was] sealed" (Williams 2004: 88). According to oral histories recorded by Antonio Rigopoulos (2020), more than 5000 people attended Baba's *mahasamadhi*, the state when he consciously left his body in 1918. The Booty Wada later became the shrine containing "a photograph of Sai Baba ...on a throne on the platform above the tomb" (Williams 2004: 88).

A few prominent devotees constituted a committee to "continue worship of Sai Baba and to maintain the places associated with him" (Williams 2004: 137). By raising funds, Kakasaheb Dixit (of Dixit Wada) led the formation of this committee and received a sanction for it by the Ahmednagar District Court in 1921. This committee was formally established in 1922 as a registered trust and named the Shri Sai Baba Sansthan, popularly known as the Sansthan. The organization was responsible for administration of the temple and management of the endowments and income donated in Baba's name. In 1923, the Sansthan began publication of a monthly magazine called *Sai-Leela* to publicize stories of devotees' experiences and thus propagate devotion to Sai Baba.

The Sansthan began to consolidate whatever material remains of Baba's presence were left after his *mahasamadhi*. It acquired the Chavadi and "until the late 1930s used it for storing books and accommodating pilgrims" (Williams 2004: 64). The land of Lendi Baug adjacent to the *wada* was bought by a devotee from Bombay a few months before Baba's *mahasamadhi* and later presented to the Sansthan (ibid., 72). The three main houses— Booty Wada, Dixit Wada, and Sathe Wada—were later transferred by heirs of their respective owners to the Sansthan. In 1940s, the Sansthan added four rooms to Sathe Wada for the use of pilgrims while it also doubled as its administrative office. Dixit Wada served as a canteen. Oral histories

confirm that the Samadhi Mandir has always remained open and Baba's *dhuni* (fire) and lamp kept burning (Rigopoulos 2020).

Through interviews, Rigopoulos (2020) found that until 1945, Tatya Kote managed the shrine and after him, his elder son was in charge from 1945 until 1965. However, the structure of the administration's scheme of the shrine was revised on a regular basis, and in 1952 was institutionalized as a public trust under the Bombay Public Trust Act. One of the first activities was installation of a marble *murti* (embodiment, image) of Sai Baba in 1954 (see Polly Roberts, this volume), and this event led to a considerable increase in the numbers of devotees arriving in Shirdi (Williams 2004: 88).

With more visitors came more income, and the Sansthan's coffers grew as did disputes and legalities around use of funds. In 1960, the state government of Maharashtra appointed a Court Receiver for management of the shrine. *The District Gazetteer* of 1976 notes that in 1970, besides the "board of trustees" that "looks after the immovable and movable property of the Sansthan," there was a "management committee [that] manages the day-to-day affairs of the Sansthan and includes nineteen members and five trustees. The management committee has a Chairman, Vice-Chairman, two Joint Secretaries, two Joint Treasurers and a managing trustee" (Kunte 1976). *The Gazetteer* also records the area of the Sai Baba temple as four acres in which the principal temple of Shri Sai Baba, office buildings, cloak-rooms, guest-houses, *dharmashalas* (pilgrim-lodges built for charitable purposes), and refreshment houses were situated and that the Sansthan had "its own building with fourteen furnished rooms" and "a membership of 3,526" (ibid.). By the late 1970s, the trust had built about 175 rooms to accommodate visitors. Smaller additions were regularly made. For instance, a small Dattatreya shrine was erected in 1976 and three small temples dedicated to Ganesh, Shani (Saturn), and Mahadev (Shiva) were renovated (Williams 2004).

Shirdi's popularity grew multi-fold with the release of the first Hindi movie on Sai Baba called *Shirdi ke Sai Baba* in 1977 (see Loar, Srinivas, this volume). Unprecedented numbers of visitors began to arrive in 1980s. At that time, there were only about 200–250 rooms available for visitors to stay, mostly in the Sansthan *dharmashala* (interview Appasaheb Kote Patil). In 1978, the Sansthan had built the Shani-niwas pilgrim-lodge and in 1981 began the Bhojanaghar that served about 1000 visitors daily (interview with the Sansthan official of Prasadalaya). On the impact of the film, Shiv Kumar (2006: para 8) notes that "the cult film ... has paid rich dividends to Shirdi's residents .... With pilgrims flocking from across the country, the simple mud huts of Sai Baba's early devotees have transformed into brick-and-mortar structures housing small businesses."

With increasing pilgrim influx, the administration scheme was once again revised in 1982–1984 with more power given to the charity commissioner, and the court deciding to appoint members of the public as Trustees to look after the functioning of the Sansthan. On the composition of the trust, Rigopoulos notes that in 1985, there were "twenty-two members plus

a Manager or Executive Officer that depend upon the Bombay City Civil Court," and that the Chairman was from Bombay (2020: 143).

In the 1990s, the Sansthan undertook a major restructuring and redesign of the temple complex. Sathe Wada was demolished; a hall was constructed next to the Dvarkamai, as the mosque where Baba resided; Dixit Wada was converted to a reading room with an extension as a museum; and "Lendi Gardens was radically re-landscaped, and the previously paved and tree-lined area turned into lawns with a waterfall and flower beds" (Williams 2004: 72). In 1995, pilgrim-lodges were built to accommodate about 1800 visitors (SSST 1999). In 1998, a queue complex comprised a three-story hall was constructed where up to 10,000 visitors would be able to line up and wait before entering the Samadhi Mandir. Another round of expansion included installing public toilets with a capacity of 1000 users at a time and lodging facilities in three locations across sixteen buildings that added up to 812 rooms to accommodate up to 7000 people (SSST 2008).

A big shift in the Sansthan's role came with the formulation of the Shirdi Amendment Act of 2004, which allowed the Sansthan to expand its activities beyond the management of the shrine (Government of Maharashtra Law and Judiciary Department 2005) and renamed the organization the Shri Sai Baba Sansthan Trust (SSST). Most significantly, the Act catapulted the Sansthan as a major governing body for development of infrastructure in the town of Shirdi. The SSST continued to develop facilities and amenities for visitors, and in 2008, a dining hall was constructed as powered by solar energy and with a capacity of serving 5500 people at one time (see Figure I.6 in Introduction). In 2013, lodging facilities were added with 1536 new rooms (SSST 2018). The SSST also became active in developing projects outside of its own ambit and collaborated with government agencies to fuel and support rapid urbanization of Shirdi. The SSST provided funds for construction of major roads and a water supply in the town, extension of the State Transport Bus terminal, and a helipad.

The Sansthan has been able to provide facilities because of its resources that have been growing exponentially over the years, as indicated in Figure 3.2. The first balance sheet of the registered trust in 1952 showed an income of about INR 0.2 million and assets of 0.65 million.[2] The District Gazetteer of 1976 records that

> this is one of the richest temple trusts in Maharashtra. There are many ornaments of the deity out of which the principal are a crown and a garland made of gold. All the vessels used in daily worship are of silver .... The Sansthan Committee office is everyday flooded with Money Orders sent by the devotees from all over India (Kunte 1976).

In 2017 and 2018, income and assets have grown to INR 6066.3 million and 21,364.9 million, respectively (SSST 2018). While the annual income from visitors continues to grow (Figure 3.2), investments made by the Sansthan
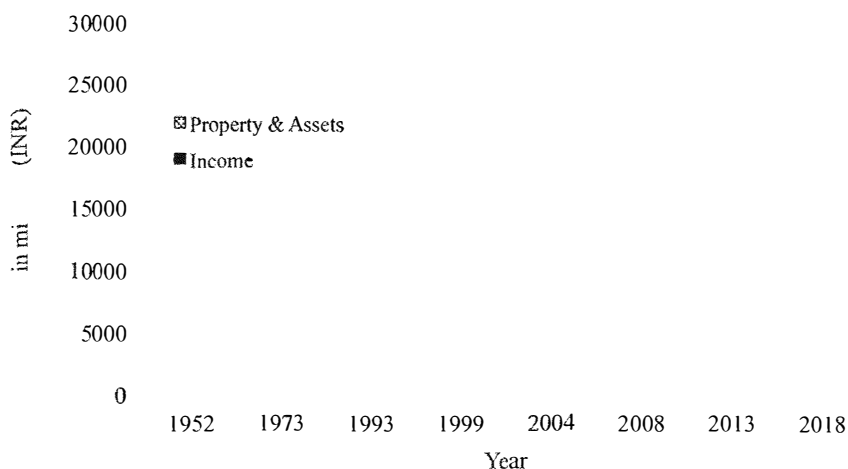
Figure 3.2 Financial resources of the Shri Sai Baba Sansthan Trust, 2018.

Source: Chart by Kiran Shinde.

as fixed deposits and gold deposits in banks are yielding high returns. The Sansthan also has bought large parcels of land for residential and commercial developments. It now owns about twenty percent of the area of Shirdi (interview with official from Nagar Panchayat, Shirdi).

On the income side, some changes are evident over years as seen in Figure 3.3. While cash-collection in the charity's donation boxes has

Figure 3.3 Trends across main sources of income from visitors, 2004–2018.

Source: Chart by Kiran Shinde.

diminished, general donations for projects have increased. Devotees are keen to support completion of projects proposed by the Sansthan through general donations. Similarly, funds for *anna-daan* (food alms) continue to increase, for devotees believe that making *anna-daan* is a good *seva* (service) for Sai Baba. It is not surprising, then, that the Sansthan was able to feed more than fifteen million visitors in 2017–2018, at an average of more than 40,000 a day (see Figure I.6).

Like *anna-daan*, the Sansthan had been mindful of the necessity of rituals for devotees to express their devotion to Sai Baba, and it has promoted them (Pandya 2014). Rituals are now the mainstay of the pilgrimage economy. Williams highlights the connections:

> Devotees may sponsor the *abhishekam* by contacting the Donation Office. Visitors may also donate cloth for Baba, which will be wrapped around the statue. Later, all the cloth that Baba has "worn" is put on sale in the Sansthan shop, just a few metres from the *mandir*. Many people like to buy cloth that has been sanctified in this way and use it for their altar or some other sacred purpose (2004: 91).

The Sansthan has also regularly added more and more items to enhance the visual imagery in the temple. For instance, in 2002, a grand silver throne weighing 205 kg was installed (Williams 2004: 91) in the Samadhi Mandir to bear the *murti* of Baba.

With increasing numbers of visitors, the ritual economy has blossomed in Shirdi. Around the sacred core of the temple-complex and so within the confines of the old village boundary are more than 2000 commercial establishments including 200 guesthouses for lodging, more than 150 private homes that rent out rooms, and around 150–200 permanent and temporary restaurants (Shinde 2017: 137). Most shops sell Sai Baba novelties, trinkets, souvenirs, *prasad* (sanctified food), and materials required for temple worship such as garlands and sweets (ibid.) (see Figure I.4). These dense commercial activities have also begun to expand into outer areas and to further shape the town of Shirdi.

Shirdi: The Urban Story

Shirdi's growth as a pilgrimage center has another side in its transformation into an urbanized site. As discussed in the previous section, the SSST has been the main driver of the pilgrimage economy and is thus at the center of tourism-led urbanization (Shinde 2017). In this section, some key transitions will be presented that anchor the urbanization history of Shirdi.

Shirdi is located on a road connecting headquarters of two important *tehsils*—that is, an administrative unit that covers a few towns and a number of villages as a Mughal legacy followed by the British colonial administration. Both these *tehsils*, Rahuri and Kopargaon, have always had

reasonable traffic flow of goods and people. During the time of Sai Baba, Shirdi had all key institutions and buildings of a typical village of a 100 houses inhabited by a 1000 people (Rigopoulos 2020). Besides the structures inhabited by Sai Baba, there were the village-office, shops, temples, ruins of the old fortified wall, a graveyard, and farmlands. Residences were all in close proximity to each other (Williams 2004: 109–123). Most visitors stayed in the facilities that were provided by the Sansthan, including Booty *wada* and Dixit *wada*. According to the 1971 census, Shirdi had a population of 6358 and an area of 3.3 square miles (some 855 ha), and the gazetteer notes that a hospital built in 1964 and a high school were maintained by the Sansthan (Kunte 1976).

The first commercial hotel in Shirdi opened in 1965 (interview with the former Sarpanch). With the popularity of the first Sai Baba movie, *Shirdi ke Sai Baba*, many outsiders, but mainly from Bombay, began to invest in building hotels in Shirdi, and by the early 1990s, around fifty were registered (Town Planning Department 1992). Many residents of the village, and particularly those closely related to stories of Sai Baba, began to expand their houses and convert them into lodges and hotels (Williams 2004: 21). A descendant of one of the first devotee families of Sai Baba mentioned that he had built his first lodge of ten rooms in 1991, and then expanded it to thirty-five rooms in 1999 and noted that this was possible because their service mattered and at least twenty-five percent of customers are repeat guests (interviewed by the author). However, such stories are rare and relevant to only ten to fifteen percent of hotels owned by locals. About 176 hotels were registered with the local municipal council, but this seems an underestimation. According to a member of the hotel association in Shirdi, at least 500 hotels include around 200 owner-occupied guesthouses, while the remaining are commercial. Of these, more than half provide only lodging while others offer a combination of rooms and meals. Although residents continue to enter the hotel industry, close to sixty percent of hotels are now owned by outsiders.

The first *ashram* (hermitage) in Shirdi was established by a devotee called Homi Baba in 1974 (Rigopoulos 2020) and a second called "Saipatham" was established in 1989 by a Telugu guru who is fondly known as Babuji (Williams 2004: 139). At present, there are some fifteen charitable trusts that have built some kind of accommodation, but they are not like the *ashrams* (interview with former Sarpanch). Charitable trusts are established by like-minded devotees generally organized around caste and class groupings, and they serve the interests of pilgrims to Shirdi. Construction of facilities by the Sansthan created most significant changes to the rural landscape of Shirdi: Massive pilgrim-lodges, dining-halls, a hospital, schools, an amusement park, and even a residential colony (a term widely used for accommodation of employees) for its own residents. The staff strength of the Sansthan has grown from 102 in 1974 (interview with former Sarpanch) to about 4826 workers, of whom close to 3000 are permanent and under contract

(SSST 2018). All need housing, amenities, and facilities, and therefore are integral to the town.

Despite visitor influx and population growth, Shirdi still represents a rapidly changing village more than a city (Shinde and Pinkney 2013; Srinivas 1999). This is mainly owing to the administrative structure through which the place was governed until the 1990s. It was a Gram Panchayat until 1990—meaning it was governed by a committee elected by local inhabitants who had little capacity to respond to the broader changes to which they were exposed regarding their town. While they took pride in being born in Sai Baba's village and serving his devotees, they hardly participated directly in the pilgrimage economy, most of which was controlled by the Sansthan (interview with the former Sarpanch). The *Gram Panchayat* was only involved in arrangements for supplying potable water to visitors and requisite sanitary measures such as anti-cholera inoculations (Kunte 1976). The organization was able to provide such services by collecting revenue through a pilgrim-tax and a fee from stallholders during fairs. The pilgrim-tax was repealed in the 1990s, and one interviewee pointed out that the Sansthan opposed such levies. Abolition of pilgrim-tax drastically reduced the resources of the Gram Panchayat, rendering it incapable of doing much for the increasing influx of visitors (interview with former President of Nagar Panchayat).

As the population of Shirdi grew to about 15,000 in 1990, the state government deemed it necessary that Shirdi should be administered as a municipal council. This move was resisted by residents, and as a result for thirteen years, there were no elections, no elected body to govern, and therefore, a Caretaker officer was appointed for administration of Shirdi (interview with former President of *Shirdi Nagar Panchayat*). In June 1999, middle-ground was found with declaration of Shirdi as a Nagar Panchayat where all residents would receive concessions from paying taxes for the first year. Only in 2001 was the first elected body of the Municipal Council formed, with seventeen members.

Meanwhile, for better planning and management of the town, the state government prepared and sanctioned the first statutory Development Plan (Master Plan) for Shirdi in 1992. The plan covered an area of 1300 ha—almost double of the area within the original village boundary (Town Planning Department 1992). Establishing such a plan had significant impact on Shirdi. First, the benefits and exemptions that land and property owners had enjoyed as residents of a village would be foregone if their land were converted to urban uses. Second, now every new construction had to be approved by the Town Planning Department (at least in theory), and this made residents and investors anxious, leading to a flurry of construction activities with hotels, restaurants, and shops constructed almost overnight, with most lacking necessary permits. In 2004, Shirdi Nagar Panchayat recorded 1500 illegal constructions and encroachments surrounding the temple precinct, and tried to remove them (PTI 2004). Third, urban land

became more expensive and would bring greater returns for local landowners, thus fueling speculation in a real estate market.[3]

Further push for urbanization was nestled in the ambitious initiative of the state government through formation of the *Shirdi Urban Development Authority* (SUDA) in 2009. The state government declared that SUDA would plan and develop an area of 106.12 square kilometers around Shirdi (Urban Development Department, Government of Maharashtra 2009: 5). With great zeal, the Chief Minister cleared infrastructure projects valued at INR 20 million (some 225,000 Euros in 2021) for Shirdi (Naik 2009: para 5). The most ambitious, such as construction of Shirdi Airport and a helipad, have materialized with financial help from the Sansthan. Similarly, the SSST has collaborated with the Maharashtra State Road Development Corporation to finance roads to improve accessibility to the increasing urban complexities of Shirdi. However, most other proposals of the SUDA have remained on paper. Nonetheless, such declarations triggered a real estate boom in Shirdi and influx of private capital and speculative investments (Shinde 2017).

The population of Shirdi more than doubled in just two decades (1991–2011), and now stands close to 40,000. It could be argued that besides recurrent heavy influx of visitors, such growth was due to creation of large-scale pilgrim infrastructure by the Sansthan and a legislative environment that supported urbanization. A timeline of important milestones is presented in Figure 3.4. The income of the Sansthan is a proxy indicator of growth of the pilgrimage economy in Shirdi as devised alongside major initiatives undertaken by the Sansthan, private-sector activities, and significant regional and national political changes.

Urban expansion of Shirdi consists of three concentric rings: The dense core, its periphery coinciding with the village boundary, and the rural fringe (Shinde 2017). The core is dense because of conversion of small houses and plots into mixed-use commercial-residential buildings closely packed wall-to-wall with very narrow streets for movement. Outside the core but within the village boundary, one finds dilapidated structures, extended houses, and a mix of many kinds of related buildings. Almost 800 shopkeepers maintain farms where they cultivate crops of guavas, wheat, and soybeans (interview with a local shopkeeper). Opportunities for speculation lie in the rural fringe, where large parcels of land were once cultivated but now present potential for plotted and streamlined development with better roads and amenities. These are favored by those who are life-long devotees and are seeking spiritual solace in the divine presence of Sai Baba (interview with the former President of Shirdi Nagar Panchayat). The urban expansion of Shirdi is indicated in Figure 3.5.

The rapid population growth and urban expansion of Shirdi is accompanied by problems typically associated with cities. Traffic jams, vehicular noise, and water pollution are all common (Kankala and Gaikwad 2011) and caused by high visitor influx. With an ever-expanding onslaught of pilgrims
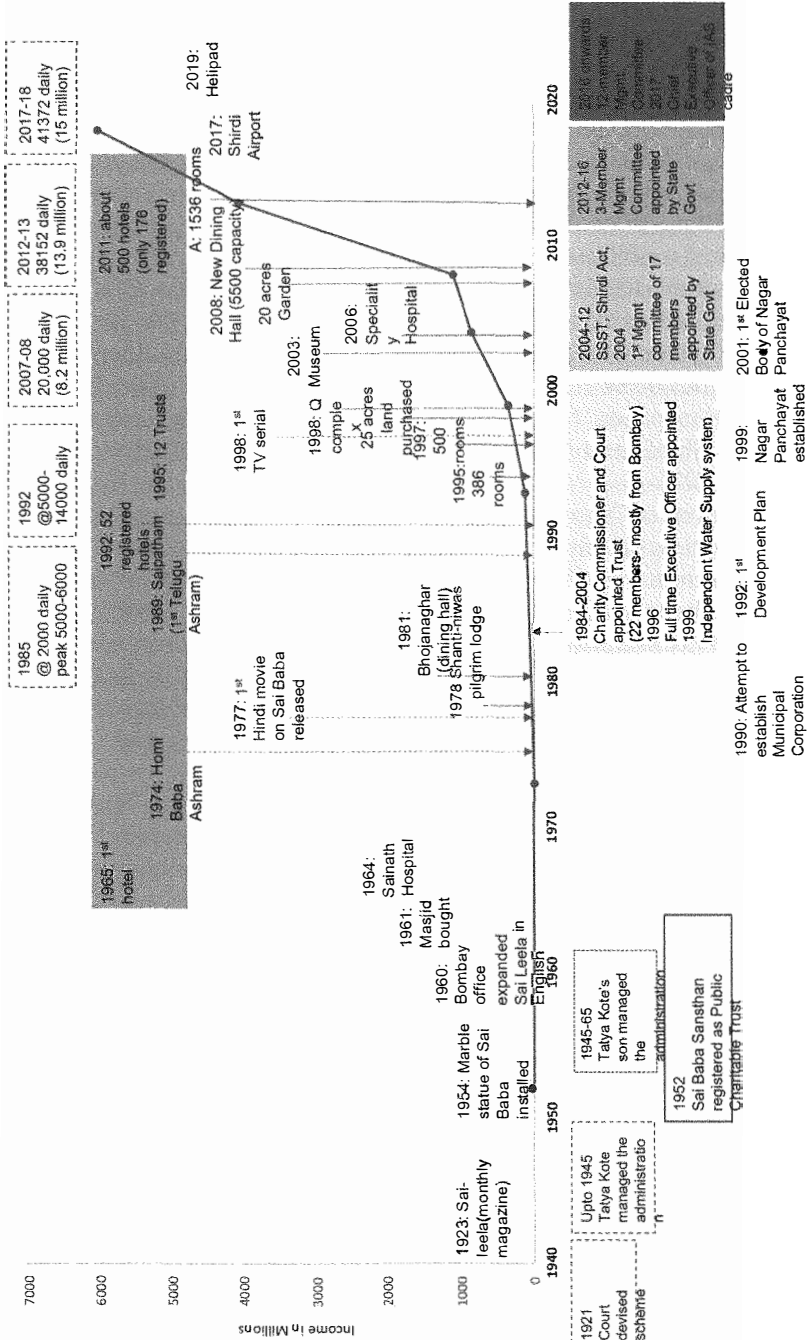
Figure 3.4 Timeline of significant events in the evolution of Shirdi as a popular pilgrim-town.

Source: Chart by Kiran Shinde.
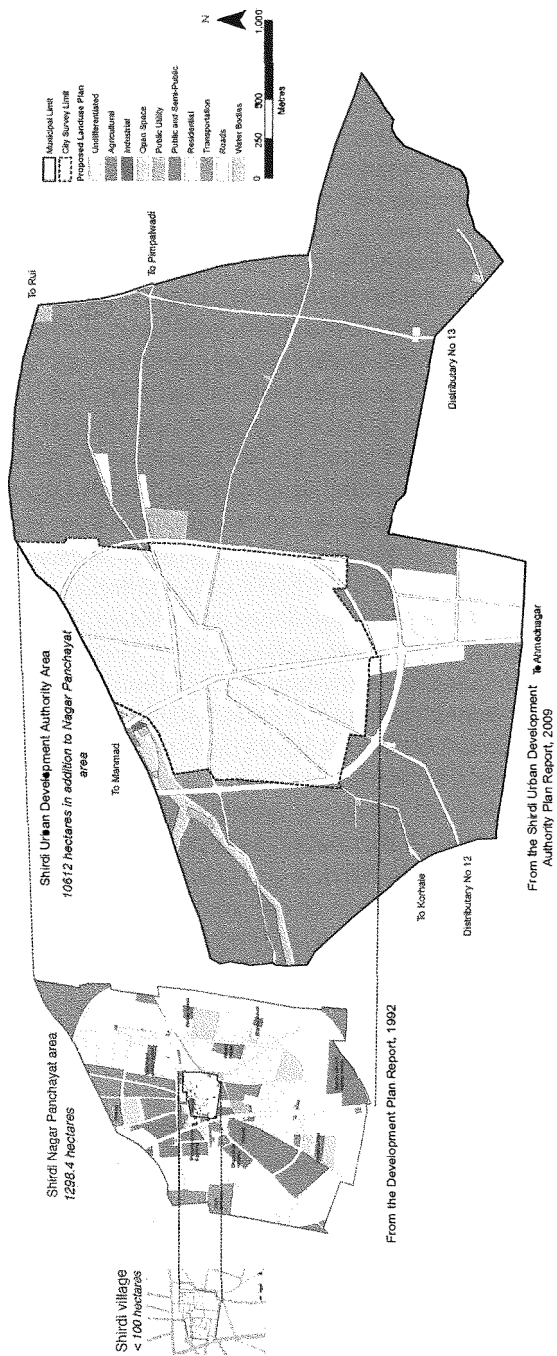
Figure 3.5 Mapping urban growth and land-use change in Shirdi, India.

Source: Chart by Kiran Shinde.

and massive in-migration, Shirdi's social fabric has changed considerably. The former Sarpanch lamented in an interview that

> from the earlier families close to Baba, only four or five have continued to stay in Shirdi …. Village community has disintegrated … [and] nothing like social life of the village remains now …. Village festivals have closed down, … routes have changed to avoid crowd near the temple, … [and] locals cannot even take *darshan* [sight/view of the divine] now.

Social fissures also grow from the dominating role that the Sansthan has acquired due to its political power and financial resources. The SSST has "handicapped the Nagar Panchayat and its people" (interview with the former Sarpanch). As another stated, "now most appointments of trustees and management positions in SSST are political and they are not emotionally attached to Shirdi. The trustee board comes generally for festivals only—attachment to the temple only not with Shirdi" (interview with a descendant whose forefathers were close to Sai Baba). Members included a state minister, a member of the State's Legislative Council who hails from the region, a Sessions Judge from the district. On more practical matters, one shopkeeper offered an inside story saying that the "SSST only invites known contractors for any building work or tenders and thus excludes local people." That there is some truth to the resentment is also evident from the number of legal cases in which the Sansthan is entangled and that it must resolve: in 2017–2018, the legal department of the Sansthan had presented twenty-three claims in the court while it was fighting 105 cases filed against it (SSST 2018: 38). Thus, two worlds exist within Shirdi, one that is woven around the SSST and devotees and the other the urban village of Shirdi where much of what happens is informal and unauthorized and therefore has all the trappings of a poorly developed place (Shinde 2017).

Of Chariots, Horses, Elephants, and Guns to Be Fired

Sai Baba's popularity is well known in academic literature and real life. How has such popularity shaped the formation of Shirdi as the pilgrimage center dedicated to Sai Baba? Are there any other reasons at play in the transition of Shirdi from a village to a place that "never really goes to bed—and that is part of the thrill of the place!" (Williams 2004: 131)? In seeking answers to such questions, this chapter has drawn attention to processes instrumental to the growth of Shirdi.

By providing necessary facilities for pilgrims to take *darshan* of their beloved Sai Baba in the best possible manner, the SSST has not only anchored the pilgrimage economy but also acquired a status as a benevolent organization. It always had been resourceful, much like Sai Baba himself, but the way in which the state has intervened in creating the present-day structure is how the SSST has become a very powerful stakeholder in the

urban development of Shirdi. Not only has it brought its political orientation to bear, its activities have also created fissures. While the SSST's ventures seem to respond well to wider demands of devotees, they are also criticized by Shirdi's older generation of residents. This said, there is no denying the highly significant role of the SSST: A long-term resident of Shirdi stated clearly that without Baba there is no Sansthan; without the Sansthan there is no Shirdi. While residents accept the authority of the SSST as symbolic of Sai Baba's grace, they must deal with harsh realities of remaining in a rapidly urbanizing place that in some ways seems to be leaving them behind.

That such changes are an outcome of intense commercial activities related to a pilgrimage economy is no news. But for Shirdi, such realities have many layers. Although the town is dedicated to a modern-day saint and heavily guarded and controlled by the Sansthan, Shirdi shares traits typical of Hindu pilgrim-towns. Many devotees have constructed their second homes and "spiritual retreats" in Shirdi. Most significantly, many gurus have established ashrams there so that devotees and followers can practice their ways of worship to Sai Baba. Similarly, many collectives from caste and class groupings have organized themselves as charitable trusts and purchased lands for building their own pilgrim-lodges to facilitate travel of their members to Shirdi (Shinde and Pinkney 2013). The story of Shirdi's growth resonates, in part, with what scholars have found in many other Indian pilgrim-towns such as Vrindavan, Banaras, Haridwar, and Nathdwara that are associated with traditional deities (Freitag 1989; Shinde 2012). However, there is a difference in the near absence of a strong architectural language that is closely connected with both the monumental heritage structures that were once patronized by royalty and the close-knit neighborhoods that developed around temples and served priestly classes. The distinct patterns related to caste and occupation found in traditional pilgrim-towns are hard to find in Shirdi. More could be said, but it must be stressed that while Shirdi does exhibit spatial refabulations (see Introduction of this volume) driven by religious and spiritual needs, their expressions are related to contemporary tourism infrastructure. The nature of these changes is aptly demonstrated by a recently opened religious theme park called *Sai-teerth* and dedicated to Sai Baba, which reproduces the important places of Sai Baba in another location within Shirdi itself while providing memorable audio-visual experiences.

While describing festivities in her guidebook to Shirdi, Williams quotes from *Charters and Sayings* no. 360: "Years earlier, Baba had predicted such scenes when talking to a few devotees, 'In Shirdi there will be huge storied buildings, grand processions will be held, and big men will come. Chariots, horses, elephants will come, guns will be fired'" (2004: 66).

No guns are being fired now, but certainly, the Shirdi of Sai Baba has changed dramatically with new buildings and institutions. Just as surely, it will continue to change with the state figuratively "firing the guns" (through the Sansthan) and the private sector bringing in investments of "chariots, horses, and elephants."

Notes

1 Some key Shirdi Sai Baba studies include McLain (2011), Rigopoulos (1993), Shepherd (1986), Srinivas (1999, 2008), Warren (1999), and White (1972).
2 In 2021, 100 Indian rupees equalled around 1.15 Euro.
3 Other problems and challenges with the Development Plan are discussed in greater depth in Shinde (2017).

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4   Routes and Repositories

Shirdi Sai Baba's Urban Presence

Smriti Srinivas

In the Bollywood blockbuster, *Amar Akbar Anthony* (1977), a Shirdi Sai Baba shrine stands off a highway, presumably near the peripheries of Bombay (Mumbai). The shrine is located in wooded terrain and provides the setting for one of the pivotal moments of the film, which tells the story of the separation and reconciliation of three brothers, one raised Hindu, one Muslim, and one Christian. A crude, unfinished-looking mud wall surrounds the shrine, and we follow a blind woman who is escaping pursuers stumbling and crawling toward it to the sounds of a song. The building's architecture is ambiguous: It looks like a Muslim *dargah* (grave of a revered person) and a Hindu shrine, depending on one's perspective. A cobra guards its walls and, facing the garlanded, seated, white *murti* (embodiment) of Baba in stone or plaster, is a bull—probably Nandi; both the cobra and Nandi are associated with the deity Shiva. The building appears to be made of concrete, its floor is tiled, and while other images and items of worship inside are mainly "Hindu," one catches glimpses of a dangling crescent moon that is a crossover sign (being associated in iconography with Islam as well as Shiva), and there is an openness to the devotional exchanges within. The constituency seems to be multi-religious, and Akbar, the Muslim brother, twirling sometimes like a dervish, celebrates the saint by singing "Shirdi Wale Sai Baba" (Shirdi's Lord Sai Baba):

> ...*O mere Sai deva* (O my Lord Sai)
> *tere sab naam leva* (your name is taken by all)
> *juda insaan sare* (human beings in all their difference)
> *sabhi tujhko hai pyare* (all are beloved to you)
> *sune fariyaad sabki* (you listen to everyone's cry for help)
> *tujhe hai yaad sabki* (you keep everyone in mind/you remember everyone)...[1]

An act of grace accompanies the song as a corpothetic transfer of twin flames from Baba's eyes that restores the blind woman's sight. When her sight returns, she sees the image of her three long-lost sons on the saint's visage. Coinciding with the release of another popular film (see Loar, this

volume), *Shirdi ke Sai Baba* (1977), the scene also attests to the visibility of Baba as a pan-Indian icon who is the "destination of every traveler" (*har raahi ki manzil*) or one with a query, as the song claims.[2]

My query is this: What is the relationship between Shirdi Sai Baba's images, their powers, ocular or otherwise, and their disposition in urban—rather than national—space? I suggest that the film scene's gesture toward roadways, urban peripheries, and the unstable, multiple meanings of the shrine and its polyvalent persona (lord/saint/Shiva in his court/*dargah*/temple) seated in the heart of an incomplete and still evolving exterior provides an unintended but significant point of departure for exploration. In thinking with roads and peripheries, I draw on the generative potential of the *mobility* paradigm that focuses attention on movement and its constraints as a structuring feature of institutions, spaces, objects, bodies, and identities.[3] In particular, an engagement with mobilities of various kinds spatializes religion's roles.[4] By regarding mobility as a property of things and people, as circulation, and as geographical movement, urban space can be understood as "a process of various replacements and displacements articulated with the logics of emergence, transition, and transformation that religiosities may express" (Hancock and Srinivas 2018a: 461).

Exploring such replacements and displacements, I work with the concept of *routes* to indicate the following specifics: Spiritual journeys that bring holy persons, seekers, and devotees into intersecting trajectories; pathways for the transmission of religious memories and repertoires; roads and highways in the city; and the mobile capacities of religious images.[5] I am centrally interested in spatial designs or architectural forms that I shall call *repositories* to indicate the habitations that come to house religious imaginations, memories, and practices in the material landscape of the city. These include roadside shrines, megachurches or temples, middling temples for old or emerging deities, ashrams and hermitages, mosques, tombs of saints and mendicants, and even their ruins.[6] These may vary in scale, significance, or monumentality, but they nevertheless record movements and transformations. Built into material and conceptual routes and repositories is temporality as an understanding that they emerge over time, accrete, morph into new forms, change direction, acquire new meanings, break down, are layered, and so on, eliciting our reflection.

The first section of this chapter discusses several routes of transmission of Shirdi Sai Baba's charisma to Indian and global audiences after his death in 1918. The second seeks to understand *spatial refabulations* of Baba's urban presence by focusing on Bangalore (Bengaluru), a city founded in the sixteenth century, now a major Indian metropolis and global destination of about thirteen million people in South India famously known as India's high-tech "Silicon Valley" (Srinivas 2001).[7] On several roads and transport arteries, in public temples, roadside shrines, and markets, we see how architectural forms, rituals and worship, quotidian lives, and corporeal practices of devotees come to be repositories of Shirdi Sai Baba's presence over time,

connect the biographical with the material, and infuse spatiality with religiosity. The third section reflects on these processes of spatialization and their associated constituencies as well as their significance for the (devotional) present.

Unfolding across these sections is a story about a layered sacred geography of the Deccan—including not only the Shirdi-Aurangabad region in northern Maharashtra but its counterpart in Pandharpur and the Varkaris in the south. The Deccani repertoire that is visible in Shirdi Sai Baba's life and teachings was remade within expanding routes of influence and affinity to cover other Maharashtrian sites such as Pune and Sakori but also other Deccan neighbors such as Puttaparthi in Andhra Pradesh and Bangalore in Karnataka. It is also, in some ways, a story about an abiding religious question in India seen from the Deccan and the south and about colonial to postcolonial transformations of space: Some spaces of religious polyglossia remained resolutely "local" while other sites and identities were harnessed to become more mobile and un/dis-placed, urban, "national," and sometimes, more "Hindu."

Routes of Transmission[8]

The charismatic icon appearing in *Amar Akbar Anthony* and most Shirdi Sai Baba shrines and temples across India represents the Shirdi Samadhi Mandir's *murti* (see Introduction, this volume). While Baba's clothes were probably white or uncolored garments, this image takes on many hues and accoutrements as it appears on devotees' altars, calendar art, dashboards of cars, or as marble *murtis* in temples. As vehicles in the production of devotion, Baba's images range from their immersion in local cultures to nationalist and universalist forms of deification. Apart from the mobile capacities inherent in these *murtis*—to which we shall turn in the next section—or the development of Shirdi into a pan-Indian site of pilgrimage (see Shinde, this volume), there are several conduits through which Baba's powers have been mobilized for various Indian and global publics and his memory transformed by oral, material, hagiographical, and performative practices.[9]

A first route is based on a thematic *repertoire* of connections between religious figures in the past or present. Works on Shirdi Sai Baba have recognized his links with Sufism, Vaishnava and Vedanta traditions, Kabir, Dattatreya, Gorakhnath, and the Nathpanthi order.[10] Thus, White (1972: 63–78) brings together a number of saints in the Pune and Bangalore areas as a coherent and interconnected group that he calls the "Sai Baba movement" including Shirdi Sai Baba, Upasni Maharaj, Godavari Mata, and Sathya Sai Baba.[11] He identifies Gorakhnath (associated with the Kanphata yogis and the Nathpanthi order), Dattatreya (a deified early ascetic popularly identified with Shiva, Brahma, and Vishnu), and Kabir (a medieval saint) as contributing important themes and content to the Sai Baba movement. The Shirdi Sansthan committee also suggests that Baba is an

incarnation of Dattatreya, a protean figure appearing in several pathways from Tantra to networks of Muslim holy men, Maharashtra being a center of Datta worship (Deák 2010, Rigopoulos 1998 and this volume).

The second route is one of spatial and imaginative *affiliation* between spiritual leaders or pilgrimage sites. Among these leaders, Meher Baba (1894–1969) and Upasni Maharaj (1870–1941) appear frequently in connection with Shirdi Sai Baba's life, having met and stayed with him for some time.[12] They later created their own devotional followings but interpreted Baba's teachings and persona differently—the former in a largely Sufi and the latter in a Vedantic mode. Another scheme of correspondence and complementarity is the idea of five Perfect Masters, a cosmology in which the five head an invisible hierarchy of saints and seers (see Deák, this volume). While this cosmology seems to be drawn largely from a Sufi universe, authors invoke Perfect Masters belonging to a number of traditions. Thus, Satpathy (2001: 117) and Haynes (1989: 37–38) suggest a Maharashtrian network of Perfect Masters including Hazrat Baba Tajuddin of Nagpur, Hazrat Babajan of Pune, Upasni Maharaj of Sakori, Narayan Maharaj of Keda Gaon, and Sai Baba of Shirdi. Within Maharashtra, complementarity exists between the two largest pilgrimage sites today, Shirdi in the north and Pandharpur in the south, and a geographical network of sites connects the lives of Meher Baba, Upasni Maharaj, and Shirdi Sai Baba.

A third route relies on agents who did not meet Shirdi Sai Baba during his lifetime but who undertook *narrativization* of his life and philosophy for new and dispersed audiences in postcolonial India and worldwide. The several volumes published by Narasimha Swami, for example, have achieved wide circulation and acceptance by later writers.[13] B.V. Narasimha Iyer (1874–1956), as he was initially known, was a civil lawyer, member of the Madras Legislative Council, and active member of the Home Rule and Non-Cooperation movements. In 1921, after several personal tragedies, he decided to look for a true teacher (*sadguru*). Through a chain of gurus including Ramana Maharshi at Tiruvannamalai, Narayan Maharaj, Upasni Maharaj, and Meher Baba, Narasimha Iyer came to Shirdi in 1936, where he had a vision of Shirdi Baba. Transformed, he decided to take the message of Sai far beyond the bounds of Shirdi. In 1939, Narasimha Swami returned to Madras, opened the All-India Sai Samaj, and engaged in Sai publicity through lectures, incessant tours of the country, and a band of volunteers. He saw in Baba a universal guru and a living emblem of Hindu-Muslim unity; this was ideologically not far from the political milieu from which Narasimha Swami emerged including Non-Cooperation and the Khilafat movement when the cry was that Muslim and Hindu together would take on the Raj.

The Sai Baba temple in Mylapore, Madras, established in 1952–1953, was the first such institution associated with Narasimha Swami's All-India Sai Samaj. In 1953, ritual consecration of the temple occurred and in the 1970s, a *murti* of Baba was installed within (see Waghorne, this volume). The

hundreds of other Shirdi Sai Baba temples created in India after 1950 associated with the All-India Sai Samaj mostly present a double-layered construction of Baba as guru. At the primary level are Baba's life circumstances and practices at Shirdi such as the production of ash from a perpetual fire or his Sufi links. At the secondary level is a regimen of joint worship for different communities that was cast in scriptural terms by Narasimha Swami through frequent references to the Bhagavad Gita, Adi Shankara, and the Vedas (e.g., Narasimha Swami 1965a). In practice, while joint worship is undertaken by devotees in urban temples in India, non-Hindu devotees are uncommon. In this route of transmission, therefore, Shirdi Sai Baba is freed from locality and his physical body; his Sufi heritage passes into a zone of cultural amnesia; and his "ethereal body" (Narasimha Swami 1965b: 21) is conceptualized within classical traditions of Hinduism.

Although the Shirdi Sai Sansthan does not recognize any successor to Shirdi Sai Baba, the fourth route arises from the possibility that there might be a *reincarnation* of Baba, his charisma now embodied in another (Srinivas 1999b). This route can be best traced to Sathyanarayana Raju (1926–2011), famously known as the global guru Sathya Sai Baba who was born of humble parentage in Puttaparthi village in Andhra Pradesh (Srinivas 2008).[14] At the age of fourteen, he went through a prolonged period of "illness" and erratic behavior. On May 23, 1940, Sathya called his family to him and declared: "I am Sai Baba" (Kasturi 1968: 43). Devotees began to seek him out for spiritual guidance, his acts of healing and other miracles, and by 1950, a hermitage called Prashanti Nilayam was completed. 1957 was a watershed in Sathya Sai Baba's career: He left for a northern Indian tour of cities and sacred sites and his public role became more pan-Indian. On Guru Purnima day in 1963, he disclosed that his birth was in accordance with a boon given to the sage Bharadvaja: Shiva and Shakti would be born in the Bharadvaja lineage thrice—Shiva alone as Shirdi Sai Baba, Shiva and Shakti together at Puttaparthi as Sathya Sai Baba, and Shakti alone as Prema Sai.[15]

Sathya Sai Baba's declaration made explicit links to Shaiva and Shakta traditions as well as divine androgyny. The reconstruction of Shirdi Sai Baba's memory should also be inserted into a larger institutional framework. Sathya Sai Baba's announcement accompanied the beginnings of a service (*seva*) organization: The First All-India Conference of Sai Seva Organizations was held in 1967. At the First World Conference of Sathya Sai Seva Organizations in 1968, Baba announced that he was the embodiment of every divine entity and that he had come to establish eternal religion or Sanatana Dharma. He also left for his first and only foreign trip, visiting eastern Africa. Several other institutions emerged through the active encouragement of Sathya Sai Baba and philanthropic contributions by his devotees including men's and women's colleges founded in the 1960s and 1970s and a university in 1981. Also significant were specialty hospitals in Puttaparthi (1991) and Bangalore (2001). In conjunction with his increasingly global role, while Sathya Sai Baba continued to refer to

local and pan-Indian traditions and teachers, he also placed significance on Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Zoroastrianism, and Judaism.

Repositories of Presence

Founded as a fort-bazaar in the center of India's Deccan region in 1537, Bangalore has historically been part of significant Indian Ocean exchanges. Under Tipu Sultan (1750–1799), the "Tiger of Mysore" and strenuous opponent of British power in South Asia, Bangalore appeared on many oceanic, military, diplomatic, and trade maps. After the last Anglo-Mysore war in 1799, the presence of the British Cantonment to the east of the Old City with its soldiers, churches, merchants, railroads, and bungalows created other Indian Ocean networks. Known for its textile industry, the city expanded through public-sector industries, new industrial estates, housing extensions, and informal settlements after Indian independence in 1947, but even before the 1980s, Bangalore had a pool of technical and educational institutions that led to its characterization as India's premier science city. By the end of the century, it had emerged as India's high-tech/bio-tech center. In the twenty-first century's neo-liberal landscape, with about thirteen million people, Bangalore is embedded within clearly identifiable global networks of science, aviation, finance, labor, and infrastructure.

Across greater Bangalore today, some of the routes of transmission of Baba's charisma take material form as they do in sites globally.[16] At least three centers in Bangalore are associated with Meher Baba, for instance, the oldest of which is the Universal Spiritual Center en route to Mysore founded by Meher Baba himself in 1939. For many devotees of Meher Baba today, Shirdi Sai Baba is a familiar name. Similarly, the Sathya Sai Baba movement's "roots" in Shirdi Sai Baba are reflected in the lived habitat of Brindavan (Sathya Sai Baba's second most important hermitage) in eastern Bangalore near the Export Promotion Industrial Park, but also in the veneration of both figures in devotional songs, homes of devotees, and altars in dozens of Sathya Sai Baba centers in the city (Srinivas 2008).

Shirdi Sai Baba, however, is the sole focus of devotion on several roads and highways of Bangalore city where at least twenty well-known repositories exist, although many more informal sites mark and produce space for devotees and passers-by. I have encountered the saint's presence in devotional groups functioning out of people's homes; seen de-facto temples in informal settlements across the city; and found his form on exterior walls, on advertisements for legal services and astrologers, and in three-wheeled autorickshaws. These presentations are entwined with everyday lives and spiritual quests and intersect with the institutional, infrastructural, and material histories of different urban locations (see also Jeychandran, Larios, Roberts and Roberts, Vicziany, Waghorne, this volume).[17] As repositories of Baba's presence, they are also habitations of religious memory and locations in which his image is mobilized.

Quotidian and ritual activities of devotees meet in such places but also, as in the shrine in the film with which we began, these sites are unfinished forms open to the future. In what follows, I discuss three locations and their repositories in Bangalore that I studied at different times. Indeed, I returned to them in 2020 after a lapse of between ten and twenty-five years to analyze their spatial and temporal changes. Significantly, my last visit was undertaken in very constrained conditions due to the global COVID-19 pandemic that put Bangalore city into lockdown along with the rest of India from the end of March 2020. As conditions eased in June and July the same year, I could visit the sites, but the pandemic affected what questions I could ask, where I could go, and what was or was not open to the public. Nevertheless, the "social lives of shrines" approach in this chapter reveals the processual sense of place and praxis implied in spatio-religious refabulations.

Anthill, Cement, Granite

Rupena Agrahara's Shirdi Sai Baba shrines in southern Bangalore are associated with Shivamma Thayee (1891–1994), a female renouncer and devotee of Shirdi Sai Baba who achieved local rather than pan-Indian repute.[18] Born to an agriculturist family of Gounders in Coimbatore district of Tamil Nadu, Rajamma (as she was called) met Baba in 1906 when he visited a village close to Coimbatore town with her uncle. While it is widely believed that Baba never left the Shirdi area after he came to reside there, Rajamma stated that he stayed in that village for two days. He also initiated her with the Gayatri mantra and predicted that she would be a great soul. Rajamma visited Baba in 1908 at his mosque. She describes him as about six feet tall with long hands, fair in skin-color, possessing a sharp nose, and deep blue eyes that shone penetratingly. Baba spoke to her in Tamil.

Rajamma's continued absorption in her guru, whom she regarded as an incarnation of Shiva and Dattatreya, finally led to her husband abandoning her. Later on, her son died in a motor accident and Rajamma felt that Baba had freed her from all family attachments. In 1917, Baba gave her the name by which she is known today and ordered her to go to Bangalore and found a hermitage in his name. She lived for several years in a remote corner of the city begging for alms. One Narayan Reddy gifted land to her in Rupena Agrahara, then an isolated tract distant from the urbanizing center, where Shivamma Thayee did penance for about twelve years. Persuaded by devotees to end her strenuous penance, she then turned her attention to the hermitage, started a primary school, founded temples dedicated to Baba, and extended her blessings as a guru in her own right to the many who began to gather around her.

The remote, rural, and forested land on the urban periphery at that time was reflected when an "anthill" covered her entire body during her penance and a cobra would come and sit on her matted locks of hair. These

anthills are typically associated with Nagas (*naga* is "serpent" in Sanskrit), who also appear in Buddhism and Jainism, but it is Shiva who is often considered lord of the Nagas and wears a cobra around his neck.[19] Naga stones (*naga kallu*) associated with fecundity and fertility are placed under trees in South India and present Nagas as half human (top) and half snake (bottom). They are usually carved from basalt, which is found abundantly in this region. The significance of Shiva, Nagas, and Shirdi Sai Baba will become apparent shortly.

When I first visited Rupena Agrahara in December 2000 (see Srinivas 2002, 2008), I drove by car through busy traffic on the Intermediate Ring Road to Hosur Road and its markets. Once I took the turnoff to Rupena Agrahara, the road became uneven and bumpy, and the area appeared more like a village settlement. In a shady area with trees were a Lingayat cemetery, a few houses, a school, and the Shirdi shrines (Figure 4.1). The earliest image of Shirdi Sai Baba (date of installation unclear) was at Shivamma Thayee's residence as a foot-tall silver *murti* seated on and crowned by a cobra considered the "Naga Sai" form. Another *murti* dating from 1970 lay in a cement temple. As a focus of festivals every year, this *murti* was similar to the one at Shirdi but realized in black stone (see also Figure I.8, Introduction), probably basalt long used for religious sculpture in India. With large white painted eyes, the *murti* looked like local goddess images in this area (for example, Mariamma) or other village deities. On either side of the black Baba were images in

Figure 4.1 Rupena Agrahara, Bangalore, India, 2000.

Source: Photograph by Smriti Srinivas.
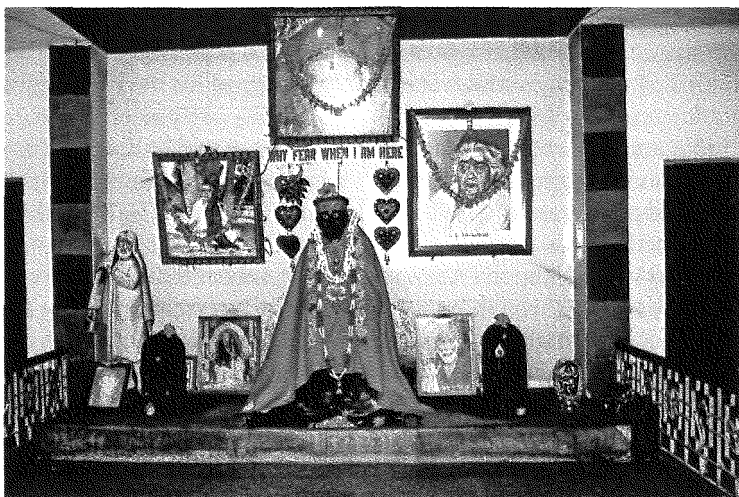
Figure 4.2 Shirdi Sai Baba *murti* in black stone, Rupena Agrahara, Bangalore, India, 2000.

Source: Photograph by Smriti Srinivas.
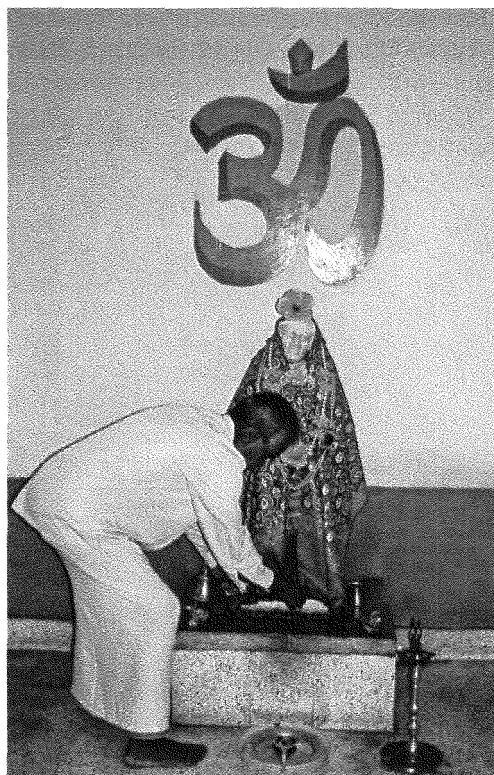
Figure 4.3 Shirdi Sai Baba as a standing fakir in white marble, Rupena Agrahara, Bangalore, India 2000.

Source: Photograph by Smriti Srinivas.

similar material of Ganesha and Subrahmanya, Shiva's sons (Figure 4.2). In 2000, behind the altar were photographs of Shivamma Thayee and a sign that asked, "Why fear when I am here?" Shivamma Thayee was buried in a chamber under the sanctum with a *linga* (aniconic symbol of Shiva) above her tomb. Unlike the Naga/goddess/Shaiva valence of the first two sites was the last image in a mini-shrine—a white marble *murti* of Baba as a standing fakir that Shivamma Thayee installed in 1989 based upon dream instructions from Baba (Figure 4.3).

Twenty years later, the shrines remained closed because of the global pandemic even though the Karnataka government had announced that religious institutions might reopen while observing safety precautions. I was only able to visit the shrines through the temple website and recent photographs posted online. I used Google satellite maps to visualize the changes the area had undergone between my first and current visits.

The shrines were now enclosed within a gated temple complex called the Sri Shirdi Sadguru Saibaba Mutt. While the Naga Sai image (Figure 4.4) remained more or less the same in Shivamma Thayee's small home, the mini-shrine of the white marble fakir-Baba did not exist anymore.[20] The temple of the black Baba was no longer a simple square concrete room but

Figure 4.4 Naga Sai *murti* of Shirdi Sai Baba, Sri Shirdi Sadguru Saibaba Mutt, Bangalore (Bengaluru), India, 2021.

Source: Photograph by Shri Venkata Raju, priest of the temple, via Santhipriya (alias N.R. Jayaram).

Figure 4.5 Black stone *murti* of Shirdi Sai Baba, Sri Shirdi Sadguru Saibaba Mutt, Bangalore (Bengaluru), India, 2021.

Source: Photograph by Shri Venkata Raju, priest of the temple, via Santhipriya (alias N.R. Jayaram).

entered through a large hall where a seated Nandi looked toward the sanctum. The temple also included images of nine planets (*navagraha*) meant for worship by devotees. The pillared sanctum area was enclosed by railings and Baba, still flanked by Ganesha and Subrahmanya, sat on polished granite (Figure 4.5). Shivamma Thayee's picture and others had been replaced by a polished granite wall. While the complex retained its Shaiva connections, during festival time these central images were garlanded, seated on a throne like Hindu deities, and had lost their rural character. Outside the gate, most of the trees had disappeared and the immediate area around it was crowded with houses, apartments, shops, a police station, two hospital buildings, a clinic, and a government school. The area had become a dense, largely lower middle-class community on Bangalore's outskirts en route to the hyper-urbanized "Electronic City."

The Mosque in a Niche and a Hinduized Temple in the City

Unlike Rupena Agrahara's rural origins, the Shirdi Sai Baba shrine in Cambridge Layout (also known as Someshvarapura) emerged in an

already busy residential neighborhood dating from the 1960s in eastern Bangalore. In its current lifetime, its architectural design has undergone three main changes. Six devotees, most of them Tamil-speakers from the Defense Accounts head office in Pune city in Maharashtra, were instrumental in its inception. After their retirement, they settled in Bangalore and purchased a plot in 1968 to hold a one-room shrine with an iconic picture of Baba (details are not known). In 1980, they joined forces with three businessmen (a Tamil-speaker, a Sindhi, and a Marwari), who had vowed to build a temple after visiting Shirdi in the 1970s. Their efforts led to the construction of a temple in 1985 that became affiliated with the All-India Sai Samaj of Narasimha Swami. In 2020, the temple's form morphed yet again.

When I first researched the temple in its second manifestation in 1994–1995 (Srinivas 1999a, 2002, 2008), it had two levels (Figure 4.6). Below the level of the road in a large empty room was a niche in the wall that held a picture of Baba in white clothes, a fakir sitting in Dvarkamai mosque. When the lower floor was under construction, a devotee named Vimala Rai made a pilgrimage to Shirdi where the priest told her that he had received dream instructions to give the picture to the Bangalore temple. The level of the temple that most people visited lay a floor above the road and contained a white marble *murti* of Baba (similar to the one in Shirdi) that priests daily

Figure 4.6 Cambridge Layout Shirdi Sai Baba temple, Bangalore, India, 1995.
Source: Photograph by Smriti Srinivas.

Figure 4.7 Shirdi Sai Baba *murti* in marble, Cambridge Layout temple, Bangalore,
        India, 1995.

Source: Image bought outside the temple in the market, in Smriti Srinivas's possession.
Photographer unknown.

clothed and decorated with garlands (Figure 4.7). The *murti* sat on a silver
throne with lions on either side (acquired in 1995) depicting Baba as a deity/
king. Temple rituals included Shaiva and Vaishnava elements and among
festivals celebrated, Gurupurnima (when all gurus from Vyasa to Shirdi
Baba are revered) and Vijayadashami (the day of Baba's passing in the
Hindu calendar) were central to temple life. Celebration of Rama Navami
(festival marking the birthday of the deity Rama) had become increasingly
elaborate with the temple managers understanding it to be the "birthday"

of Shirdi Sai Baba. The temple was actively engaged in social outreach such as running a charitable dispensary, offering Sanskrit verse classes for children, feeding the poor on Sundays, and opening a hospital providing free medical care.

Devotees at the temple from the neighborhood and other areas of the city shared mid-level professional, mercantile, or bureaucratic backgrounds. The majority were Hindus from different parts of India speaking a variety of languages. As my informal interviews indicated, most conceived of Baba as a guru or God and propitiated him in addition to other family or personal gods. While the temple contained two small pyramidical towers (*gopura*), one over the entrance and another over the sanctum, its exterior modern design did not resemble a typical religious building in the region. Its sacred interior, however, mirrored the split Baba persona of Narasimha Swami's formulation with a mendicant in the lower room and regal guru/god in the upper room. Such a contrast sat comfortably with the urban Hindu middle class, who were his dominant constituency here.

Twenty-five years later, in June 2020, the temple's remodeling, largely funded by devotees, was complete and its doors were finally open to the public. Since traveling by public transport felt unsafe in COVID-19 conditions, I made the forty-minute walk from my apartment to the temple, trying to avoid crowded streets and sweating under my face-mask.[21] The temple now occupied twice the area and had shed its modernist exterior. Above the entrance was a yellow-golden temple tower containing a Ganesha *murti* conspicuously clad in a saffron garment, right leg over left like Baba's image. A temple bell, "Om" in Devanagari script on various parts of the roof held by rounded pillars, and other signage signaled a "Hindu" Shri Shirdi Sai Baba Mandir (Figure 4.8). After debating whether I should go in, I left my shoes outside and stepped gingerly up the stairs taking care not to touch the railings or other devotees. Steps led up to the Shirdi image fully bypassing the room downstairs that had held the iconic picture of fakir-Baba in the mosque. Granite walls now girded the exterior base of the building and pilgrims visiting the temple had no ready access to the bottom floor. I had no way of knowing whether the bottom floor still existed in its previous incarnation since it was not open to the public.

A new spacious hall with granite flooring on the top floor opened to one side of the marble *murti* to accommodate devotees coming for ritual activities. The *murti* with its marble base and black granite wall behind had not changed in twenty-five years, although the words faith/reverence (*shraddha*) and patience/perseverance (*saburi*) now appeared on the wall behind it in Devanagari script (Figure 4.9). During my visit, despite COVID-19 and no vaccines, mask-wearing devotees formed a line to enter after receiving a spray of hand-sanitizer. More cautious devotees on two-wheelers or on foot stopped on the road for a quick exchange of gazes (*darshan*) with the *murti*.
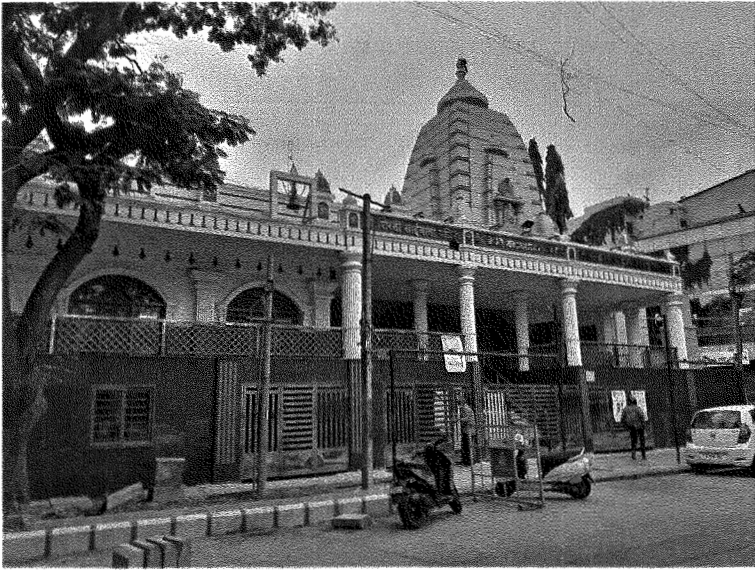
Figure 4.8 Shri Shirdi Sai Baba Mandir, Cambridge Layout, Bangalore (Bengaluru), India, 2020.

Source: Photograph by Smriti Srinivas.

Figure 4.9 Shirdi Sai Baba *murti*, Cambridge Layout temple, Bangalore (Bengaluru) 2020.

Source: Photograph by Smriti Srinivas.

Quasi-Shrine in Transit

An unnamed "quasi-shrine" to Shirdi Sai Baba stands in the upscale neighborhood of HAL 2nd Stage dating from the late 1970s in eastern Bangalore (Srinivas 2015, 2016). It is situated on the busy 100 Feet Road amidst a world of global and national chain stores, "fashion" shops, restaurants, and bars to which hundreds flock to party, shop, or stroll by on any given evening. Based on research conducted in 2010, I compared Baba's *murti* in the then new quasi-shrine to the ubiquitous and lonely watchman to be found standing outside the glassy storefronts of many shops in this neighborhood. Baba was seated in his iconic "Shirdi" pose, regal with a crown and rich robes in a cubical space open on three sides (Figure 4.10). Water cascaded down the glassy backdrop. There was no indication that Baba received regular offerings from devotees, although passers-by had his *darshan* while he conferred his silent blessings. Although many pedestrians recognized the saint, this image was not an object of evident worship. Instead, shorn of ritual practices, he appeared more like an advertisement in a shop window than a holy presence.

Ten years later, the neighborhood's frenetic pace had slowed. The shrine bore subtle signs of transit when I walked by one afternoon.[22] The glassy backdrop of flowing water was no longer a feature and Baba's *murti*, still royal, garlanded, and richly dressed, sat in front of an opaque white wall (Figure 4.11). At his feet were items of Hindu worship and the words *shraddha* and *saburi* were inscribed in white powder in Devanagari script.
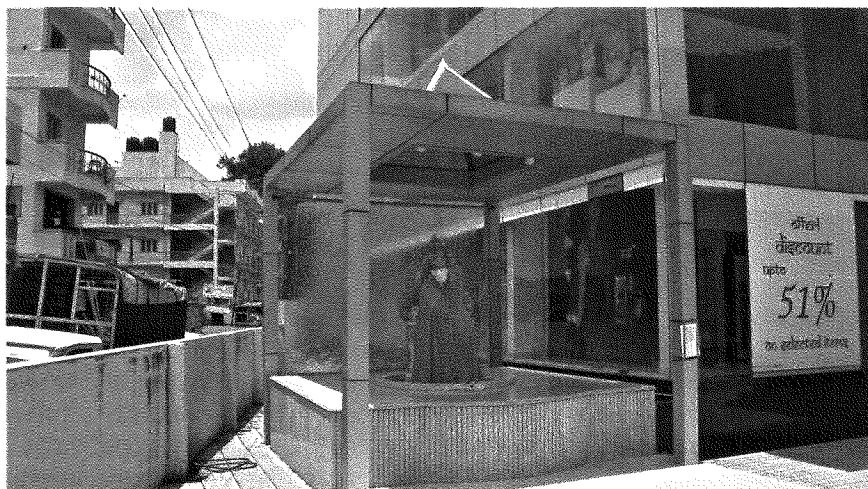
Figure 4.10 Shirdi Sai Baba quasi-shrine on 100 Feet Road, HAL 2nd Stage, Bangalore, India, 2010.

Source: Photograph by Smriti Srinivas.

Figure 4.11 Shirdi Sai Baba quasi-shrine on 100 Feet Road, HAL 2nd Stage, Bangalore (Bengaluru), India, 2020.

Source: Photograph by Smriti Srinivas.

When I stopped at the shrine, a curious watchman appeared and we conversed in Hindustani muffled by our masks. While the upscale stores were open, the pandemic had dampened consumer interest, and hardly anyone was around. The gentleman informed me that normally a priest from Assam performed rituals daily at 6:30 AM and changed Baba's clothes but because of the COVID-19 lockdown, he, like millions of migrants across India, had made the arduous journey back to his home, either fleeing from or being forced to leave the city. The shrine belonged to the adjacent commercial building owned by a South Indian businessman;

Figure 4.12 Tree-shrine, 100 Feet Road, HAL 2nd Stage, Bangalore (Bengaluru), India, 2020.

Source: Photograph by Smriti Srinivas.

a store employee was stepping in for the absent priest. The quasi-shrine seemed to be on its way to becoming a small temple; its ritual accoutrements probably reflected the personal fortunes of its patron rather than legal permissions from the city. However, the shrine still had no obvious worshippers because, although directly in public view, it was private property like personal altars found inside businesses, restaurants, and stores in India.

The quasi-shrine contrasted with a new shrine that had appeared in the past year about five minutes from it by foot (Figure 4.12). A decorated altar

Figure 4.13 Images inside tree's hollow, 100 Feet Road, HAL 2nd Stage, Bangalore
         (Bengaluru), India, 2020.

Source: Photograph by Smriti Srinivas.

set into a hollow tree bore images of Ganapati, Shiva, and Parvati, but also
the familiar seated Shirdi Sai Baba in plastic or some other molded mate-
rial (Figure 4.13). This "tree shrine" received offerings from worshippers
including coins, flowers, and vermillion, although one would have to stand
dangerously close to traffic to realize such votive exchanges. Nevertheless,
whether deliberate or accidental, the gaze of those who walked past or drove
by the quasi-shrine and the tree-shrine in buses and autos were recipients of
Baba's ocular benediction much like the sightless woman in the film *Amar
Akbar Anthony*.

Enclosure or Unfinalizability?

On October 19, 2018, newspapers in India covered Prime Minister Modi's visit to Shirdi to attend the valedictory event of the Sai Baba *samadhi* (profound contemplation of the Absolute, union with the Divine) centenary program marking his passing. The events had already been inaugurated by the President of India, Ram Nath Kovind. Both visits attested to the significance of Baba's charisma for the Indian state and the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).[23] A few years earlier, ahead of an invitation to Modi to visit Shirdi in 2014, the head of the Dwaraka *pitha* (seat) in Gujarat (Modi's home base), as one of the four cardinal centers credited to the eighth-century Adi Shankara associated with Advaita philosophy, warned that Modi might lose the protection of celestial gods if he insisted upon visiting Shirdi. The same dignitary proclaimed that Baba was a Muslim fakir who could not be compared to Hindu deities and should not be worshipped like them. His remarks led a local court in Madhya Pradesh to issue a summons against the Dwaraka *pitha* head. Rajesh Shivsangia, the complainant who ran a gents' beauty parlor, alleged that the dignitary had committed an offence under Section 298 of the Indian Penal Code by hurting religious sentiments.[24] Such incidents suggest that many "Hindus" and "Hinduisms" are in circulation in the national arena.

In comparison to discourses and players on the national stage, an understanding of the disposition of Shirdi Sai Baba's images and powers in the urban terrain requires attention to spatio-material refabulations. The Baba shrine in *Amar Akbar Anthony* resembles Rupena Agrahara's shrines from my 2000 visit regarding concrete buildings in green spaces on a city's peripheries as well as their Shaiva-fakir valence. Their inclusiveness or non-unitary aesthetic contrasts with a process of spatial, imaginative, and ritual "enclosure" that has come to include all three Baba sites in Bangalore in the present moment. Not only are they now firmly contained within the density of Bangalore's metropolitan infrastructure, within the gated temple complex, a Hinduized temple building, or a still evolving cube, Baba's presence, as he sits regally on silver or golden thrones, seems increasingly framed by granite walls and polished plinths.

Such enclosures reflect the growing affluence of temple patrons and devotees and the religious aspirations of upwardly mobile groups: Reddy-caste landowners turned urbanites in Rupena Agrahara, a South Indian businessman on 100 Feet Road, and the growing "Hinduization" of middle and upper class persons associated with the Cambridge Layout Shirdi Sai Baba temple. A relatively easy connection ties these aspirations and temporal changes to the growing influence of the BJP in Karnataka over the last decade, as in other parts of India. Another feature of these shifts is how urban patrons of Baba's repositories seem increasingly taken with the material enchantment of marble and polished granite over more humble black basalt and concrete, following a trend perceivable in public buildings such as marriage halls and temples but also in private homes.

However, the story in this chapter about images and mobilities is not set in marble or granite, so to speak. Other circulations and movements create loose ends in such transformations. While Reddy landowners in Rupena Agrahara have upper-class aspirations, others visiting the shrines come from diverse caste and class backgrounds and the black Baba *murti* resonates with village deities and Naga stones with which they are familiar. Equally, the autorick-shaws and buses that ply the roads bringing devotees to any of these reposito-ries carry images of Shirdi Sai Baba in a variety of modes from fakir to deity and dressed, or otherwise presented, in many hues. In particular, autorick-shaw drivers from many religious and caste backgrounds that I have met are staunch devotees of Baba, and while they do not stop at sites during their busy workdays, they can be seen looking at Baba's form as they speed by. In markets and stores abutting these repositories, in advertisements for picture frames or tiffin meals, as sacred graffiti on neighborhood walls, and in many other spaces, quotidian diversity in Baba's forms of presentation render his ritual enclosures visually unstable, as if under threat of breaking down, when following roads and routes outside such shrines (Figure 4.14).
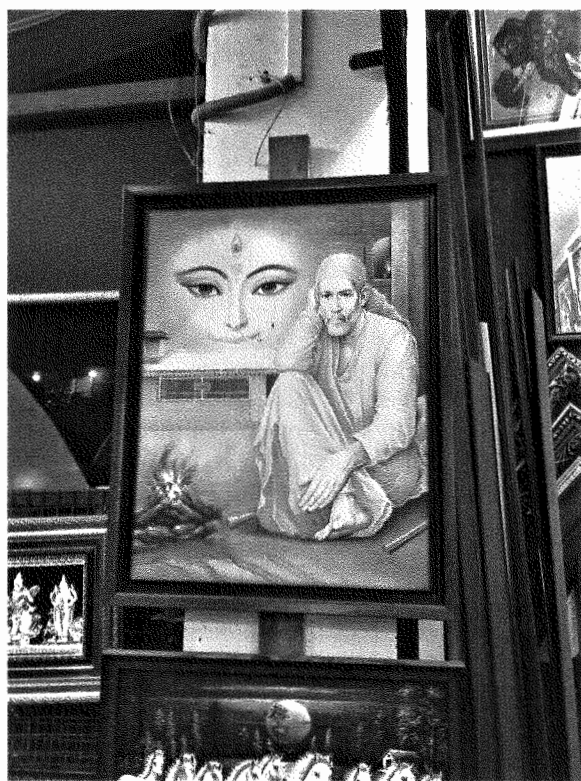
Figure 4.14 Shirdi Sai Baba in his mosque-pose backed by a goddess image in a local frame shop, Bangalore (Bengaluru), India, 2020.

Source: Photograph by Smriti Srinivas.

Repositories, then, are places of pause, where Baba's images can rest, even places for safekeeping. But images possess powers, as Baba's devotees know, and he can set forth again manifesting himself in unforeseeable directions through his peripatetic ways. Two- and three-dimensional icons have social lives remade through encounter with different audiences (see Davis 1997) to forge novel identities "disjunct from the familiar stories of a non-visual history" (Pinney 2004: 8). In our case, Shirdi Sai Baba's presentations and itinerancy can lead back to older histories that remain inexorably elusive for any singular understandings of "religion" and also open outward to futures that defy finality.

Notes

1 I thank Punam Zutshi for helping with this translation.
2 For a reading of the film, Shirdi Sai Baba, and the shrine, see Elison et al. (2016). See also McLain (2016), who states that the films *Shirdi ke Sai Baba* and *Amar Akbar Anthony* promote a vision of the saint as unifying different religious traditions but, despite this, affirm the normativity of Hinduism.
3 This is a vast interdisciplinary topic coalescing over the past decade and a half. See, for example, Cresswell and Merriman (2016), Hancock and Srinivas (2018b), Urry (2007), and the journal, *Mobilities*.
4 See, for example, Beaumont and Baker (2011), Becker et al. (2014), Kong et al. (2013), Roberts and Roberts (2003), and Srinivas (2001).
5 See Clifford's (1997) discussion of routes in the context of cultures-in-motion, zones of contact, travel, and the relationship of anthropology to them. Hancock and Srinivas (2008) proposed that routes and circuits in religion refer to traditional forms of religious mobility such as pilgrimages, but also forms of transport and media in order to analyze how religion mediates and is mediated by infrastructural, technological, and material constituents of mobility.
6 In the context of South Asia, see Bigelow (2010), Keul (2021), Larios and Voix (2018), Srinivas (2018), Taneja (2017), and Waghorne (2004).
7 Bangalore's name was changed to Bengaluru in 2014. Since some of the original, baseline fieldwork in this chapter was conducted before that change and appears in publications as "Bangalore," I use Bangalore throughout the chapter's text for simplicity's sake and to prevent confusion; both names appear in the captions if the images were taken after 2014.
8 A fuller treatment of the arguments in this section is Srinivas (2008: 40–48, 228–233).
9 On religious memory and its transformation, see, for example, Halbwachs (1992), Hervieu-Léger (2000), Roberts and Roberts (1996), and Srinivas (2001).
10 On Sufi connections, see Kamath and Kher (1991) and Warren (2004). On Vaishnava and Vedantic links, see Narasimha Swami (1994a, 1994b, 1994c) and Sai Sharan Anand (1986). On Baba and Kabir, see Rigopoulos (1993) and White (1972). On Dattatreya, Nath, and Baba, see Rigopoulos (1998) and White (1972).
11 See also Sham Rao (1972).
12 On Upasni Maharaj, see Shepherd (1985: 83–142) and Narasimha Swami and Subbarao (1966). On Meher Baba, see Shepherd (1986: 248–297) for an annotated bibliography.
13 This overview is based on my interpretations of Narasimha Swami's life and writings: see Srinivas (1999a, 2002, 2008). For other recent interpretations, see Loar (2018), McLain (2016), and Warren (2004).

14 Srinivas (2008) is the only social science monograph analyzing both the Indian and transnational terrains of the Sathya Sai Baba movement based on research and fieldwork in India, eastern Africa, and the United States. Babb (1986) is an early case study of the Indian movement and two others; Klass (1991) is an early study of the Trinidadian case. The movement has been discussed in countries outside India more often since the mid-1990s (e.g., Kent 2004), chiefly in the South Asian diaspora, and has attracted scholars in Euro-American contexts interested in New Religions, New Religious movements, and New Age ideas.

15 This claim is sometimes reported differently; see Srinivas (2008: 60–61).

16 For example, McLain (2016) discusses temples in Chicago and Austin; Roberts and Roberts (2016) consider Shirdi Baba images as articulating Indian Ocean "spiritscapes," especially in Mauritius.

17 See Elison (2014) and Vicziany (2016) for analyses of Shirdi Sai Baba devotion in Bombay.

18 This overview of Rajamma's life is based largely on Ruhela (1992) and https://santhipriya.com/2018/06/divine-mother-shivamma-thayee.html, accessed May 31, 2020. S.P. Ruhela, Professor of Education at Jamia Millia Islamia University, Delhi, interviewed Shivamma Thayee for a number of hours in 1992 via an interpreter, K.S. Jayaraman. She apparently agreed to his publishing an account of her life.

19 Termite mounds are also associated with Nagas; see Rigopoulos (2014) on termite mounds in the context of Sathya Sai Baba.

20 The *murti* was removed in early 2021 and the mini-shrine demolished to build a house. A destitute women's home built by Shivamma Thayee adjacent to the temple was also closed in the last two to three years (Santhipriya [alias N.R. Jayaraman], personal communication, July 4, 2021).

21 This visit was on June 18, 2020.

22 This was on June 3, 2020.

23 See, for example, https://www.india.com/news/india/narendra-modi-in-shirdi-live-news-updates-sai-baba-samadhi-centenary-celebrations-pradhan-mantri-awas-yojana-3388150/, accessed September 14, 2020.

24 https://www.sify.com/news/shankaracharya-warns-pm-modi-ahead-of-his-shirdi-visit-news-topnews-oimoS3ibcahjg.html, accessed September 14, 2020 See also Vicziany (2016: 158–159).

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Interleaf B: "This Is *My* Shirdi"

Wayside Shrines and Sai Baba's Popular Omnipresence

Borayin Larios

In 2005, during one of my first rides in an auto-rickshaw in the city of Pune, the driver explained to me that the white-plastic saint that adorned the mini-shrine resting in front of his handlebar was "the Jesus Christ of India." The iconic *murti* (image) of the bearded fakir (ascetic) wearing his headscarf was garlanded with a string of marigolds, and in front of him, a fragrant incense-stick burned. On the windshield flanking the mini-shrine, one could read the words "Shraddha" (faith) and "Saburi" (patience) on multicolored neon glitter-stickers crowned by an equally polychrome "OM."

The rickshaw driver's Sai Baba shrine initiated my prolonged interest in the saint and urban displays of popular religion more generally.[1] As I began to study wayside shrines in Pune, I came across many dedicated to Sai Baba.[2] How devotees produce sacred places through the presence of a saint defies formal religion. Street shrines provide blessings and safe haven to those living at the margins of social stratification and attendant privilege, but also serve the processes of identity formation that allow less-advantaged persons to imagine themselves as part of localities and the nation at large (Lohokare 2016). Wayside shrines vary in size, form, and materials used to house Baba, but most share a common aesthetic. Baba is always the central presence through one of his photographs, a painting, or a lithograph based on one of his iconic images, a *murti,* or a combination of such materials. A *murti* is usually a replica of the larger-than-life-size marble "embodiment" located at Baba's *samadhi* shrine in Shirdi (see Roberts, this volume), here housed in a miniature temple that indexes the architectural aesthetics of Shirdi or a generic Hindu temple (cf. Elison 2018a). More elaborate shrines present Baba's *padukas* in the form of his footwear, footprints, or a depiction of his feet. Very often, the words *shraddha* and *saburi* flank his image as do an OM-symbol and a mantra such as *OM sai, OM sairam* or *saishyam, OM sainathaya namah,* or sometimes *digambara digambara shripada vallabha digambara* linking him to the Datta-sampradaya of Maharashtra.[3]

Many have attested to the *transreligious* and composite nature of Sai Baba from his early depictions as a living master who brought together Muslim and Hindu religious sensitivities, leading to his re-imagination as a symbol

of universal hope and tolerance after leaving his physical body.[4] Baba is seen to exemplify ecumenical Hinduism (Williams et al. 2012). At the same time, Baba's presence at wayside shrines refers to a widely acknowledged authority and charisma increasingly appropriated through what Romila Thapar (1997) calls *syndicated Hinduism*—that is, religious forms instrumentalized to fashion reactionary forces. In response, Baba's devotees push back against monolithic Hinduism through a discourse of inclusivism ironically used by Hindutva ideologues to position Hinduism as tolerant versus "oppressive" Islam and "dogmatic" Christianity.

In Pune, Sai Baba no longer seems to be understood as an ambiguous Muslim fakir or the universal saint of all religions, but rather as a saintly figure who represents the truth in all religions and who, by erasing labels, points to the "true spirit of Hinduism" and Indian secularism at large. Most shrines present Baba as an incarnation of Dattatreya, and some inflect a particularly Brahmanical sense that Jeremy Morse (2020) calls *shastric bhakti*, particularly in images juxtaposing Baba with Shripada Shrivallabha and Narsimha Sarasvati.[5] Such an identification is communicated by adding images from the Datta-*sampradaya* (religious lineage) or by incorporating Baba into Dattatreya iconography (see Deák, Rigopoulos, this volume). For example, one of the three heads of Dattatreya may be that of Baba and the other two of Maharashtrian saints as incarnations of the deity.[6] Also, many wayside shrines dedicated to Baba are erected next to Audumbar (cluster-fig) trees considered the sacred abode of Dattatreya (Rigopoulos 1998: 130, note 47) (Figure B.1).

One wayside shrine was erected a few years ago outside the construction site of "Sai Heritage," an upper middle class colony in Aundh, Pune (Figure B.2). According to the elderly caretaker Ramprasad who owned a grocery shop across the street, construction workers erected the humble shrine when the foundation stone was set, hoping that Baba would protect them from accidents. The shrine attracted neighbors, and Ramprasad found new clientele. He held that he had always felt a connection to Baba and he planned to visit Shirdi. But then Baba "called" in a dream, telling Ramprasad that "all his problems would disappear and that he would find God without ever having to leave his place."

Soon after the construction was finished and its workers left, Ramprasad began offering *seva* (service) to Baba by taking care of the now-abandoned shrine. Baba told him that "Shirdi is here. There is no place where I am not. Have faith in this" (pers. comm., 2011). For many years on the first Thursday of the month, Ramprasad offered *idlis* (steamed rice cakes) and chutney to anyone visiting the shrine, and in 2009, he and other elderly neighbors formed Sai Jyeshtha Nagarik Sangh—The Sai Senior Citizens Association. "Sai has now made this [place] his *darbar*" (royal court assembly), Ramprasad continued. "He performs his *lilas* [play] here, without much fancy. I take his *darshan* [vision, sight of the divine] every day at this very shrine. I close my eyes and I see him. This is *my* Shirdi." Baba's message

Figure B.1 Wayside Shrine in Pune, India, depicting from left to right: Akkalkot
        Svami, Dattatreya, and Sai Baba, 2016.

Source: Photo by Borayin Larios.

is simple and appeals to a broad following who hold that Baba will always
protect and comfort anyone who has faith in him.

Wayside shrines like Ramprasad's are pluri-semantic places that convey
a variety of meanings, practices, and motivations. Their shared practices,
overlapping images, and entangled discourses point to the complexity of
religious diversity in India (Larios and Voix 2018). More than anything,
wayside shrines are public places for social gathering as managed by neigh-
borhood associations known as *mitra mandals* (friends' circles). Micro-
politics determine the growth, expansion, and shift of religious places of
this sort, dependent upon immediate surroundings, supportive neigh-
bors, or the demographic dominance of a particular locality. As Madhura
Lohokare (2016: 167) has remarked, *mitra mandals* in Pune are commonly
male-dominated, and being "intensely patriotic, deeply religious, and
intent on educational and moral development and community service, these
Muslim/Hindu/Dalit collectives fight to better their standing amid intense
middle-class accusations of their neighborhoods' decadence and depravity."

Ramprasad's wayside shrine was modest rather than in any way majestic
or royal. Baba's wooden *mandir* (temple) was offered a coat of bright orange
paint to give it a new life, yet the space of the Sai Jyeshtha Nagarik Sangh
had no proper enclosure. The pavement of the sidewalk was partly broken
and dusty, and the shrine was sheltered under an unstable tent (Figure B.3)
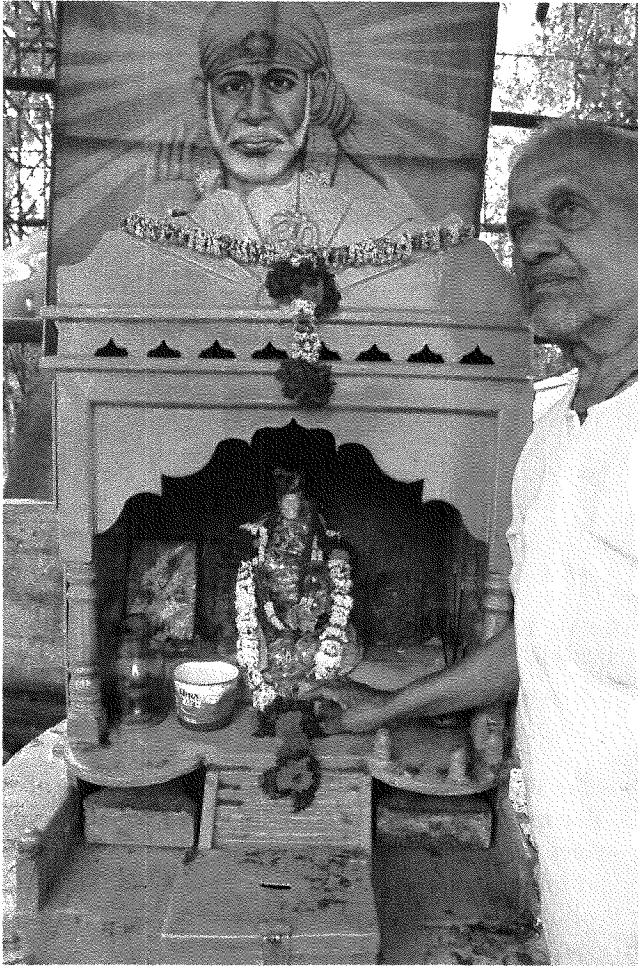
Figure B.2 Ramprasad and Sai Baba, Pune, India, 2011.

Source: Photo by Borayin Larios.

For Ramprasad and his friends, upkeep of their humble wayside shrine was a calling and duty (*dharma*). Ramprasad served Sai Baba in this and no other place because of the revelation that he could find Baba at this very spot as "Shirdi," precluding need to travel to receive the blessings or be in the presence of the saint. The shrine also gave Ramprasad a sense of ownership, even if it was collective. While Baba is for everyone everywhere, this particular manifestation was his/their Baba. Ramprasad's ties to his locality and neighbors were strengthened, as the shrine helped him to construct and/or affirm his identity as a Hindu and "ideal senior citizen of India." Ramprasad's shrine was a royal court (*darbar*) in which Baba receives

Figure B.3 View of the Sai Baba shrine from the other side of the street, Pune, India, 2011.

Source: Photo by Borayin Larios.

his subjects. The shrine was also where one could present grievances to be resolved. For many like Ramprasad, localized urban shrines present alternative spaces of justice. Baba mobilizes a number of affects resisting Hindu nationalism. I would argue that in Pune, wayside shrines paradoxically evoke the notion of Hindu majoritarianism while the saint's charisma largely resists the logic of communalism.

The study of urban religion through the lens of *spatial refabulation* illustrates the ways in which Baba's devotees reconfigure their environment by coloring it with both their own yearnings and imaginations. Such place-making brings our attention to how wayside shrines inscribe religiosity in cityscapes through material, performative, and embodied ways. Wayside shrines pop up like mushrooms both intentionally and unintentionally in composite, dense, multi-religious Indian cosmopolitan cities, even as they clash with local deep-seated caste politics and asymmetrical claims to space. Just before the publication of this volume, I found out that the Sai Baba shrine and Ramprasad had disappeared without traces. The shrine had been removed by the city's corporation for a road-widening project in which illegal structures were removed. As the pandemic hit India many suffered, especially the elderly, and thus some neighbors speculate that Ramprasad's health may also have been affected. My hope is that somewhere Ramprasad and Sai Baba are still together.

Notes

1 Relevant scholarship includes Elison (2014, 2018b), Srinivas (2015, 2016), and Waghorne (2004, 2016).
2 Our working definition of "wayside shrines" is that they are "sites that enshrine a worshipped object that is immediately adjacent to a public path, visible from it and accessible to any passerby" (Larios and Voix 2018). For examples outside of South Asia, see Monger (1997), Everett (2002), Henzel (1991), and Neelis (2014).
3 Deployment of mantras reinforces the notion that experiences at these shrines transcend ritual practices of *darshan* as primarily visual experience. Smells (incense, flowers, scented oils), sounds (bells, clapping, and devotional music), touching a *murti* of Baba or prostrating at his feet, and the taste of consecrated food (*prasad*) participate in sensorial encounters with the divine at wayside shrines.
4 See Rigopoulos (1993), Srinivas (2008), McLain (2011), and Deák, Roberts, and Roberts, this volume.
5 According to Jeremy Morse (2020: 137), *shastric bhakti* suggests "devotion to the figure of the guru with a thoroughgoing concern for ritual praxis and codes of conduct as found in the *dharmaśāstras*." Shripada Shrivallabha and Narsimha Sarasvati are the first two incarnations of Datta according to the *Gurucaritra* as a Marathi work written by Sarasvati Gangadhara in which their lives are described.
6 The other two heads may present any of the many incarnations of Dattatreya and lineages with spiritual connection with him. One of the most common trinities at wayside shrines I have encountered is Svami Samartha of Akkalkot, Gajanan Maharaj, and Sai Baba. Variations include Vasudevananda Sarasvati alias Tembe Svami, and Shankar Maharaj of Pune. On Datta's lineages, see Rigopoulos (1998).

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5 Kolis of Mumbai and Shirdi Sai Baba

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Kolis are one of three Indigenous groups in Mumbai, along with Agri and Bhandari. Twenty-two Koli communities are spread across thirty-nine Koliwada (villages).[2] Although the traditional occupation of Kolis has been fishing, this and associated jobs have been progressively lost since Indian independence, and Kolis face confiscation of their land and houses as pressure for urban development mounts. Shirdi Sai Baba's life of poverty and material discomfort makes him especially attractive to the "poor and oppressed" (Hardiman 2015: 369). This chapter, therefore, focuses on the increasingly dispossessed Kolis rather than the many Sai devotees of upwardly mobile or middle-class status in other cities (see Srinivas, Waghorne, in this volume).

In the last fifteen years, fieldwork has been undertaken in nine Koliwada (Figure 5.1), but analysis here relies on insights mainly from two Koli villages in Versova and Worli. Koliwada have become deeply politicized, with Hindu nationalist (Hindutva) political parties strongly present. In particular, the Shiv Sena has engaged many Koli politicians, although Kolis know that their small numbers prevent significant political influence beyond appealing to the wider electorate of Other Backward Classes.[3] Despite the politics, Koli religious practices have not adopted the hallmarks of Hindu nationalist ideologies. This chapter explores the complex religious beliefs and practices of Kolis, with special reference to Shirdi Sai Baba. The focus is on why Koli young men venerate Baba and how such practices compare with their equally strong devotions to Hanuman.

Multi-Dimensional Traditions of Koli Religion

Koli pilgrimages to various sacred sites—typically the *samadhi* (grave markers or memorial monuments) of saints or gurus and the temples and shrines of goddesses, gods, or spirits—are powerful indicators of Koli religious practices that tie them to wider cultures of Maharashtra (Feldhaus 2003: 235). Figure 5.1 shows the location of five main sites visited by Kolis. Pilgrimage to the Ekveera Temple near Lonavala is mainly a Koli affair because Ekveera is the goddess of all Koli communities in western India.
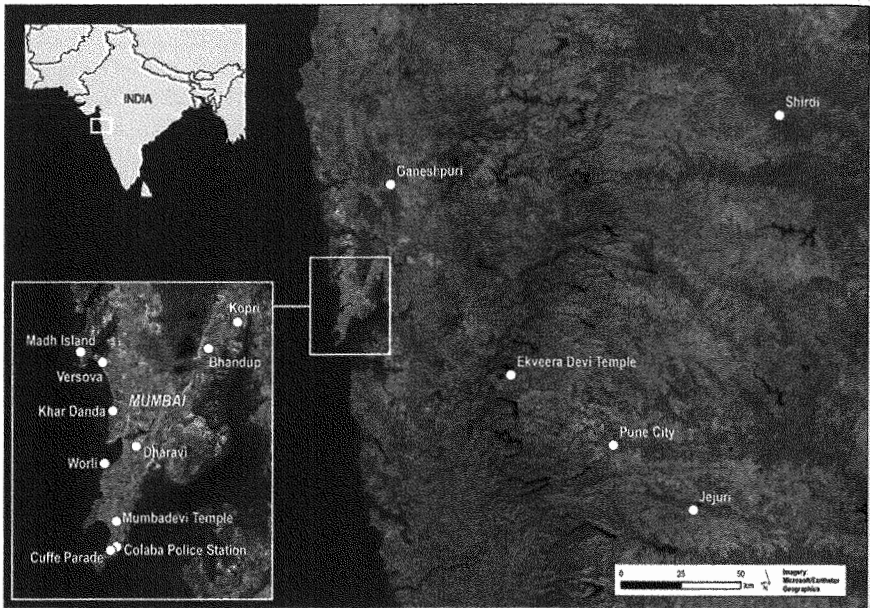
Figure 5.1 The location of nine Koliwada (Koli villages) in Mumbai, India, and the five most important pilgrimage sites for Mumbai's Kolis, 2022.

Source: Map by Marika Vicziany and Dr. Uri Gilad.

Thousands of Kolis visit this sacred site annually, but small groups of other castes and communities can also be seen (see Vicziany et al. 2017: 244). Koli participation in other pilgrimages ties them to popular Hinduism in western India, and in particular, *bhakti* (devotional) worship of saints and gurus (Dhere 2011; Sontheimer 1997; Stanley 1977). Shirdi has emerged as a pilgrimage site important to Koli youth who take *darshan* and see Sai Baba while the saint "sees" them in return.[4] But *darshan* is also much more than this, for it creates the same vibrant communication as touching, feeling, knowing, and having insight (Eck 2007: 6–10; cf. Vidal 2015). Indeed, *darshan* is very powerful, for it "establishes a special sort of intimacy ... which confers benefits by allowing worshippers to 'drink' the divine power with their eyes" (Babb 1981: 388).

Kolis continuously elaborate and re-invent their heritage (cf. Hobsbawm 1983). An earlier study of the Khadadevi Mandir (temple) in Colaba found a large variety of *murtis* (figural "embodiments") including Koli goddesses and water spirits, Hindu deities such as Ganesh and Sitalamata, contemporary leaders like Ambedkar, and manifestations of a special relationship between Kolis and Parsis (Vicziany and Bapat 2008: 194–199). Khadadevi is located on land co-opted by the Colaba Police and is typical of how other Koli sacred sites have been compromised by non-Koli communities

and institutions.[5] In other parts of Mumbai, religious practices bind Kolis to non-Koli residents. In the Koliwada of Worli, for example, an important Sufi *dargah* (grave) lies between the old Portuguese fort and the sea. During the Mumbai riots of December 1992, the Koli Muslim caretaker of the *dargah* was supported by dozens of Koli women who defended the site against a group of Shiv Sena youth attempting to burn it down (Vicziany et al. 2013).

Kolis venerating Shirdi Sai Baba were first encountered during interviews with twenty-seven Koli pilgrims to the Ekveera Temple in 2008.[6] We hoped to determine the extent to which Kolis still follow village goddesses (*gramdevi*) in addition to Ekveera Devi, the clan goddess (*kulvadevi*). Nearly half said that Koli mother goddesses were the main deities of their villages. Some said that Khandoba was the main deity along with Ekveera, while a few named only Khandoba.[7] One-third reported that incarnations of Shiva and Vishnu were the primary deities of their villages and a further nineteen percent said that their villages had no main deity. Many also told us that they had a personal deity or guru to whom they prayed each day: A third of Koli pilgrims interviewed named Shirdi Sai Baba, while five more identified other gurus including Swami Samartha, a nineteenth-century guru in the Dattatreya tradition (see Deák, Rigopoulos, this volume).

The Worli Koliwada is typical of Mumbai's Koli settlements because cottage-industry offshore fishing has increasingly contracted as the main source of employment, and less than forty percent of Koli households still depend on fishing. Traditional employment has suffered much more in Bhandup Koliwada and only employs two percent of households. In Dharavi Koliwada, fishing collapsed during the 1970s when urban development landlocked the area.[8] Large commercial fishing trawlers and related industrial practices, environmental degradation, and urban encroachment have all had detrimental effects on Koli communities. By contrast, small-scale fishing in Versova remains vibrant and commercially successful, where about 4000 Koli households generate some Rs. 400 crores (US$54.3 million) annually from fishing and related employment (Lewis 2017). Machimar Nagar, the Koliwada on Cuffe Parade, Colaba, is less commercially successful, but local leaders report that about seventy percent of men and women are still involved in fishing, a statement substantiated by a report by the Mumbai Transformation Support Unit (2015).[9]

The commercial success of Versova and Machimar Nagar (Figure 5.1) depends on traditional boats as well as diesel-powered vessels and refrigeration for longer expeditions out to sea. Yet sustaining the remnants of local fishing is a never-ending struggle exacerbated by new marketing networks developed by non-Koli merchants. Massive infrastructure developments such as the western coastal road and realization of an immense Shivaji *murti* also now threaten residential land and fish breeding grounds on which the livelihoods of Kolis in Versova and Machimar Nagar depend.[10]

Koli Youth and Shirdi Sai Baba

Initial inquiries about Koli worship of the complex and ambiguous guru, Shirdi Sai Baba, brought simple answers: All Kolis revere Shakti as the driving energy of Koli goddesses, while Shiva is venerated as the godhead of the Hindu pantheon. So, how does Shirdi Sai Baba fit into such a "Shakti and Shiva" paradigm?

Young Koli men are enthusiastic devotees of Baba. Their devotion manifests itself most dramatically when they undertake pilgrimage or *pada yatra* (foot procession) to Shirdi for the annual celebration of Guru Purnima.[11] Shirdi is some 250 km from Koli communities in Mumbai, and an arduous journey of at least fourteen days is required for the round trip. By the time devotees return from their long journey, their feet are badly swollen and covered with blisters. Recovery takes days, but sacrifices are hallmarks of a pilgrim's devotion, and as a related sacrifice, those with jobs give up their holidays and sick-leave entitlements to undertake this annual journey. Such rigors permit a valued "exteriorized mysticism" outside of mundane circumstances (Turner and Turner 1978: 5, 7). The decision to undertake a pilgrimage requires setting aside family obligations, but in ways that distinguish people from their communities through higher moral purpose admired by the community. Walking to Shirdi has its own rituals yet is personally liberating for pilgrims, as it removes the "obligatoriness of a life embedded in social structure" (ibid.: 8).

During the walk to Shirdi, youths meditate on the significance of Sai Baba and their own lives by repeatedly calling out his name. In 2020, Guru Purnima fell on July 5th as the COVID-19 pandemic raged. The annual pilgrimage was not possible owing to an extended lockdown by the Maharashtrian government while the Mumbai Municipal Corporation sealed off 745 containment zones in the city, including the Worli Koliwada (Mumbailive 2020). There was no time to organize alternative events to celebrate Sai Baba in the Koliwada, but many families conducted private rituals at home.

In normal years, pilgrims from the Versova Koliwada come together from many neighborhoods. New but short-lived group identities are forged as young men break from the rhythms of everyday life in adoration of their virtuous guru. Nothing but Sai Baba binds them together. Groups 100 strong distinguish themselves by wearing "festival uniforms" of color-coded shirts and pants to promote the idea that all participants are equal.[12] Color-coding also helps groups to find their overnight camping grounds. Mundane matters of funding, food, accommodation, and healthcare are left to a manager who solicits donations of cash and kind to cover costs. A van carrying food, water, and chairs typically arrives at the next overnight stop to prepare for the group's evening rest. Accompanying the pilgrims are sports utility vehicles rigged with loudspeakers so that Koli songs in praise of Baba can be heard by all devotees. Such singing begins when brass bands accompany pilgrims to the Koliwada's perimeter to begin pilgrimage (Figure 5.2). Women
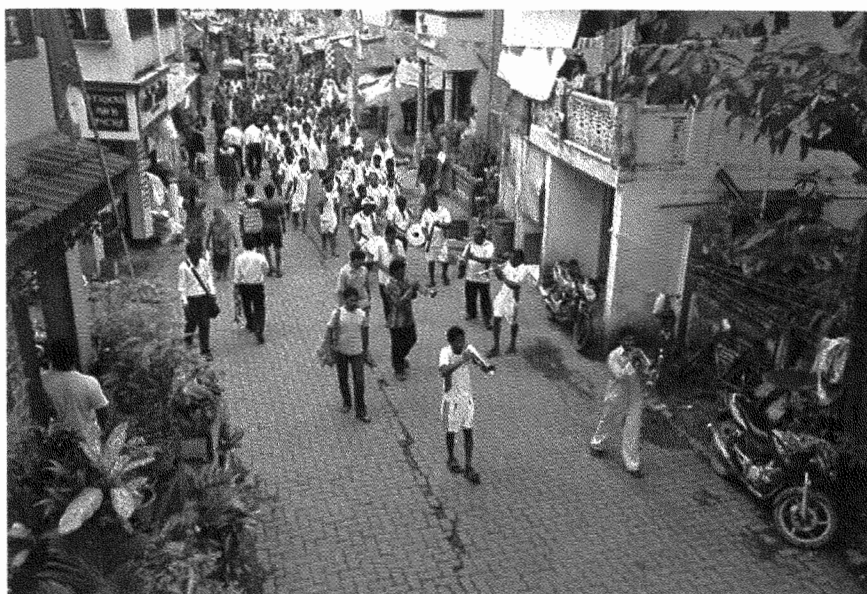
Figure 5.2 Koli brass band accompanying pilgrims to the outskirts of Versova
      Koliwada, Mumbai, India, as they leave for Shirdi, 2021.

Source: Photograph by Mohit Ramle.

follow, carrying a *murti* of Sai Baba under a parasol as an emblem of the
Universal King-God (Figure 5.3).[13] Living together for two weeks, sharing
the experiences of pilgrimage, and singing familiar tunes in praise of the
guru bring Kolis from different neighborhoods and the Koliwada together
as "Kolis" just as *Varkaris* on pilgrimage to Jejuri helped to define the
meaning of "Maharahstra" (Karve 1962: 22).

One of the most popular songs to Sai Baba began is a *bhajan* (devotional
ode) to honor Ekveera Devi. The melody remains but lyrics now reflect
devotion to Baba. Koli traditions are not frozen in time and borrowing from
poems honoring the Koli Mother Goddess suggests the ease with which
Kolis move between what are understood as earlier, "traditional" rituals to
contemporary expressions. Other songs have been written for the guru by
Koli and non-Koli composers and singers who are devotees of Sai Baba.[14]
Perhaps the most popular *bhajans* are those composed and sung by Jagdish
Patil.[15] One song with 250,000 viewings on YouTube speaks of boys and
girls dancing to the tune of the band and how the merriment brings villag-
ers together for launching the pilgrimage.[16] Another song with 9.6 million
viewings sings to the "Glory of Sai," and how devotees "thirst for your
darshan."[17]

Through singing, dancing, waving flags, and assuring the saint's presence
through photos respectfully carried to Shirdi on palanquins, Kolis express

Figure 5.3 Women follow the brass band to the outskirts of Versova Koliwada, Mumbai, India, 2021.

Source: Photograph by Mohit Ramle.

their joyous love for their guru. The pleasures of praising Baba as part of pilgrims' mystical experiences are interspersed with leisure activities which include visiting popular tourist sites on the return journey to Mumbai. "Play and solemnity" are equally important and contribute to long-lived memories of pilgrimages as momentous and transformative occasions (Turner and Turner 1978: 37).

In contrast to young people, Koli elders continue to worship mainly Koli deities rather than Baba. In Versova, for example, the mother goddess is Hingladevi, to whom daily and special sacrifices are offered. The dominance of Koli youth in pilgrimages to Shirdi reflects a shift in devotional practices and beliefs. Sai Baba became a major influence among Koli young adults after many saw the 1977 Bollywood movie *Shirdi ke Sai Baba* (see Loar, Srinivas, this volume).[18] The film, still very popular, tells a story of family struggles with an incurably sick son who recovers after pilgrimage to

Shirdi. The story juxtaposes the power of praying to Sai Baba and visiting his shrine with the failed Western bio-medical expertise of the boy's father (a doctor) and the hospitals that they visited.[19] The decision to seek Baba's intervention is made by the son who awakens from a coma and asks to be taken to Shirdi. Perhaps this conscious choice by a young boy encourages Koli youth viewing the movie to be agents of their own destinies.

According to the plot explained on the IMBd website (Rajoo n.d.), Baba's powers were heightened by his communion with India's previous healers and religious teachers including Vithoba, Bhagwan Shri Krishna, and Bhagwan Shri Shiv. Inter-religious faith is the central feature in an account which praises "this new Messiah, one whom the Muslims called 'Allah Sai,' Christians 'Jesus Sai,' Sikhs 'Nanak Sai,' and Hindus 'Bhola Sai.' Sai could recite scriptures from all the Holy books, whether it was the Holy Quran, the Holy Bible, the Holy Granth Sahib, or the Holy Geeta, and always blessed Hindus with 'Allah bless you,' and Muslims with 'Krishna bless you'" (ibid.).

Rajoo's words reflect the inclusive views that Kolis have of Baba. Their devotion and Shirdi pilgrimage resonate with 700-year-old traditions of the *bhakti* movement in Maharashtra. In its essence, the popular, vernacular, largely low-caste *bhakti* movement ignores the sectarian and social divisions of India and demands that pilgrims undertake their devotional journeys without hatred in their hearts (Youngblood 2003: 291). More generally, cosmopolitan Mumbai is known by millions for its inclusive cultures and cross-participation in religious rituals. Again, the film industry has contributed to that perception in popular movies such as *Amar Akbar Anthony* that was also released in 1977 and praises the inter-religious tolerance taught by Sai Baba (Elison 2014: 176–180; Elison et al. 2016).

A contemporary example of the inner steel that Sai Baba inspires is the story of how he helped Kolis in Machhimar Nagar Koliwada (Cuffe Parade) to avoid eviction. In the 1980s, dislocated Kolis were protesting against the Collector of Mumbai who repeatedly bulldozed their houses to throw them off reclaimed land. They were about to abandon their *morchas* (protests) when Sai Baba appeared in a dream and told Damodar Tandel (a Koli leader) to keep up the struggle and to remember him by "creating a space for him" in the village. A derelict temple was rededicated to Sai and renovated (Figure 5.4), a decision guided by Sai whose photograph was placed on suitable ground by Damodar. The latter often dreamt of Sai who, in December 2012, warned him that he would experience "great pain." Damodar was savagely beaten by thugs hired by the owners of commercial trawlers and spent seven weeks in hospital prior to my interview. But he did not die for his work was not yet finished.[20] Sai's protection does not apply to all, however. During his lifetime, he often refused to intervene, saying that the time for dying had arrived for some who sought his help (Hardiman 2015: 373).

The appeal of Sai Baba stems not only from his extraordinary deeds but also his life as a living human being, which gives him an approachable and compassionate intimacy in contrast to Koli water spirits (*sat asaaras*) who
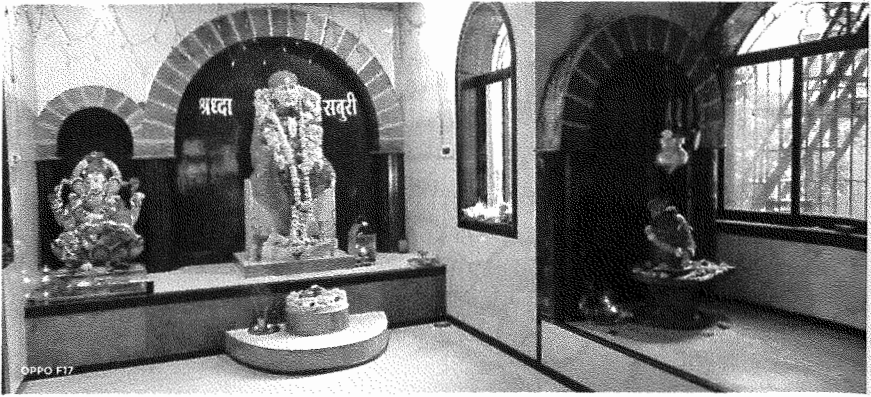
Figure 5.4 Sai Baba temple in Machhimar Nagar Koliwada, Cuffe Parade, Mumbai, India, 2021. Ganesh sits on Sai's right and on his left is an alcove with a Shiva lingam.

Source: Photograph by Kailash Tandel.

become angered by human frailties. Some Kolis believe that the guru himself seeks his disciple or devotee. In being chosen by Baba, many Kolis feel empowered to take on the burdens of daily life with greater strength. Others are more inclined to the portrait of Sai Baba in the Bollywood movie for they, as humble devotees, chose Sai Baba among all the competing gurus that India offers.

Pilgrimage to Shirdi has become an increasingly elaborate affair, now more significant than older pilgrimages to saints and gods in Jejuri, Pandharpur, the *samadhi* of Swami Nityanand Samadhi (d.1961) at Ganeshpuri, and the Shiva site of Tungareshwar, some 20 km south-west of Ganeshpuri (Figure 5.1). The most favored Koli site for Guru Purnima used to be Ganeshpuri, a distance of some 80 km north of the Versova Koliwada. Walking to Shirdi from Versova is much more challenging, for it is 250 km away and is also more than double the distance to the Ekveera temple in Lonavla, the site of the temple for the Koli clan goddess. The more lengthy and arduous the pilgrimage, the more Koli youth see the challenges of the voyage as a test of their devotion. Their steely determination to finish the return trip to Shirdi fortifies them to face the pressures of life in their Koliwada.

On village, home, and personal levels, Sai Baba has assumed an importance equal to other revered religious teachers and deities, and his portraits share sacred space with other gods and gurus as in Andheri with its Sai Datta, Sai Ganesh, and Hanuman Sai temples. In village temples and homes of wealthier Koli, shrines to Baba include *murtis* of him. In Versova Koliwada, there is no specific temple to Sai Baba, but a small *murti* has been placed in front of the Shiva lingam in the Ram temple (Figure 5.5).[21] The marble "embodiment" of Baba appears on a shelf to the right of *murtis* of Ganesha, Gauri-Parvarti, and Khandoba.[22]

Figure 5.5 Interior of the Sri Ram Temple Versova Koliwada showing a Shiva
    lingam in the foreground and Sai Baba to the far right of the mantle
    behind the lamp, 2021.

Source: Photograph by Mohit Ramle.

A Sai Ganesh temple that Kolis visit stands near the entrance to the
Versova Koliwada. It registers Kolis' bringing separate religious traditions
together in one place. By contrast, Worli Koliwada has four Sai Baba tem-
ples dedicated to him because following Baba has become so popular that
donors compete to provide construction funds.[23] Over time, Sai Baba has
increasingly become regarded as a god by Kolis, and especially Koli youth.
Like Ganesh, Baba is understood as a "remover of all obstacles." When
asked what this meant, an interlocutor referred to Sai Baba's *Vachans* or
promises. In the eighth *Vachan* that the Kolis use as their reference point,

Baba promises to "always bear your burdens for this is not a false promise."
This is a compelling commitment, given the multiple pressures faced by Kolis.

Sai Baba's Vachans translated from Marathi into English[24]

1 That person whose feet touch Shirdi, all his obstacles will cease.
2 Whoever climbs the steps of my resting place, all his troubles will be
   removed.
3 Even if I leave my body, I will still rush to rescue my devotees.
4 My samadhi will fulfill your wishes so your faith remains strong.
5 I am always alive, this is the truth; experience it for yourself.
6 Show me one person who has come to me and gone away empty handed.
7 Whoever prays to me with whatever emotional depths will be rewarded
   by my blessings.
8 I will always bear your burdens for this is not a false promise.
9 Know that there is refuge for everyone who comes here.
10 The one who has submitted to me, become one with me in body, speech,
   mind, to them I will always remain indebted.
11 Sai says that THAT ONE becomes immeasurably wealthy, THAT ONE
   is transformed at my feet.

Despite the second line in this list of powerful promises, taking *darshan*
with Sai Baba is not only limited to "climbing the steps of Baba's resting
place" but also applies to other images of him. As stated in one of the most
important texts about Sai Baba, the *Shri Sai Satcharita*, "And now, listen
carefully … to the narration of how the *darshan* of his mere photograph is
the same as his actual *darshan*" (cited in Elison 2014: 182).

   Private shrines in Koli homes often include many different kinds of
images of Sai Baba together with *murtis* of other gods, goddesses, water spir-
its, and the spirits of drowned fishermen (*veer*). In well-to-do Koli homes,
a *murti* of Sai Baba is likely to be based upon the saint's embodiment in
Shirdi (Figure 5.6; see Introduction, Roberts this volume). More typically in
less-affluent homes, a small metal icon presenting Baba's face is juxtaposed
with others venerating Ganesh and other deities. An even more widespread
practice is to have the presence of Sai in the home, workplace, or on the
dashboard of a car embodied in a framed poster of his image. Words prais-
ing Baba also evoke the guru. Some Koli youth paint Baba's name on their
boats and motorbikes. Bringing his image into the routine of daily life is
also a haptic means of making the saint's blessings intimate. But the great-
est intimacy with the guru is achieved when Koli youth tattoo their arms
and legs to bring Sai Baba's blessings to their every action (Figure 5.7).[25]
Adoring Sai Baba in this way allows *darshan* to flood the devotee's body
through his skin. The etched image of the guru's name thus becomes a per-
manent presence. Praising Sai Baba aloud is an important part of the tattoo
process. One video recording shows an artist covering the words "Sai Baba"

Figure 5.6 A shrine to Shirdi Sai Baba in the home of a well-to-do family in the Versova Koliwada, Mumbai, India, 2021. Next to the murti of Sai is a small white shrine housing Ganesh and other gods and goddesses favored by this family.

Source: Photograph by Mohit Ramle.

just inscribed on a devotee's skin; as he pulls away the cloth, he and the customer call out to Sai.

In the village of Versova, Thursday is set aside to remember and invoke Sai Baba. On Thursdays, "the day of the guru," devotees typically avoid eating fish, the favorite food of Kolis.[26] Friends and family members visit and offer *puja* and *aarti* before Baba's images. This day has been chosen because it coincides with celebrating the life of Guru Dattatreya. Worshipping more than one great teacher, leader, god, or goddess on a single day is a common practice in Koliwada. Doing so brings together disparate neighborhoods and families by emphasizing what they share rather than their differences. Such feelings strengthen Koli identities at a time when they are struggling with so many encroachments on their lives and peace of mind.

For Kolis, Sai means God. They have given Sai Baba many other names and titles such as Sai Krupa, "in God's grace," and Sai Chayya, "in God's Shadow," which reflect the shift in Sai Baba's stature from guru or saint to God. The transition is even more obvious through other names such as Sai Mauli or Sai Ekveera. *Mauli* means Mother, but these appellations have much deeper connotations, for they speak to Koli veneration of Mother Nature, Earth Mother, the Mother who nurtures the universe, the Mother Goddess. All these names therefore describe the elevated position of Sai Baba among Koli devotees who look to him for mother-like love, protection, and sustenance. Referring to Sai Baba as Sai Ekveera immediately links him to Ekveera Devi, the Koli clan's main goddess. Nikhil Sudku's

Figure 5.7 The body tattoo reads "Sai Ram," 2021.

Source: Photograph by Mohit Ramle.

image of Sai Ekveera embodies the enhanced power of *darshan* through the double-deity's third-seeing eye of enlightenment (Figure 5.8).

Koli Youth and Hanuman

Hanuman is often associated with gyms and wrestling houses among the Backward Classes, and he has emerged as an important figure of veneration among Koli youth. He is a gigantic presence in the lives of many Indians who delight in his athleticism, agility, and speed—virtues which gave him the status of the rescuing superhero in the Ramayana, one of India's most
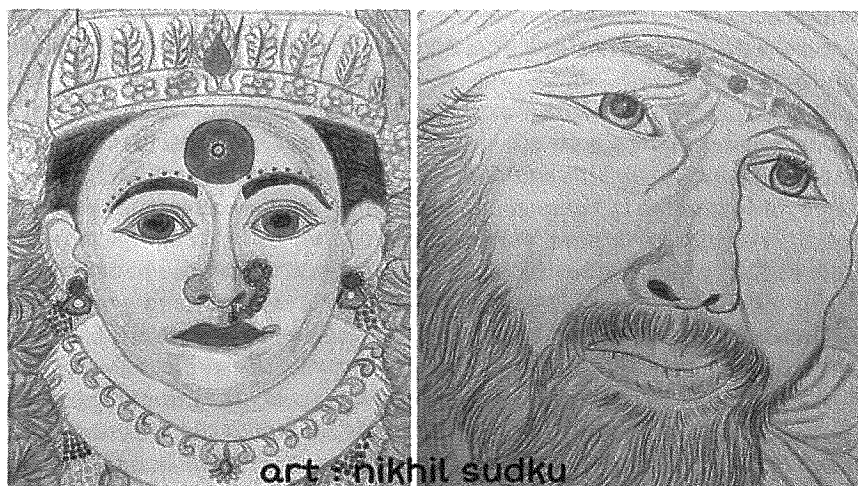
Figure 5.8 Sai Ekveera drawing by Nikhil Sudku, Theronda, Alibaug, Maharashtra, India, 2021.

Source: Photograph by Mohit Ramle.

beloved epics (Lutgendorf 2007). Hanuman's physicality makes him very human and easy to approach by his devotees, but equally important are his virtues as a devoted servant of the Hindu God Ram. As Joseph Alter explains, the heroic strength of Hanuman (*shakti* [energy] combined with *bal* [strength]) is invigorated by his devotional adoration of (*bhakti*) Ram: "The more perfect his *bhakti*, the greater his strength; the more fabulous his strength the greater the magnitude of his *bhakti*" (Alter 1992: Chapter 9). Hanuman's "fabulous strength" is an aspiration for male Koli youths who also seek strength of character and purpose.

Hanuman's agile, muscular body makes him the idol of Koli body-builders and gymnasts, while his devotion to Ram is a model for Koli youth as an exemplar of how to live one's life. Hanuman not only bears guru status but also allows Koli youth to transfer such devotion to their personal, human guru—Sai Baba for example. In this manner, despite outward contrasts between worshipping an exuberant superhero like Hanuman and the meditative Sai Baba, the act of devotion (*bhakti*) allows Kolis to be ardent followers of both.

Physical strength and mental endurance in wider Indian cultures are based on celibacy. Hanuman, just like Sai Baba, is a lifelong celibate or *brahamacharya*. Stories of Hanuman's birth and that of his son Matsyagarbha are different versions of immaculate conception: Hanuman came into this world through one of the ears of his mother while his son was born of a fish that swallowed Hanuman's fertile sweat (Alter 1992). Clearly, Hanuman does not lack virility, but through chastity, he redirects such force to

enhance his *shakti* and *bhakti*. In the culture of Indian wrestling, the three virtues of physical strength, *shakti,* and *bhakti* are intertwined and mutually reinforcing.

Koli youth have their own explanations for Hanuman's traits. His status as *brahamacharya* is so taken for granted that the immaculate conceptions of Hanuman and his son do not feature in their stories. Their favorite name for Hanuman is *Vajrangbali*, with *Vajra,* "diamond shaped," and *ang,* "body," suggesting "a powerful body that cannot be broken."[27] Such is the ideal of Koli youth. Nor can Koli spirits or mental endurance be broken.

Like other devotees of Hanuman, Koli youths avidly attend gyms in the Koliwada that are typically adjacent to Hanuman temples. Worli has three such temples, one of which is situated in the ruins of the old Portuguese Fort. In the adjacent gym, young men practice traditional exercises (*akhada, kusti, namaskars, baithaks*) and modern ones like push-ups, and they give each other massages with oil (e.g. *Anjaneya/Hanuman taila)* and oil therapy *(chikitsa).*[28] Koli idolization of Hanuman is an inversion of the more common, high-caste attitude that regards him as a low-level member of the Hindu pantheon best suited to the low castes.[29] In this, Kolis share values with Backward Classes such as Bangalore's Tigala, whose young men are equally enamored with Hanuman and the virtues of wrestling and body-building as among the less ferocious aspects of martial arts of northern and southern India (Srinivas 2001). Despite diverging from high-caste orthodoxy by venerating Hanuman, other aspects of Kolis working out in gyms reinforce pan-Indian beliefs in the need to conserve blood and semen to gain physical and intellectual power.

In Versova, Hanuman is honored every Saturday by meditation and fasting. His god-like status has been confirmed in recent times by the renaming of the Versova Hanuman temple as the Shri Ram Temple, as Hanuman is recognized as an avatar of Ram. From an outsider's perspective, renaming a local temple to honor Shri Ram resonates with the Hindu nationalist agenda to build a temple to Ram at Ayodhya in northern India, but such a conclusion is unwarranted. Instead, Koli youths' attachment to Hanuman as an incarnation of Lord Ram is devoid of Hindu nationalist content (cf. Lutgendorf 2007: 259). Every May, Koli enthusiasm for physical endurance is celebrated with the annual wrestling competition (*Kushti*) in the Madh Island Koliwada.[30] This festival coincides with the popular festival honoring the birthday of Ganesh.

Women also visit Hanuman temples to offer prayers and gifts, but they depend on men to approach the idol, for they can never enter the inner sanctum because as *Bal Brahmachari*, Hanuman is the god of sexual abstinence.[31] Along with many other Hindus (Lutgendorf 2007: 258, 328), Kolis see the lifelong celibacy of Hanuman as the source of his extraordinary strength, and women and wives would detract from that. On marriage, a young man's energy is dissipated by the sexual demands of his wife, so extreme exercises and wrestling are not recommended for married youth. Such perceptions

give Koli youth a rationale for taking pride in their unmarried status. Hanuman also appeals to Koli youth because of his other qualities such as his empathy. He is not forbidding, has a sense of humor, and honors mothers and women. He is not aggressively male, yet in the eyes of young Koli men, he is the quintessential male God. Kolis speak of his feats in Lanka as an example of physical prowess and the burning of Lanka as a metaphor for his role in destroying evil.[32]

In Koli youth culture of contemporary Mumbai, veneration of Hanuman and Shirdi Sai Baba make comfortable companions, for both cultural icons have been slowly transforming into gods. Their humanism, appeal to multiple social and religious traditions, celibacy and value orientations are closely aligned. Youth devotees of Sai Baba and Hanuman subject themselves to extreme tests of endurance through the pilgrimage to Shirdi in the former case and gym work in the latter.[33] These connections are reflected in the spatial geographies of the Koliwada, where it is not uncommon to have a Sai Baba shrine adjacent to a Hanuman temple.

Envoi

This chapter maps the broad contours of religious beliefs and practices of Koli youth. Might the masculine youth culture that defines veneration of Shirdi Sai Baba and Hanuman in Mumbai's Koliwada reflect deeper issues and ambivalences that are transforming religious practices among them?

First, Koliwada are experiencing unrelenting pressure from development projects that directly impinge on their sustainability. The deepening crisis in coastal fishing has been exacerbated by anxieties from the COVID-19 pandemic. In the first half of 2020, India's GDP contracted by twenty-nine percent, raising fears of long-term employment prospects for everyone. During this time, trust between Koli communities and the Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai reached a new low, with many Koliwada leaders voicing suspicion of an agenda to grab control of Koliwada lands to expedite construction of a coastal road. In an atmosphere of contested definitions of what constitutes desirable "urban development," the physical and mental prowess of Koli youth proves more important than ever. One is reminded of how the loss of lands and livelihoods of Backward Classes in an ever expanding Bangalore compelled men to engage in ritual demonstrations of physical strength and celibacy as a way of remembering their past importance, and in doing so, retrieve their significance in the ritual, social, and political life of the city today (Srinivas 2001).

Pressures to beautify Mumbai also directly impact Koli youth. Plans to renovate the old Portuguese Fort in the Worli Koliwada target attracting tourists, and this adds to feelings of insecurity about access to the fort, the Hanuman temple there, and its gym. However, such plans need not constitute a threat provided that Mumbai authorities are willing to solicit the opinions of local Kolis. They might model their approaches on the kind of

open-air museum spaces that characterized the development of Fort Kochi as a tourist-heritage site that brings together the history of the area with the contemporary needs of residents. Involvement of the Archaeological Survey of India may provide the Worli Koliwada an opportunity to avoid the mistakes that have often resulted from the Mumbai Municipal Corporation pushing ahead with its concept of "development."[34]

Challenges to masculinity are emerging within Koli communities. During the last decade, a growing trend among educated Koli women has been to marry non-Koli men. In resisting family preferences for Koli partners and arranged marriages, some educated women have migrated long distances, even to Australia. We have not studied relationships between Koli youth and Koli women, although Mother Goddess worship and the long traditions of matriliny in Koli society suggest that male aggression is not prevalent (cf. Lohokare 2016).[35] Within this ambivalent context, might the attachment of Koli youth to Hanuman and Shirdi Sai Baba be interpreted as young men trying to assert or reinforce their masculinity by bonding together in popular worship that expresses male prowess, valor, and virtue through the labors of *pada yatra,* gym work, and celibacy?

The roots of the current land-fishing crisis in Mumbai's Koliwada date from the 1970s when, coincidentally, *Shirdi ke Sai Baba* became a hugely popular movie. At the time, Mumbai experienced its first intensive wave of economic restructuring with the closing of the cotton textile mills that had defined the city's life from the mid-nineteenth century (D'Monte 2002). The 1970s saw systematic destruction of an independent working-class labor movement (Prakash 2010), the consolidation of the power of the Shiv Sena, and its control of labor unions (Hansen 2001). Since the 1970s, authoritarian display of Nehruvian socialism, especially during Indira Gandhi's "Emergency," has increasingly been replaced by an elite-driven neo-liberalism keen to make Mumbai more like Shanghai (Chief Minister's Task Force 2004; McKinsey and Company 2003). That modernization program not only ignores Koli aspirations for support of their livelihoods and dwindling assets but also has given builders, land developers, state-private financiers, and local authorities the power to re-define the Koliwada of Mumbai as "slums" in order to seize some of Asia's most valuable real estate. So far, the government's program to "beautify" Mumbai has taken precedence over the expressed needs of Indigenous Kolis.

In the turmoil of Mumbai's unprecedented development, the devotion of Koli youth to the exemplary life and deeds of Shirdi Sai Baba strengthens their physical endurance while calming their spirits. The exuberant Hanuman is a worthy companion to the contemplative Sai Baba in their struggles. Both Baba and Hanuman may well emerge not merely as new gods of Kolis but new gods of optimism at a time when this increasingly marginalized community takes its fight against the loss of their fishing, their lands, their water rights, and their jobs to new levels of everyday resistance (Vicziany et al. 2022).

Notes

1 I wish to thank Anusha Kersarkar-Gavankar (PhD researcher, IITB Monash Research Academy, Mumbai) for her indispensable assistance in collecting data during the COVID-19 pandemic. Thanks to Antonio Rigopoulos for invaluable comments on this chapter. Without the generosity of Koli and Agri interviewees, the Monash Koli Research Project would not have been possible. I am especially grateful to the support given to me by Mohit Ramle (Versova), the Worlikar family (Worli), Kailash Tandel (Machimar Nagar Koliwada and PhD researcher, IITB Monash Research Academy Mumbai), Nikhil Sudku (artist, Alibaug), and Dr Uri Gilad (GPS specialist, Brisbane, Australia).

2 The Government of India lists seven Koli subgroups as Scheduled Tribes and another fifteen as Backward Classes in Maharashtra (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, April 9, 2018; National Commission of Backward Classes, updated June 16, 2011).

3 Interview with Ramkrishna Keni, Dharavi Koliwada, January 12, 2013. "Backwardness" is defined by perceived educational and social disadvantages (Mendelsohn and Vicziany 1998: 21, 133, 234, 236, 238). Mumbai's Kolis do not regard themselves as "Backward," despite fifteen Koli groups being officially labelled as such.

4 In Koli culture, "youth" means male members of the community aged from about fifteen to fifty-five.

5 Vicziany and Bapat (2009); Vicziany et al. (2013). The Kolis now demand that management of the Mumbadevi temple be granted to them as the temple is part of their heritage.

6 Sanjay Ranade, a member of Monash University's Koli Research Project, conducted these interviews outside the Ekveera Temple, Lonavala, over three days in September 2009. Thirty-seven pilgrims were interviewed, the majority Kolis, Agris, and Bhandaris.

7 Khandoba, a manifestation of Shiva, is the focus of the famous annual pilgrimage by devotees to Jejuri. He fits comfortably into the Koli pantheon because he combines Shaiva and Vaishnava traditions in addition to straddling the Hindu-Muslim divide as exemplified by one of his five wives being a Muslim.

8 Interviews in Mumbai: V Worlikar, Worli Koliwada, January 18, 2013; N Pawar, Bhandup Koliwada, February 10, 2017; R. Keni, Dharavi Koliwada, January 12, 2013.

9 Cuffe Parade connects the Oberoi and Taj President hotels in Mumbai; it runs between the central business district of Colaba and the foreshore. Interview with the late Damodar Tandel, Machimar Nagar Koliwada, Cuffe Parade, January 30, 2013.

10 At 212 m tall, the Shivaji *murti* will be one of the world's tallest devotional sculptures. It is expected to attract some 10,000 tourists a day (India Infra Hub Staff, 2021).

11 "This festival falls on the full moon day in the month of Asadh (July-August). On this day, sacred to the memory of sage Vyasa, Hindus honor and worship their teachers" (Rigopoulos 2020: 64, note 20).

12 Interviews with Mohit Ramle, Versova Koliwada, June 12, 2020; July 4, 2020.

13 The parasol is one of the most enduring symbols of kingship in South Asia and was widely used in religious architecture and iconography as a symbol of Chakravartin, the Universal King or God. See Khare (1978: 683–689) and Snodgrass (1992: 96, 324–326).

14 Interviews with Mohit Ramle, Versova Koliwada, June 19, 2020; July 5, 2020.

15 Patil is an Agri, not a Koli, but the relationship between these two groups is very close because they are both Indigenous, traditional fishers, and speak closely related Marathi dialects.

16 Patil (n.d.a), the song was posted on YouTube on December 21, 2017, by Bhavesh Madhavi: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PFhoQmVAKXY.

17 Patil (n.d.b), a performance was posted to YouTube on April 28, 2012, courtesy of the Ultra Bhakti Company that specializes in popularizing religious folk songs: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uMzPpT96Q5E.

18 Interview with Mohit Ramle, June 18, 2020.

19 The plot speaks to David Hardiman's argument (2015: 361–362, 377) that Sai Baba's medical miracles belonged to older healing traditions which, during the Indian nationalist movement, morphed into a pan-Indian belief that spirituality trumped science.

20 Interview with Damodar Tandel, January 30, 2013. Kolis have long campaigned against commercial trawlers for encroaching on coastal waters, over-fishing, and destroying their livelihoods. Tandel was in the forefront of these struggles and so at great personal risk.

21 Interview with Mohit Ramle, November 24, 2020.

22 The Sai image is smaller than the others because it is the latest addition and not much space was left; the arrangement does not reflect any hierarchy of beliefs.

23 One cynical Koli said that the passion for building so many temples, including those to Sai Baba, is just another example of how the Koliwada are driven by greed and materialism. Personal communication from Mumbai, December, 3, 2020.

24 The *Vachans* were supplied by Mohit Ramle and translated by Anusha Kersarkar-Gavankar (PhD researcher, IITB Monash Research Academy), November 25, 2020. Baba's *Vachans* are often worded and/or translated differently; see Roberts and Roberts, this volume.

25 The go-to tattooist for Versova youths has Koli-Agri parents.

26 Interview with Mohit Ramle, December 16, 2020.

27 Interview with Mohit Ramle, December 16, 2020.

28 Interview with A. Worlikar, Worli Koliwada, December 16, 2020.

29 Lutgendorf (1994: 233–234) explains how militarization of Hanuman by Hindutva ideologues does not automatically reverse this elite view that ignores many Hindu kings in pre-modern India who venerated and promoted Hanuman. More generalized inversions, such as Koli and Other Backward Classes' love for Hanuman, imply persistent, everyday criticism of high-caste Hindu values.

30 Interview with Mohit Ramle, May 4, 2021.

31 Interview with Mohit Ramle, December 16, 2020.

32 Interview with Mohit Ramle, December 22, 2020. According to one Koli informant, Lanka used to be thought of as some place in southern India but now, "thanks to modernisation and the access that Kolis have to media, they know that Lanka is a country." Without necessarily knowing it, Koli youth are absorbing recent political ideas that give new historical meanings to Indian legends.

33 Despite evidence of Sai Baba having been a wrestler as a young man (Kher 1999: 78–79), Koli youth seem to know nothing about this. Sai Baba venerated Hanuman and "was occasionally possessed by him" (Rigopoulos 2020: 156). Sai's parents had dedicated him to Maruti (the Marathi word for Hanuman) and as a result Baba thought of Hanuman as "his brother" (Williams 2002: 98). A story has it that when Baba sought refuge from heavy rain, he refused to sit on a ledge at the same level as a Hanuman *murti* because he thought he should not be at the "same level as God" (Narasimha Swami 1999: 45). Also see Rigopoulos (2020: 99–100, 102, 150, 156, 175).

34 In May 2016, the Archaeological Survey of India signed an agreement with the Government of Maharashtra to renovate eleven major forts in Mumbai and Maharashtra, including the one in the Worli Koliwada (Tahseen 2016). On the possibilities of developing an open-air museum precinct in the Worli Koliwada, see Jeychandran (2014: 51–62).

35 The assertiveness of the Dalit Mang, as described by Lohokare (2016), is driven in part by the extreme discrimination that they suffer because of their employment as sweepers. Koli youth, by contrast, come from current or former fishing families whose traditional jobs fell outside the gross prejudices that continue to confront India's Dalits (see Mendelsohn and Vicziany 1998). This higher position of women in the Koliwada does not prevent Kolis from fearlessly asserting the high status of their communities as Indigenous people.

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6 "Saint Above (Beyond) Religion"

Re-Imaging Shirdi Sai in Chennai and Singapore

Joanne Punzo Waghorne

A poster personally designed by the founding guru of the popular Anna Baba Mandir in suburban Chennai depicts Shirdi Sai Baba dressed as a Muslim in front of a mosque, as a Hindu deity (Venkateswara) in front of the golden temple spire at Tirupati (Ananda Nilayam Vimana), and as Santa Claus in front of a Christian cathedral (Figure 6.1).[1] The poster appears in publications and, as in the photograph here, is singled out among the many Sai posters in the temple. In closer view, "Saint above Religion" appears in English below the cathedral, with the same phrase in Hindi under the Muslim Sai and in Tamil under the Hindu *deva* (deity) form. Interestingly, here Santa and not Jesus signals Christianity. Meanwhile, across the Indian Ocean in Singapore, a spiritual center turned temple glorifies Shirdi Sai in gleaming white marble, but again on its walls hangs a framed print of a floating Sai holding hands with Krishna and Christ. Such refabulated portrayals of Baba marking devotion to the Maharashtrian saint-teacher are often the work of guru-like patrons, each with their own following and who voice Baba's continued presence, re-form his image, and build new *congregations*. Such devotional communities housed in over twenty temples to Shirdi Sai in Chennai and now one in Singapore, often include images of a deeply respected founder-teacher within their walls. All of the temple centers that I have visited emphasize Baba's multireligious—better, *transreligious*—nature.

Using the term *transreligious* with deliberation, I am fully aware of the new turn in theology so signaled (Martin 2020; Thatamanil 2020), which I will revisit. The ever-growing popularity of Baba, especially among urban middle-class devotees, remains bound to an identity that openly acknowledges multiple religious traditions. But here the challenge begins: What term/s best describe/s this nature of Baba's personality? Two compelling suggestions are *composite* and *polyvalent*: "Shirdi Sai Baba's composite identity is one of the most important reasons for the appeal of this movement to his newfound devotees" (McLain 2016, 40), and "Shirdi Sai Baba's polyvalent personality and support of several traditions proved a powerful draw for emerging middle classes providing categories and practices that could be interpreted by many communities and traditions" (Srinivas 2008: 38). The answer to our question depends on context, for instance, the language
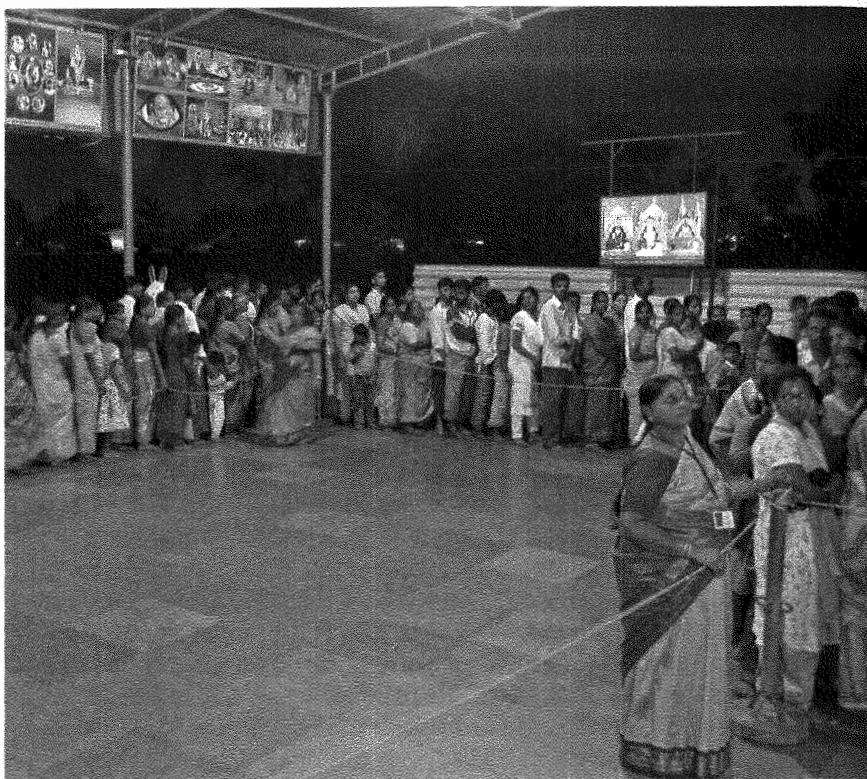
Figure 6.1 The poster designed by the founding guru is visible on the display board as devotees wait in the courtyard to enter the Anna Baba Mandir Chennai, India, 2008.

Source: Photograph by Dick Waghorne.

and visual sensibilities of a given area, in this case, Tamil-speaking Chennai and Singapore with its Tamil-centered ethos as one of the four official languages and acknowledged cultural components of the city-state. Both were key colonial port cities embedded in Indian Ocean trading networks and entangled within multireligious and multiethnic labor exchanges of the British Raj with its sizable Christian populations. In this chapter, I will stay with *transreligious*—and return to it as an evolving *theological* term in the context of the Tamil phrase, *Matankalai Katanta Makan* on the innovative poster designed by the late founder of the Anna Baba Mandir, R.V. Kumar (1947–2012), also known as Sri Kumar Baba.[2]

From Paper to Marble

Although over the years I have worked with many members of new and developing temples in Chennai and beyond, I have a paradoxical relationship with Shirdi Sai centers. The All India Sai Samaj founded in 1952 is the oldest

Sai center in the city. It is located very near the venerable Kapaleeshwarar Temple in Mylapore but is a herald of emerging post-independence temples—innovative in architectural style and often housing divine images new to this southern city. My encounter with the Sai Samaj awakened me to the impending boom in construction of temples by persons of an increasingly influential middle class, as an aspect of their religiosity that departed from Milton Singer's now classic discussion of an accommodation of Sanskrit-focused "Great Traditions" (1972). These temples, especially those dedicated to guru-saints like Shirdi Sai, could not be classified as either folk (Little Tradition) or conventional.

While photographing a procession from the Kapaleeshwarar Temple in 1986, my husband and I bumped into a small palanquin carrying an iconic image of Shirdi Sai accompanied by a few ardent devotees. The event remains vivid in my memory because the enthusiastic Dr. Muthu Venkataraman, then the guiding force of the center, beckoned to us from the street. Warmly welcoming us, he divulged his intention to magnify Sai's presence in Chennai.[3] Later that year, Dr. Venkataraman would accompany the same palanquin as it circled the streets of Mylapore to celebrate the installation of a stunning life-size marble *murti* of Baba in the All India Sai Samaj. This was the first of many such installation rituals (here termed Mangalabhishekam, but usually Kumbhabhishekam) of new and expanded temples that my husband and I would document (Waghorne 2004), (Figures 6.2 and 6.3).

Despite one publication on this event in Mylapore in 1999 and years of visiting Shirdi Sai centers in the city and then in Singapore, there was *something* about these centers that strangely compelled me to separate them from a growing list of new temples.[4] I realized that such "spiritual" movements require a more innovative methodology and form of analysis reflecting differences between *spiritual* and *religious* activities. Following Linda Woodhead and Paul Heelas, *spirituality* becomes "the sacred in the cultivation of unique subjective-life" as differentiated from religion "subordinating subjective-life to the 'higher authority' of transcendent meaning, goodness and truth" (Heelas and Woodhead 2005: 5; Waghorne 2020a, 2020b: 61–62).

Key moments at several of these centers signaled new developments in the imaging and imagining of Sai's personality. Standing out were the installation of a marble *murti* in Mylapore, the changing status of a marble *murti* at the Shri Shirdi Saibaba Spiritual & Charitable Trust in Injambakkam, and the installation of yet another marble Baba where only a poster once sufficed in the Shirdi Sai Spiritual Center in Singapore (see also Srinivas, this volume). Such paper-to-marble aggrandizements occurred simultaneously with Baba's continuing enfolding of other divine personages into his being, especially noticeable in a significant event at the Anna Baba Mandir and a birthday party for Jesus on a Christmas Day in Chennai in front of a small home-size marble Sai dressed as Santa Claus.

Shirdi Sai, along with Sri Ramakrishna, Guru Raghavendra, and others share the status of Gurudev (*gurudeva*, teacher-God)—born as humans
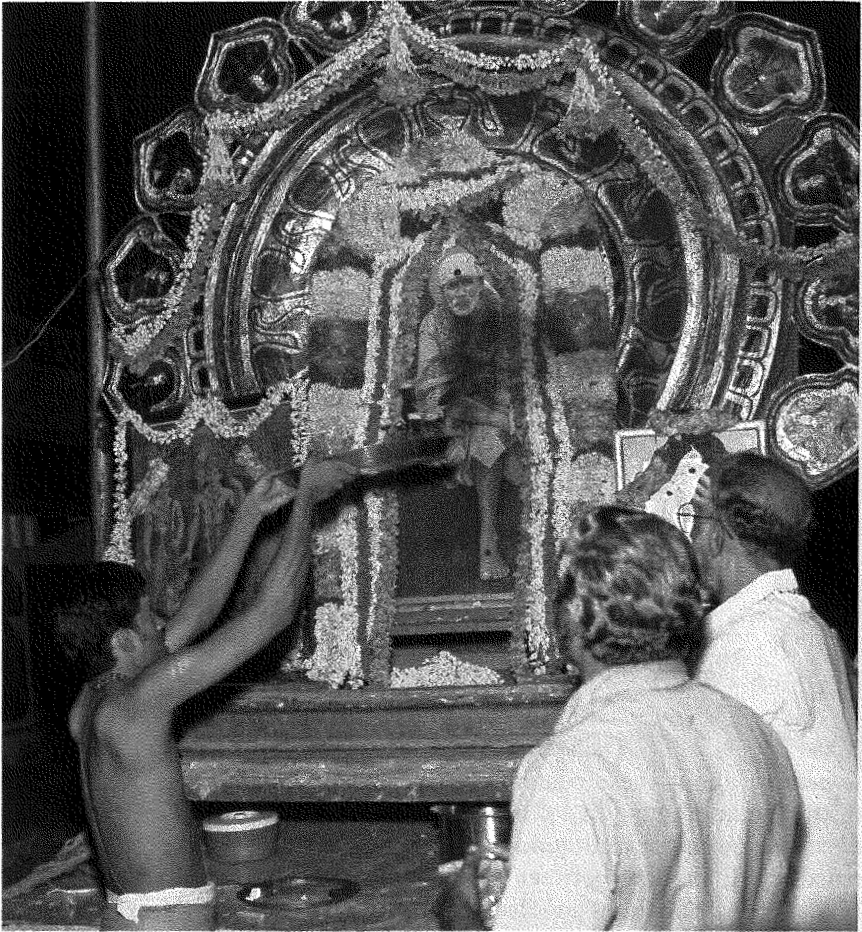
Figure 6.2 Priest offering burning camphor to Sai as his image processes on the streets near the All India Sai Samaj in Mylapore, Chennai, India, 1987.

Source: Photograph by Dick Waghorne.

but transfigured as divine beings. Although an all-India phenomenon, in Chennai many Sai centers have mirrored the transition from guru to deity visually in the slow transformation of their Samaj (meeting places) from an emphasis on Sai as guru venerated through an inexpensive and widely available paper print or a painting befitting his streetwise status that acquired its sacrality not from formal ritual but from years of devotion by a revered founder and other early Baba devotees. In such forms, the once itinerant Shirdi Sai moved to a properly installed marble *murti*, fully available for a more life-sized experience of Sai. Further development led to construction of railing and the presence of priests in what I call the *templing* of the saint now embodied—rather re-bodied—in marble (Figure 6.4).

Figure 6.3 Dr. Muthu Venkataraman offers the first obeisance to the newly conse-
crated marble image of Sai in Mylapore, Chennai, India, 1987.

Source: Photograph by Dick Waghorne.

For example, the Mylapore All India Sai Samaj retains its name after
the tenure of Venkatraman. Devotees continue to act as a congregation in
satsangs, gathering together to seek truth and with group devotional sing-
ing. Indeed, an online Tamil Nadu tourist site names this as an important
feature of the institution.[5] Muslims and Christians are still reported to
attend and pray, as Samaj officials often mentioned to me. However, since
the installation of the marble *murti*, the Samaj functions much more as a
koyil (temple) than in 1986 when I first encountered an itinerant Shirdi Sai
in the form of a painted poster, pulled on a modest palanquin by his ardent
devotees. Metal railing now controls the crowds and priests attend Shirdi
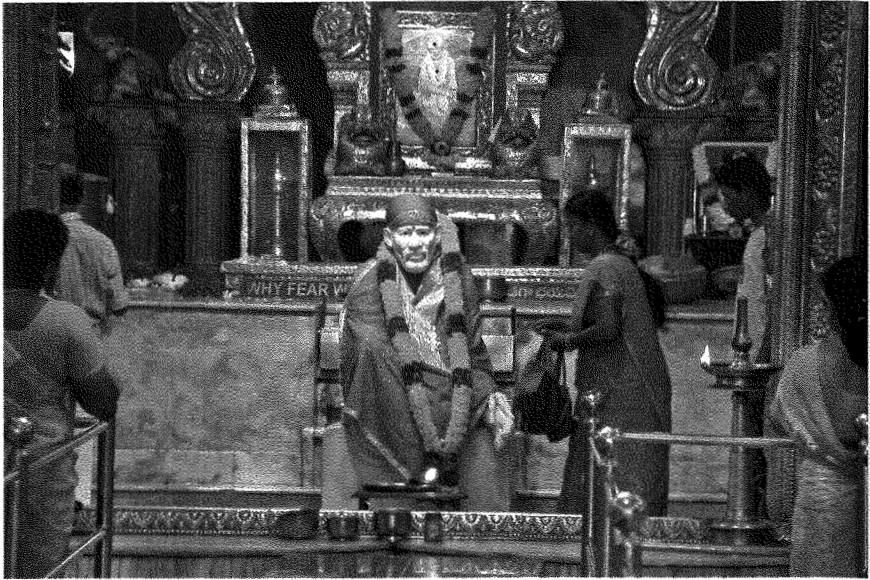
Figure 6.4 Sai in his new sanctum behind railing at the All India Sai Samaj, Chennai, India, 2008.

Source: Photograph by Dick Waghorne.

Sai's sanctum-like throne room. Some find this progress as a sign of Sai's growing acceptance, but for others it is disturbing.

New Sai Gurus: Manifesting Sai as All Gods and Gurus

Sri Kumar Baba and other well-educated professionals-turned-gurus and/or devoted patrons advance Shirdi Sai Baba's presence in urban spaces as they build "spiritual centers," temples, and halls for meditation within Tamil-centered contexts of Chennai and now Singapore. The materials used to embody Baba, the power and role of his patron-caretakers, the growing list of deities with whom Baba is associated, and the community formed around the saint all evolve in common and interrelated trajectories. As founder of the Anna Baba Mandir, Kumar Baba's relationship with Baba, like that of so many inspired devotee-patrons, was transformed from a guru-like leader to something more. A pamphlet describing "The Nine-Fold Path of Guruji" offers a list of rules given directly to Kumar Baba by Shirdi Sai and affirms that Sai "is the manifestation of all Gods and all Gurus." Declaring that Sri Kumar Baba "was only a class monitor, taking care of the class (the world at large), the authors assert that Baba was the real Guru or Teacher." However, a cryptic addendum suggests that "Shirdi Sai has said that in the 60th year of Sri Kumar Baba, He would proclaim to the world that both are one in the same" (Sampathkumar n.d.: 29). A Sai-centered blog has Baba

telling R.V. Kumar, "now that you have come within my fold, there is no action that you will perform independently. You will now be my tool and perform all that I wish and desire to do. You are at my behest and I will control all your deeds. I am Anna Baba and you shall henceforth be called Kumar Baba."[6] Villasvathi Amma, another guru-founder of a new Sai mandir, credits the founding of her temple, Navasai Baba, to Kumar Baba who became too infirm to complete the last request of Shirdi Baba for a temple in the form of the Navagraha—the nine planets that control human fate. Once again, Kumar Baba begot another guru-founder and at the same time, Sai has enfolded yet another set of divine beings.[7]

Baba as "all Gods and Gurus" was displayed in the celebration of Guru Purnima at the Anna Baba Mandir on the night of Friday, March 21, 2008. This was an especially auspicious moment, I was told, because it marked the rare confluence of Guru Purnima, Good Friday, and the Prophet's Birthday, as I later confirmed by online search.[8] Devotees of Shirdi Sai patiently waited in line in the courtyard under the poster that introduced this chapter (see Figure 6.1). They then moved through a ritual triathlon of Sai worship that encouraged each to realize Baba's omnipresence kinesthetically. My field notes record my immediate impressions on that night:

> We practically ran up "the eighteen holy steps," and began the twelve circumambulations of the golden Shikara [tower rising over the sanctum] now encased in shining metal "Kavacham" [Tamil, armor] with deities that I did not immediately recognize on four sides. After an almost dizzying rounding of the tower, we followed our hostess to another line where we waited to touch our heads to a clay *paduka* or the feet of a guru, here Sai. The process combined the eighteen steps at Sabarimala with a fast-paced circumambulation that reminded me of photos of the Hajj in Mecca. We then descended the stairs again at a rapid clip and came into the main temple hall where we circumambulated the Sai altar. First, we put our heads on the marble *paduka* [feet], then touching the feet of Lord Venkateshwara in bas relief on the wall, then on to the small image of Sai in the back and then touching the feet of Meenakshi, also in bas relief and finally making *pranams* [obedience] to Sai.

Transreligiosity in the event gestured—I felt—toward Muslim practices, as I experienced far faster circumambulation than the almost meditative circling in a traditional temple that I have witnessed so many times in local temples in Chennai and Singapore (Figure 6.5). And my hosts pointedly emphasized the concurrence of the Prophet's birthday, although the author of the official pamphlet keeps her explanation within Hindu terminology (Sampathkumar n.d.: 19). Here Baba enfolds the current luminaries of popular Hindu devotion: The long-loved Goddess Meenakshi of Madurai, Lord Venkateswara of Tirupati, and now Ayyappa Swamy of Sabarimala in
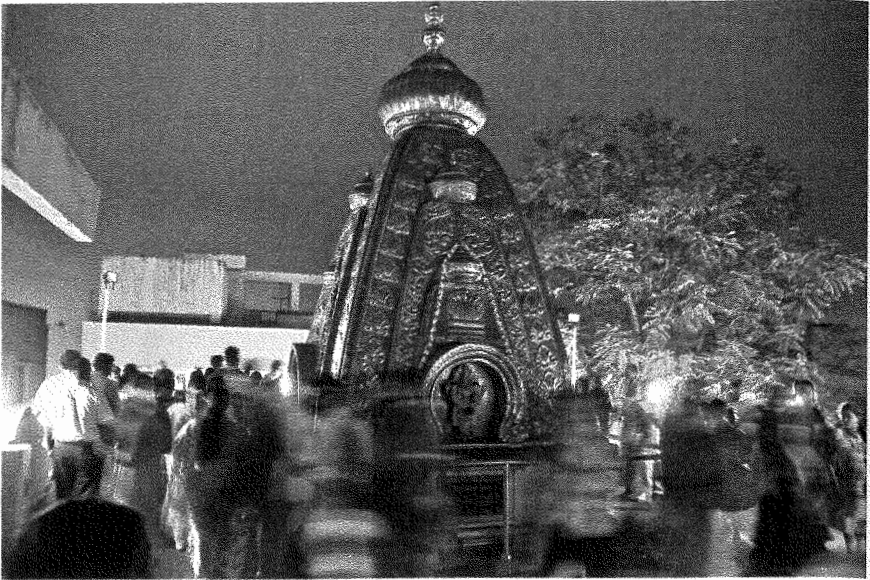
Figure 6.5 Devotees circumambulate the tower (Shikara) above the sanctum of Sai so quickly that they blur the photo, Chennai, India, 2008.

Source: Photograph by Dick Waghorne.

nearby Kerala. These same deities mark Kumar Baba's own spiritual progression. When Shirdi Sai first appeared to his future devotee on a fateful visit to Sai temple in Injambakkam, R.V. Kumar heard a voice calling him to touch the *paduka*, which he dismissed as an illusion. As an ardent devotee, Sri Kumar was meditating in front of the Goddess Meenakshi in Madurai, when "a six foot tall figure of Baba walked out of the sanctum. ... He also heard the Mother's divine voice telling him that Shirdi Baba was a Great Mahan (great or mighty being) [and that] following Baba's footsteps was the best path for him" (Sampathkumar n.d.: 5). Sri Kumar received similar advice from Lord Venkateswara at Tirupati: "Shirdi Sai Baba and I are one in the same" (ibid: 11). At no step of the way did Kumar Baba reject any deity, but instead he moved on to Sai in an inclusive way rather than as a *convert*.[9]

Important here are allusions to Jesus via Santa in the poster of Figure 6.1 as well as the portrait of Sai in flowing white superimposed on the Sacred Heart of Jesus hanging next to the office inquiry window. Kumar Baba's more recent embrace of Jesus has no discursive narrative as yet. However, traces of Jesus surface in iconography, in the emphasis on service, and in Baba Kumar's articulated principle of Anbu-Amaidhi-Annadanam. In her pamphlet, Dr. Rukmani Sampathkumar explains the Tamil/Sanskrit "Tarakamantra" ("saving text," a mantra that brings salvation) of Kumar Baba: "Love (Anbu) and Amaidhi (peace) [is] the third and most important

quality pre-eminently necessary for a human being is the Act of Charity—particularly Anna Dhan" (Sampathkumar n.d.: 2). Being familiar with the educational system in Chennai through which so many middle-class Hindus attend prestigious Catholic colleges and high schools (secondary schools) where education in religion is often required, one may hear overtones of 1 Corinthians 13:13, "And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity." At the same time, the Tamil/Sanskrit terms here have rich local connotations. Anbu carries the sense of love not only as affection, grace, and benevolence, but also with theological valence as devotion and a synonym for *bhakti* as etymology that complements iconography.[10]

Annadanam is a much-used Sanskrit term that has homonyms rich with implications: First with the Christian name Anna *(Hebrew* Hannah) meaning grace, favor; and then with the *Anna* (Tamil for elder brother), the popular epithet of a beloved chief minister, C.N. Annadurai; and finally with *Annai* (Tamil for mother). The Jesus imagery invokes these intense connections. The main *murti* of Shirdi Sai in the Anna Baba Mandir, however, emphasizes the pose of Sai seated in royal repose wearing a crown of flowers, royal elephants at his sides, and with his right hand raised in blessing (Figure 6.6). The Sai in another very different pose with hands widely outstretched appears only on posters near the office depicting Sai as Jesus.

Figure 6.6 Elaborately decorated marble image of Sai at the Anna Baba Mandir, Chennai, India, 2008.

Source: Photograph by Dick Waghorne.

Santa Baba and Jesus

Baba as Muslim-Hindu is well known, but in Chennai with its influential Christian population, especially in the Mylapore neighborhood, a Christian-Hindu Sai makes sense. Mylapore houses premier Hindu temples such as the Kapaleeshwarar, as well as the St. Thomas Basilica built over the tomb of the Apostle Thomas who brought Christianity to India. An amalgam of Baba with Christianity fits local religious ecology. In Mylapore, the Shirdi Sai temple presents an alcove that openly simulates the areas in a Catholic church set aside for lighting votive candles to patron saints, complete with metal stalls from which to purchase tapers. At the entrance, just after a framed image of the Sacred Heart of Jesus (see Morgan 2008), a darkened image of Baba impressed onto a mirror hovers above a table of melting candles (Figure 6.7). Images implicitly linking Baba to Jesus appear on temple walls of other Sai temples in the city. Baba is sometimes seen in white with outstretched arms in what might be called a Jesus *mudra* (posture) which has analogues beginning in the mid-twentieth century.[11] The same image appears above the marble *murti* in the grand temple in Injambakkam as well as in murals on the walls of more modest temples. For example, the entrance to the Government Press Quarters, New Washermenpet, displays a painting of Sai at the entrance with outstretched arms and the common apothegm in

Figure 6.7 Offering candles to Jesus at the All India Sai Samaj, Chennai, India, 2008.

Source: Photograph by Dick Waghorne.

Figure 6.8 A woman and her little daughter meditate in front of a mural of Sai with outstretched arms at the Government Press Quarters, New Washermenpet, Chennai, India, 2009.

Source: Photograph by Dick Waghorne.

capitals, WHY FEAR WHEN I AM HERE.[12] In one of the inner rooms, a devotee and her young daughter meditate on a stunning mural of Sai, again with outstretched hands (Figure 6.8). Christ is similarly portrayed at the Church of Saints Joachim and Anne dedicated by Pope John Paul II in 1986, and again at the Sahaya Annai church dedicated in 1997, his hands form a similar all-embracing *mudra* (Figure 6.9).[13]

Verbal and visual allusions to Jesus in the Anna Baba Mandir, then, are no accident. In Tamil Nadu, Christians constitute eight to ten percent of the population but assert strong presence as convent schools and Catholic colleges are prestigious, and many professionals have had positive experiences with Christian-based education. However, some express serious worries over *conversions* that often mandate refusal of participation in Hindu
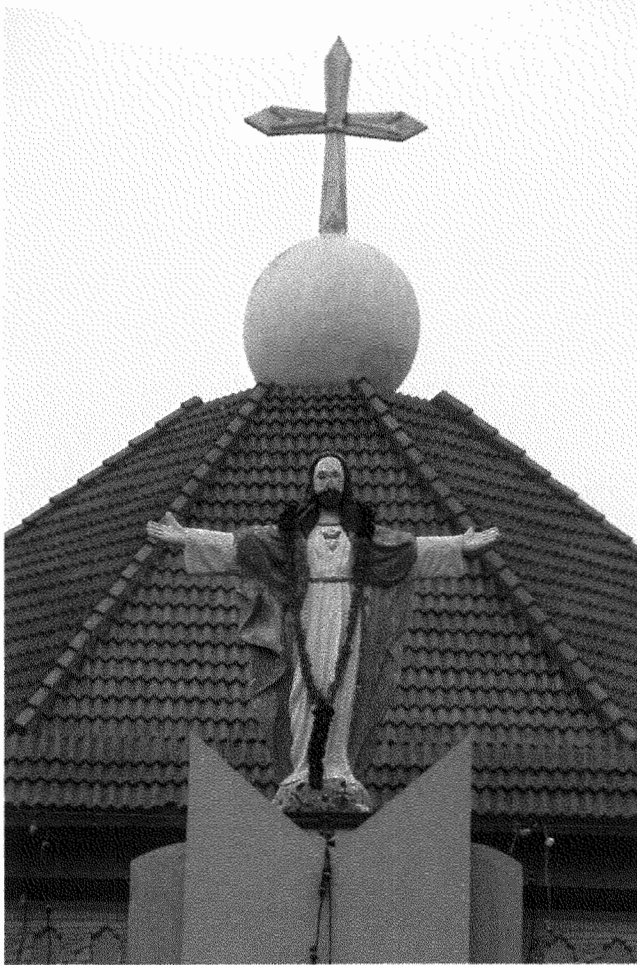
Figure 6.9 Jesus with outstretched arms stands atop the Sahaya Annai Church out-
        side Chennai, India, 2009.

Source: Photograph by Dick Waghorne.

rituals and holidays. Many consider such conversions a disruption of the
social fabric.

Such cases of total conversion are rare, but participation in Christian
meetings or even rituals are not. Colonial-style missionaries no longer pro-
mote expansion of Christian influence as avidly as do Tamilian Evangelical
preachers with major followings such as Dr. V.G. Santhosam with his "wide
spectrum of Business interests" including housing, resorts, and amusement
parks.[14] Dr. Santhosam also touts religious harmony as a striking counter-
part to Anna Baba. As an article in *Life Positive* explains,

Dr. V.G. Santhosam, chairman of the VGP business group.... hails from a Christian family of modest means.... Passages from the Quran, the Bible, the Bhagavad Gita are read during prayer sessions. Often Santhosam himself leads the service. Religious functions of different faiths are celebrated here with equal fanfare. The temple is unique, says Santhosam, as people of diverse religions and faiths can come together here on one platform.[15]

Dr. Santhosam's Temple of World Peace offers an encompassing "platform" for the "universal religion of love," and Christian overtones are audible for those "with ears to hear" (Matthew 11:15) but are otherwise hushed under a generalized but *religious* language of faiths, holy texts, and holidays. In the Sai world of the Anna Baba Mandir, the platform rests on Hindu sensibilities but adopts the language of *spirituality* rather than religion.

Representatives of the Temple of World Peace or the Anna Baba Mandir do *not* speak of conversion. Shirdi Sai organizations adopt the term "spiritual" in their formal designations. For example, the major complex in Injambakkam calls itself a "Spiritual and Charitable Trust," and the Mylapore complex is a Samaj (*samaj,* "to bring or collect together") and so remains an association or society, not a religious *temple.* As for new Christian-based organizations, Christians in South Asia (especially India) who do not convert may "remain identified with the Hindu community. They call themselves *Jesu bhakta*—devotees of Jesus. Typically, Hindus accept people in their community who worship Jesus, even exclusively, within the larger framework of Hinduism" (Tennent 2013: 28).

Another understanding of Shirdi Sai and Jesus was offered by V. Kasturirangan and his wife Vijaya Kasturirangan at their home in suburban Chennai.[16] In their ground-floor flat, they have created a shrine with a marble image of Shirdi Sai. They have named the *murti* Annai Baba (*not* Anna Baba), "Mother Baba" after both Kasturi's mother who died when he was ten years old and because Sai Baba also said he was like a mother. The *murti* has been placed in their living room on a raised area where people can come and sit. Kasturi has a special sight, and like his guru, he is a medium for Baba's instruction.

Although he attended Catholic school and even met the Pope when he visited Chennai in 1986, Kasturi's worship and concerns remain within broad Hindu sensibilities, and he presents Sai as a reformer. Kasturi had a special vision that Baba wanted to receive a standardized *arati* (offering of a lighted lamp to a deity or guru) performed as a way of unifying Hinduism similar to how other religions, especially Islam, have common rituals. But he explained his understanding of Sai Baba's nature via a list of especially close resemblances between the saint and Jesus. In an email to me in March of 2008, Kasturi outlined, "striking similarities in the ways adopted by Lord Jesus Christ and Sai Baba of Shirdi in leading/guiding devotees/followers in the right path to reach GOD."

In appearance, both look similar with beard and long white robe. Both lived a simple life, begging for food, and not money till their last breath. Distributed whatever they received as offerings from devotees in cash and kind to the people and did not hoard money, form Trusts, build temples, institutions, etc. when they lived on Earth in physical form. Their followers have undone and are still undoing all that they had preached and set example for others to follow. These people have converted these Holy saints' names into commercially marketable spiritual brand names.

Both did not declare themselves to be God... Jesus repeatedly kept saying that he is son of God. Both did not show off their infinite power to attract people. They performed miracles for a specific purpose and not for earning name, fame, or money. Both brought a dead person back to life; made very short ration of food by their blessing to appease the hunger of all present. Each cured a leprosy afflicted person, making a lame man walk. Both loved and showered blessings on animals with affection. Lord Jesus, the lamb, Baba, the tiger, horse, and goat. Both resurrected from death after three days. Both could control nature's fury, calming down storm.

They are the only real gurus who have shown all humans the only right path to God unlike the gurus that we come across now-a-days. Once a person by God's grace and his hard work and penance acquires saintly powers, he has to be very, very careful, for if he slips or commits any wrong, he not only brings disgrace and shame to himself and his followers but also to God.

Kasturi presents both Sai and Jesus as the ultimate gurus and a model for all those who would guide their flocks toward God. His disdain for later institutions, trusts, and the like shares the rhetorical style of many who espouse *spiritual practices* over *religion*. Such accounts of enlightened teachers co-opted by subsequent institutions are reminiscent of Max Weber's theory of the "routinization of charisma" (Weber 1947: 363–373). Kasturi shares the Hindu sense that a divine image includes a *vahana*, usually in the form of a special animal. However, while miracle stories are told of the gods, in contemporary Chennai such manifestations of grace and power abide with divine gurus such as Mata Amritanandamayi and Sathya Sai Baba. In his careful articulation, Kasturi is edging toward becoming a guru himself, begot by Kumar Baba. He has re-imaged Jesus, Sai, and himself, in the Christmas celebration in Chennai (2008) which my husband and I shared with Kasturi, Vijaya, and their children.

When we arrived at Kasturi and Vijaya's home, the marble *murti* of Shirdi Sai had transformed into Santa Claus. The marble altar presented twinkling lights and miniature Christmas trees flanked Santa Baba. Christian-style candles were lit rather than oil lamps, and a birthday cake for Jesus completed the *event* (Figure 6.10). The taste of Jesus-Santa-Baba's birthday cake and the Kasturis' kindness linger still.

Figure 6.10 Christmas cake in front of Sai dressed as Santa Claus, Chennai, India, 2008.

Source: Photograph by Dick Waghorne.

Processes of Transport

Christmas with Mr. Kasturi's family and his Annai Baba encapsulate the processes that unfolded as Shirdi Sai, the saint, was transported from Maharashtra to Chennai. As founding guru of the first center for Sai in Mylapore, B.V. Narasimha Iyer began these developments. Although a graduate of Madras Christian College and Madras Law College, Mr. Iyer became Narasimha Swami after family tragedy moved him into Baba's embrace (Srinivas 1999, 2008). After establishment of the Sai Samaj in 1952, new Sai centers emerged in the 1980s. Again, transformation was in evidence at the Mylapore Samaj: The long-revered poster painting of Sai gave way to a life-scaled marble *murti* as a new patron aspired to higher status in the community. The congregation grew, leading to a priest officiating and installation of railing to control crowds.

Meanwhile, at the Sai temple in Injambakkam, a *murti* once accessible in the round now stands in a sanctum-like structure with even more railing as hundreds pour into the building for Sunday services (Figure 6.11).

Figure 6.11 Marble *murti* of Sai inside the sanctum at the Shri Shirdi Saibaba
        Spiritual & Charitable Trust in Injambakkam, Chennai, India, 2008.

Source: Photograph by Dick Waghorne.

Although not a guru-like figure, in 1994 the founder possessed charisma
and young people enthusiastically danced with him and dressed as Sai in
a procession on the street leading to the temple. Finally, at the Anna Baba
Mandir, aggrandizement of Sai takes form in the saint's manifestation of
"all God and Gurus" as a pamphlet asserts. The Anna Baba Mandir in turn
has incubated new gurus laying the foundation of their congregations with
their own Baba temples.

A similar process has occurred in Singapore. The only Shirdi Sai Spiritual
Center operates as a formal congregational space but it recently came
under the patronage of a wealthy family who installed a marble *murti* with
railing and a priest, upstaging a plain poster image of Baba (Figure 6.12).
Untheorized processes here and unanswered questions remain to be inves-
tigated. What happens to Shirdi Sai's visuality when he is no longer in the
flesh but embodied first in paper and then marble, and *may be* re-embodied
in his devotee-patron guru? At the same time in this process, is the humble
begging saint of Maharashtra moving more and more deities into his aura—
and into his body? I confess to feeling a loss of intimacy as familiar and inex-
pensive paper has turned into marble and marble has been moved behind
rails and gates—but these may only be my very personal sensibilities.

Figure 6.12 Newly installed marble Sai at the Shirdi Sai Worship Centre in Singapore, 2008.

Source: Photograph by Joanne Waghorne.

Seeing Sai Again through Haptic Visuality

The embodiment of Shirdi Sai Baba in a larger-than-life-size marble *murti* may not only have made his presence more apposite to formal ritual practices, but it also gave rise to his increasing encasement behind rails on an altar beyond the touch of devotees. Heady moments marked the marble *murti* taking life on the stage of the Mylapore Sai Samaj in 1987 (Waghorne 1999). The enthusiasm included my husband and me as we were invited to pour milk on the marble body (*palabhishekam*, "milk bath") with devotees as one of the last acts of consecration. Baba felt so real, so present, and women around us exclaimed that now the new image-body allowed them

to provide "real service" to Baba's body and the saint himself (ibid., 225). Yet each time I returned in 1994, 2004, and 2008, such tactility felt more remote as Baba finally sat enthroned. Devotees could still approach him, but many remained outside the railings and took the blessings conferred to them through *darshan* and by a priest.

The transformations and complexities of "haptic visuality" confirmed my experiential sensibilities. Laura Marks (2004, 2014) describes the move from the ancient flat images of Byzantine icons to the rounded forms of Michelangelo's Pieta as a turn from *haptic* to *optical* in visional terms. Marks argues via her work in film and on Islamic art that development of perspective during the Renaissance and Enlightenment generated an optical vision that "sees objects as distinct, distant, and identifiable, existing in illusionary three-dimensional space. It maintains a clear, crisp relationship between figure and ground. Optical visuality is necessary for distance perception: for surveying a landscape, for making fine distinctions between things at a distance" (Marks 2004: 1). The earlier haptic visuality "sees the world as though it were touching it: close, unknowable, appearing to exist on the surface of the image. Haptic images disturb the figure-ground relationship" (ibid.). The key here: Flat paintings, like Byzantine icons, or I would argue earlier Indian poster art as well, draw the viewer into a more intimate relationship with the image precisely because it does not present itself as "really" real. The fuzzy quality—the *striated* rather than smooth—keep the relationship up-close and personal eminently touchable if not by the hand, then with the eyes.[17]

Flatness keeps imagination and possibility alive. In his recent discussion of enchantment in visual culture, David Morgan discusses Orthodox icons as images "experienced as portals to the holy." Furthermore, "in approaching the icons, devotees approach the mystery, which is the aura or presence of the real behind the image, the prototype that casts the shadow" (2018: 120). Earlier, Morgan drew a similar distinction of visual piety between empathy and sympathy, "the act of identifying one's sensations with those of a depiction [of Jesus] relied on the body as an organ of knowing, the visceral bridge between the self and the knower. Empathy was the visceral instrument of such knowledge" (1998: 66). Neither icons nor forms of *haptic vision* close possibility or potentiality. But while Morgan continues to connect the icon with perfection, Marks' rendering of *haptic visuality* "attends to their particularity" (2004: 1), avoiding precise borders and mapping over craggy territory, or as Jonathan Z. Smith argues, "congruity suggests, a static perfection…which I, for one, find inhuman" (1978: 308). Here I begin to wonder if the perfection of the marble *murti* re-invites the need for a more *imperfect* human guru.

For Shirdi Sai Baba communities in Chennai and most recently in Singapore, the move from haptic to optic remains mixed and complex. Kasturi's Annai Baba image sits in a small marble pavilion (*vimana*, visible in Figure 6.11) but lives intimately within the home where both Kasturi

and his wife dress and tend to Baba's needs. At the Anna Baba Mandir, a marble *murti* sits in the round on a broad altar, very visible and accessible, but not to be touched except through haptic visuality. The same is true in Singapore, where the marble *murti* now remains behind marble railings, but in photos of recent events, the patron who donated the *murti* appears to take center stage (Figure 6.12).

Baba becomes more readily touchable through a guru. When he was alive, Sri Kumar remained highly accessible, granting audiences every week. Kasturiranga hopes to do the same in his own home, and another disciple of Kumar Baba now guides her followers in her own temple. The guru at the Anna Mandir was on his way to fulfilling his "Nine-Fold Path" as revealed to him by Sai Baba. He died before "Shirdi Baba... would proclaim to the world that both are one in the same" (Sampathkumar n.d: 29). A more general claim is that a guru voices Sai's message, becoming the mouth but not the face of Baba. Both the Anna Baba Mandir and Kasturi in his home shrine make few changes of the marble *murti* but use the South Indian process of *dressing* the *murti* (officially the *alamkara,* decoration) to layer Sai's body with multiple identities. These actions that alter time and place are not simply embellishments, they are extensions of his image-body: "The act of dressing a deity is an instrumental act: it confers life" (Waghorne 1992: 31).

Transreligious Theology—Melding Relationships

What terms within the South Indian context describe Baba's growing embodiment now associated with numerous deities and most recently with Jesus? Returning to the poster in the courtyard of the Anna Baba Mandir which launched this chapter, the three forms present Sai as a Muslim wearing a fez with Hindi inscription underneath, a Hindu deity (Venkateswara) with a Tamil label, and then as Santa Claus with the English title "SAINT ABOVE RELIGION." Comparing the Tamil and the English rendering here in this influential South Indian Sai temple is revealing. Tamil text below Sai Baba as a Hindu deity (Venkateswara) is "Matankalai Katanta Makan." Here the first term is derived from *matam,* "opinion, belief, tenet, sect, teaching," but is in the *plural* and is the expression frequently used for describing different *religions* in a textbook sense.[18] The final term, *makan,* a "great soul" as in *mahatma,* names Sai as a Teacher/Master. More difficult however is the key word *katanta,* rendered as "above" but from a root meaning to "jump over, to step over, exceed, surpass" that also bears the connotations "to transgress or disobey."[19] Apparently, the text alone could suggest a figure who disavows or even transgresses religion. A better translation might be a "melding" of religions.[20] In South Indian and particularly in Tamil cultural contexts, "beyond religion" indicates Sai Baba's relationship to other *religions*—note again the Tamil is plural. This is not about Sai and "Religion" but rather Sai and other *religions.* So, what are the theological and social resonances of this term *katanta*? Online blogs,

pamphlets, and devotee comments to websites move the answer from ethnographic-style description to discourse, as a bourgeoning popular theology of how Baba *relates* to many divine figures, deities, and master-teachers beyond the Hindu sphere, including Sufi *pirs* (spiritual guides) and Catholic saints. However, the stronger articulation remains through a visual theology that shows Baba holding hands with Jesus or taking on the clothing of Santa Claus or donning a fez as a Muslim. A rising re-articulation of Transreligious Theology in Christian circles offers another useful set of tools to consider *katanta* as stepping over pluralism as a theological concept, and points toward a theology that openly advocates *melding relationships* that demand personal engagement with multiplicity.

The group Theology without Walls, more commonly termed Transreligious Theology, held their inaugural session at the American Academy of Religion's annual meeting of 2020. A new movement within Christian theology responding to religious multiplicity was described as "The Spiritual but Not Religious, and even more the Nones, have already stepped outside confessional boundaries." The mainstream theological equivalent for this kind of inter- and intra-religious relationship remains pluralism or interfaith dialogue as between Christians and Hindus. As articulated by Diana L. Eck in the *Pluralism Project*, pluralism is "not just tolerance, but the active seeking of understanding across lines of difference."[21] Recognizing difference, "a pluralist culture will not flatten out differences, but has respect for differences and the encounter of differences" (Eck 1993: 189). The newer *transreligious* movement espoused by Catholics and Protestants, however, challenges pluralism's embrace of difference as well as the postmodernist underscoring of identity. In the introduction to *Theology Without Walls*, Jerry L. Martin (2020: 1) asserts that

> the subject matter of theology is ultimate reality, not one's own tradition. One way to put it is that, in addition to Christian theology, Hindu theology, Islamic theology, and the like, there is just Theology, the logos of *theos*, of ultimacy. It is not that we do not stand somewhere, but our sense of our goal is not limited to where we stand at the outset. All available terms, including "divine or ultimate reality" and "theology" itself, must be provisional, giving a sense of direction to thought without precluding surprising advances and revisions.

Here again comes a similar turn concurrent with a visual return to the indeterminant haptic as "dogmatic faith gives way to 'Socratic faith,' which requires humility rather than claims of infallibility" (Martin 2020: 6). Transreligious Theology recognizes and even celebrates " a world of contending, unpredictable individual choices" (ibid.). In addition, Transreligious Theology, although "not a single... uniform research program but rather a family of kindred research projects" shares "the core conviction that theological truth is available, and therefore must be pursued, beyond the walls of any single religion" (Thatamanil 2020: 53).

A key voice in this movement, John J. Thatamanil comes from Kerala, although he admits to living longer in Tamil Nadu.[22] His contribution to *Theology without Walls* orbits beyond intellectual admittances of multiplicity and choice and instead turns this gentle rebellion toward the practitioners of theology. He suggests a "theology as marked by existential commitment to the pursuit of religious truth gained through the theologian's own transformation, a transformation brought about by taking up the spiritual disciplines that serve as the means for reaching the distinctive spiritual ends of the tradition in question" (2020: 54). Thatamanil's emphasis turns to practice as knowing by radically arguing.

> What is sought is a practical braiding of spiritual disciplines, first, in the life of the practitioner and only then in the writing and teaching that might flow from such a life. Textual writing follows only after a writing into a flesh of the therapeutic regimes of specific traditions, which creates in the practitioner the long training that opens angles of vision that cannot be opened otherwise.... First-order intimacy is the cherished goal. The transformed theologian is the first product of Transreligious Theology imagined in this practical key; textual production follows next as an expression of what has been so learned (ibid.: 62–63).

Here the academic world—*the* venue for Transreligious Theology and *not* religious institutions—turns toward the *self* as a site for both transformation and another kind of understanding mirroring the turn from religion to "spirituality," if not generally, then within an influential segment of the global middle classes with the rise of *choice*. Suddenly, one experiences echoes of Shirdi Sai's transmuting body as the divine saint becomes Jesus, Santa Claus, Venkateswara, Meenakshi, while remaining a Muslim *pir* and a Hindu spiritual master. Transreligious theologians, at least for Thatamanil, are bound to their own transmutations and transformations as the access to understanding.

The scholar and the Sai devotee may be moving in similar directions, but perspectives do not converge. For the Sai devotee experiencing Sai as "all gods and gurus," multiplicity becomes a personal as well a community experience but remains within Sai Baba's body. He englobes, he enfolds, with differing times and places. I see a similar disjunction among Sai devotees as with transreligious theologians: Is there one "first-order intimacy," a culminating "ultimacy"? At the same time, if Jerry L. Martin (2020) retains his voice, the access never squeezes into a single point and incongruities and uncertainties remain. Put another way, the gritty haptic does not give way to the smooth optic. Shirdi Sai sits embedded in marble in Injambakkam, Mylapore, and Singapore, but in Anna Baba Mandir his marble body once again takes paper form as a beloved poster, his clothes become varying flesh, and he moves with emerging gurus, each re-figuring him, re-dressing him. Those who study and those who worship increasingly operate as feeling beings, using their selves as matter and mind to meld relationships.

Notes

1 I am using common spellings in English rather than formal transliteration fo common names and terms which often appear in English language newspa pers and online. For more technical terms, I will include the most common transliteration but without diacritics with the designation for Sanskrit and Tamil when relevant. Often in Tamil ritual and religious terminology, San-skrit forms are conjoined with Tamil terms so that transliteration is complex.

2 Here I am transliterating from Tamil script without diacritics. The phrase would be pronounced and more commonly written as Mathamkalai Kadan-tha Makan. My husband (Dick Waghorne) and I met Sri Kamar Baba at the celebration of Guru Purnima on Friday, March 21, 2008. He graciously blessed us and extended permission to take the photographs included here. I remain grateful, especially after his passing.

3 Dr. Venkataraman then and later told us of his plans beyond the eventual new marble body for Sai. He hoped to build an enormous murti of Shirdi Sai on the famous Madras beach that, perhaps ironically, presents numerous mon-uments to political icons like the beloved MGR (former Chief Minister M.G. Ramaswami).

4 I am grateful to the American Institute of Indian Studies for providing me with a Senior Research Fellowship to study the rituals of the Kapaleeshwarar Temple, Mylapore, and of new temples in suburban Madras City, 1986–1987. I returned to study new temples in 1994–1995 with a Fellowship for University Teachers, National Endowment for the Humanities, 1994–1995. Funding from an AIIS Senior short-term grant permitted research in Chennai December 2008-January 2009 on guru-centered organizations, including many Shirdi Sai mandirs. I also encountered and returned to some Sai Centers in March of 2008, while research on guru-centered movements in Singapore was possible through a Fulbright-Hays Faculty Research Abroad Fellowship and Visiting Senior Research Fellow (sabbatical leave program), Asian Research Institute (Globalization and Religion cluster), and National University of Singapore.

5 https://tamilnadu-favtourism.blogspot.com/2017/12/shirdi-sai-baba-temple-mylapore-chennai.html, dated December 12, 2017. Accessed June 2021.

6 saikesaat. blogspot dated March 1, 2008. Accessed January 2021.

7 http://saikesaat.blogspot.com/2008/03/sri-kumar-baba.html. Dated March 1, 2008. Accessed June 2021. On the website of another Sai Mandir in Vellore, Tamil Nadu, Sri Navasai Baba Mandir retells the story of Kumar Baba. http:// navasaibabamandir.org/founder.htm. Accessed January 26, 2021.

8 Eid-e-Milad-un-Nabi, also spelled Id-E-Milad, was listed in 2008 as Friday, March 21. https://www.drikpanchang.com/calendars/indian/muslim-festivals/ milad-un-nabi/milad-un-nabi-date-time.html?geoname-id=1264527& year=2008. Accessed January 2021.

9 Here *convert*, especially in the context of South India, implies a rejection of all previous guides and deities as is required for conversion to Christianity.

10 Translation from the *Tamil Lexicon* (1936) via dsal@uchicago.edu. Also see https://www.wordhippo.com/what-is/the/tamil-word-for-efc66939192e254c da0cc4f04380c16e5b8df546.html.

11 My thanks to David Morgan (pers. comm., 2021, via our co-editor Allen Rob-erts), who has long published on popular images of Jesus. Morgan kindly sent several other examples of Jesus in similar pose and remarked in an email, "The image you sent is a common one from the middle decades of the 20th century in Europe" and suggests that "the motif derives from a large statue and mosaic in the Basilica of the Sacred Heart in Montmartre .... The open arms convey Christ's compassion." It is an interesting development since it

takes the mystical gesture of Jesus "revealing his heart to Margaret Mary Ala-coque" and transforms it "into a much more pastoral gesture of open-armed acceptance."

12 North Chennai Shirdi Sai Baba Trust, Kamaraj Salai, Govt Press Quarters, New Washermenpet, Chennai 600081.

13 A cornerstone reads "Sahaya Annai Church, Vadanemmeli, ECR (East Coast Road) Blessed by Aruldas James D.D. Arch Bishop of Chennai Mylapore 12-19-1997"; another, "Church of Saints Joachim and Anne Parents of the Mother of God was blessed by His Holiness Pope John Paul II 5th February 1986 During his visit to Madras."

14 http://vgphousing.in/profile-vgp-groups.html. Accessed April 2021.

15 http://www.lifepositive.com/Mind/ethics-and-values/peace/c_823_peace-search.asp, accessed March 13, 2014. This article is no longer active on the site.

16 I use their names and the photos with full permission.

17 In her influential *Darśan*, Diana Eck describes this touching with the eyes in its Hindu context, although without reference to notions of haptic visuality which were not yet developed.

18 Here I am using the University of Madras *Tamil Lexicon* 1962, reprinted from the excellent 1936 version. An association between *matam* and "belief" speaks to the much-debated issue of Indian language equivalents for the Euro-American academic constructed term "Religion." In the 1990s, scholars in the study of religion under the influence of postmodernism widely argued that the very term "Religion" was a construct of Western academic discourse. The most influential was Jonathan Z. Smith's "Religion, Religions, Religious" (2004, 179).

19 Here I again use the University of Madras *Tamil Lexicon* 1962.

20 Thanks to my colleague at Syracuse University's South Asia Center, Prof. Radha Kumar, who concurs with my sense that the term does not translate as "above." I use her term *melding* here.

21 https://pluhttps://pluralism.org/aboutralism.org/about, accessed May 2021. Also Eck (1993, 2001).

22 Twitter reply from John Thatamanil@JJT1, November 7, 2020. Accessed May 30, 2021.

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Interleaf C: Sai Baba, Ghana, and Oceanic Spiritual Crossovers

Neelima Jeychandran

Coastal West Africa is home to many "new" religions, some ancient elsewhere but recently introduced, others originating there. Understandings of Shirdi Sai Baba's devotional cultures bridge such differences and tell us how new forms of spirituality intersect with trajectories of Indian migrations and the circulation of religious faiths and materialities. Thousands of Ghanaians now undertake Hindu practices but in their own culturally inflected ways. Other religions such as Sikhism are slowly gaining followers in Ghana and Togo where devotees not only recite the Guru Granth Sahib and learn ritualistic care of holy scripture, but are equally immersed in Kundalini yoga and meditation practices. Here I examine spiritual crossovers between the Indian Ocean and Atlantic worlds by focusing upon three different religious spaces in Accra, Ghana: The Hindu Monastery of Africa (HMA), the Hindu Temple at Osu, and the home altar of an early Indian migrant family. These hybrid Afrasian sacred spaces in Accra exemplify how Baba is integrated into trans-religious devotional practices.

What we may loosely identify as "Hindu" religious landscapes of contemporary Ghana are linked to the HMA, the largest Hindu temple in West Africa. Its magnificent tower overlooks demure homes and buildings of the Odorkor neighborhood of Accra, and the monastery's architecture plays a pivotal role in popularizing Hinduism in Ghana. Around 20,000 Ghanaians currently follow spiritual practices sponsored by the HMA and other organizations such as the Society for Krishna Consciousness (Atiemo 2017). The late Swami Ghanananda, founder and guru of the HMA from 1970, was a traditional healer who hoped to acquire herbal skills in India but discovered far deeper inspiration (Wuaku 2013). Swami was responsible for expanding the monastery and opening branches across southern Ghana, Togo, and Côte d'Ivoire.

Reflecting West African Hindu devotional cultures, the HMA presents a bricolage of chromolithographs, calendars, and icons of Indian deities and gurus including Sathya Sai Baba and Shirdi Sai Baba, Indian philosophers, Gandhi and other social-reformers, Sikh gurus, and Jesus and Mary. These rich meaning-making sources tell us how Indic religious traditions, sainthood, and guru-based movements coexist while referring to histories
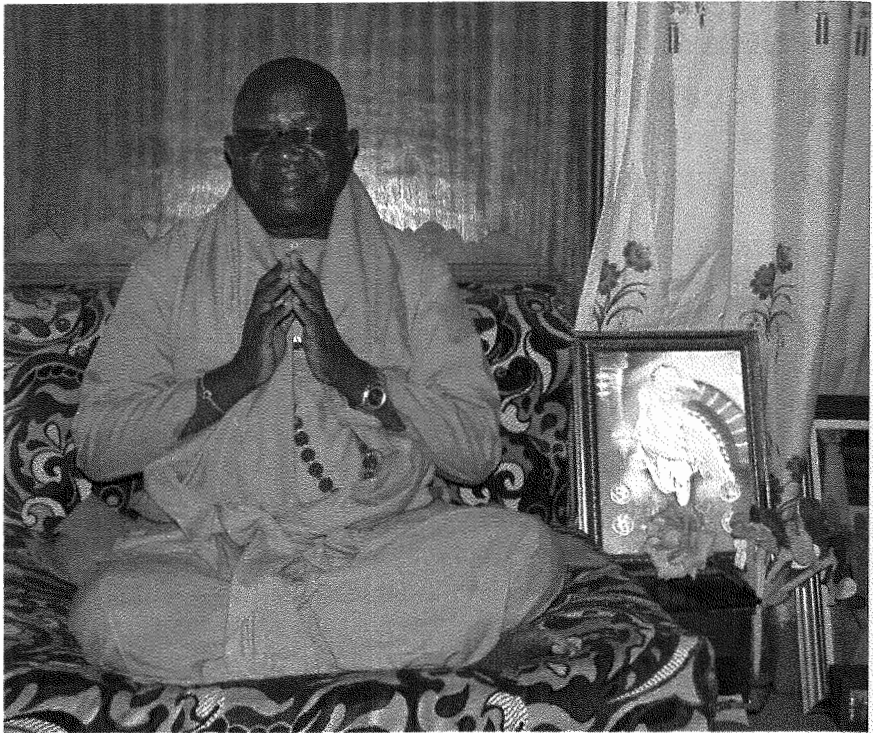
Figure C.1 The late Swami Ghanananda, founder and guru of the Hindu Monastery of Accra, Ghana, 2012.

Source: Photograph by Mary Nooter Roberts.

of early Indian migrations, postcolonial African-Asian solidarities, and the syncretic worldview that Swami Ghanananda promoted. Novel icons and *murtis* often brought back from pilgrimages to India are placed on the many shrines of the HMA, where they shape the perceptions of Africans who worship them and suggest new ways to interpret spiritual affiliations. Swami kept a framed image of Shirdi Sai Baba by his side, as he and other Ghanaians feel that Indian religiosities are resonant with local religions and an alternative to stultifying Evangelical Christianity (Wuaku 2013) (Figure C.1). The Ghanaian guru-led Hindu movement created a conducive space at the HMA where other guru-based faiths thrived.

A similar confluence of faiths is found at the Hindu Temple of Osu, Accra. Situated inside the Indian Social Culture Center, large wooden altars are graced by Indic gods and goddesses. The sacred Sikh scripture Guru Granth Sahib, wrapped in silk, occupies a central niche behind which are large framed images of Sikh gurus. Just adjacent is a *murti* of Shirdi Sai Baba brought from India by a devotee.[1] Adjacent are busts of Jesus and Mary with a large photograph of Sathya Sai Baba in the background (Figure C.2).
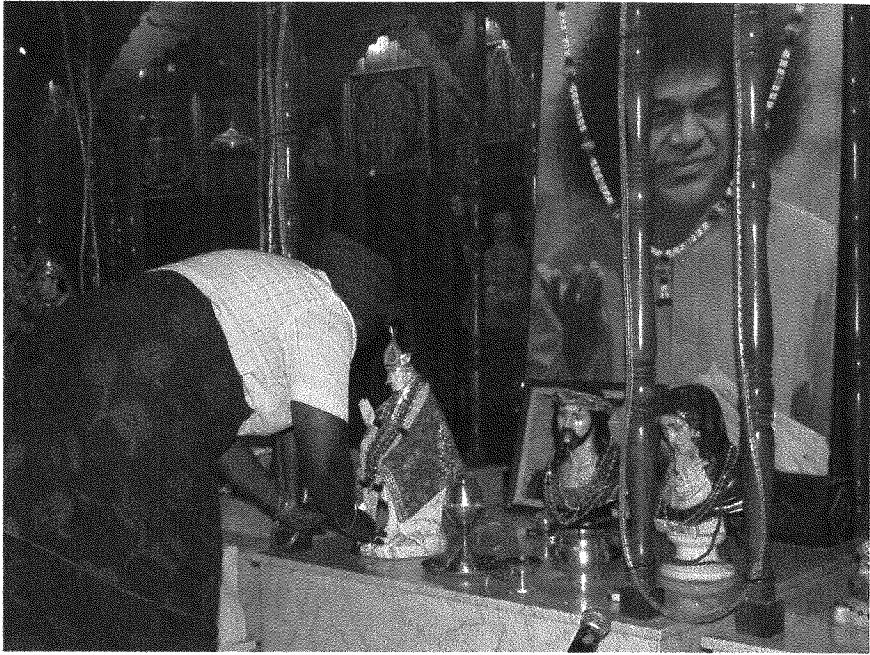
Figure C.2 A devotee offering prayers to Shirdi Sai Baba on an altar for Shirdi Sai Baba, Sathya Sai Baba, Jesus, and Mary at the Hindu Temple in Osu, Accra, Ghana, 2012.

Source: Photograph by Mary Nooter Roberts.

Most Ghanaian Hindu devotees understand Sathya Sai Baba as an incarnation of Shirdi Baba. The altars' arrangements present "African Hinduism" through which religiosities new to Africa blend with Christianity and traditional African beliefs. The temple priest notes that since Shirdi Sai Baba had pronounced that devotees can see him in any form, Jesus and Mary are present with Baba. Such proximities are seen in Sai centers across the world where pictures of Sathya Sai Baba and Jesus are placed next to each other (see Waghorne, this volume).

In the next altar is a *murti* of Jhulelal, a deity worshiped by Hindus and Muslim Sindhis and who is presented as a pious old man seated on a fish. Jhulelal is associated with a larger group of Sufi oceanic saints and is also regarded as an incarnation of Varuna, the Hindu water god (Dandekar 2016). As an interfaith deity, Jhulelal has been worshipped in South Asia by communities associated with Indian Ocean maritime trade and travel, and the deity came to West Africa with the migration of Sindhi people. Such earlier networks of religious circulation coupled with the presence of a diverse South Asian community in West Africa in the 1960s and 1970s paved the way for accepting twentieth-century saints including Sathya Sai Baba. In 1976,

businessman Kishin Khubchandani introduced this guru-based movement to Ghana and joined forces with other members of the South Asian community to start a Sai Baba Center in Accra. Other West African devotees of Sathya Sai Baba like Victor Kanu, a former diplomat from Sierra Leone, played a vital role in promoting Sai Baba worship in Africa through establishing schools and other charitable institutions.[2] Also, Sathya Sai Baba's visit to Kenya and Uganda in 1968 propelled the Sai Baba movement across Africa (see Srinivas 2008). As elsewhere in Africa, the Sai Center's extensive community work played an important role in the Sai Baba movement gaining popularity in Ghana (ibid.), and devotees also organized tours to Puttaparthi and Sathya Sai Baba's ashram in Whitefield, Bangalore. Many also visited Shirdi during such pilgrimages.

Today, Jhulelal, Sathya Sai Baba, and Shirdi Sai Baba share fluid and composite transnational religious identities within and beyond South Asian diasporas. Since Shirdi Baba promises to appear in any form, he is integrated into temples but also appears in names of shops and small businesses. An example of Baba's transversal spiritual presence is the phrase "Om Sai Ram" written on the entrance to the Kundalini meditation center in Lomé, Togo, which demonstrates Baba's assimilation into West African yoga and meditation practices.

The integration of Ghanaian and South Asian traditions can be seen during Thursday evening pujas for Shirdi Sai Baba and Sathya Sai Baba at the Hindu Temple of Osu (Figure C.3). Such syncretism is not unique. In Ghanaian and other West African contexts, histories of adaptation abound, as ritual and performance aesthetics from South Asian religions and Islam are integrated into local practice. While Hindu visual motifs are often incorporated into altars and rituals dedicated to the Mami Wata pantheon of ocean spirits (Hill 2018; Rush 2008 and this volume), Bollywood music is sometimes employed to recite praises of the Prophet Muhammad during festivities (Young 2017). A similar melding of devotional soundscapes occurs as devotees sing *bhajans* for Baba in the Akan language (see Shankar 2020). We also see a visual mélange of African and Indian motifs in *pujas* for Baba, such as a chair upholstered in Kente cloth that promises and welcomes the presence of Sathya Sai Baba in Accra.

During Thursday *puja,* Ghanaian devotees and worshipers from the Indian diaspora sing *bhajans* and perform *aarti* for Sathya Sai Baba. Drums are used in Akan cultures to summon and appease spirits (Nketia 1963), and Sai devotees sing *kirtans* and recite Baba's 108 names to Ghanaian-Indian cadences. Devotees blend conceptual, linguistic, and musical codes and create sites for religious exchange and a "guru-language" that is highly mobile and transnational (Srinivas 2008: 309, 313). Baba's inclusive philosophy and performative engagements have also appealed to Christian Ghanaians. Indeed, most Ghanaian devotees of Baba are also Christians. The priest of the Hindu temple noted that Ghanaian devotees worship Shiva, Krishna, and other deities as well as Shirdi Sai Baba and Sathya

Figure C.3 Thursday evening *puja* for Shirdi and Sathya Sai Babas with Kente-upholstered throne for Sathya Sai Baba to our right, Accra, Ghana, 2012.

Source: Photograph by Mary Nooter Roberts.

Sai Baba.[3] As Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu points out, devout Methodists, Presbyterians, Anglicans, and Roman Catholics have turned to Sathya Sai Baba in search of spiritual fulfillment and most feel that their faith in Christ can be deepened with such affiliation. Asamoah-Gyadu also notes that lyrics of Ghanaian Christian hymns have been revised as *bhajans* for Sathya Sai Baba (2002: 20). Songbooks at the temple are printed in English so that devotees can easily immerse themselves in rituals. Collective engagement during *bhajans* through singing, clapping, and playing musical instruments generates affective participation and creates a sensory devotional register for Sai Baba devotees through which they may connect with each other (see Srinivas 2008: 304).

Such a fusion of religious outlooks and practices extends to some in the Indian diaspora in Ghana. As one of the earliest Indian families to settle in Ghana, the home of the Mohinanis served as the first temple for Indic religions in Accra before construction of the Osu temple. Gianchand Motiram Mohinani arrived in Ghana in 1937 and established a trading company. The Mohinanis' home altar was a composite devotional space, for it housed the first Guru Granth Sahib in Ghana and Indian families visited their shrine

in the 1960s.[4] At the Mohinanis' residence, Shirdi Sai Baba was worshiped along with other pan-Indian deities. The late Nirmala Mohinani, who was the custodian of the shrine, also served as an informal priestess and was the president of the Indian Women Association of Ghana for several years. She was an ardent Shirdi Baba devotee.

Baba arrived in West Africa with other Indic religiosities, and devotional practices have been recontextualized according to indigenous West African worldviews and ritual aesthetics (Wuaku 2013). Because of Baba's multidimensional presence through different media, Ghanaian and Indian devotees easily situate Shirdi Sai Baba in sacred environments of different scales and complexities, from domestic shrines to temple spaces and meditation and yoga centers. For West African devotees, Baba is a trans-religious figure and a protector whose transversal coexistence with ancient deities and local spirits means that he can be venerated with other South Asian saints, fakirs, gurus, and philosophers, as well as with Jesus and Mami Wata deities of the Vodun pantheon (Rush, this volume).

Notes

1 The *murti* seen in Figure C.2 was replaced by a marble *murti* of Shirdi Sai Baba a few years later.
2 I thank Antonio Rigopoulos for informing me about Victor Kanu's role in spreading Sathya Sai worship in Africa (personal communication, July 8, 2021). Also see https://media.radiosai.org/journals/vol_09/01OCT11/kanu1.htm, accessed July 14, 2021.
3 Communication with the priest of the Hindu Temple of Osu, 2012.
4 The Mohinani family house in 1940s served as the unofficial Indian embassy before India's independence. The family left Ghana in 2017 and moved to Singapore.

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7   Baba's Guiding Hand

Artists and Acheiropoiesis

Mary "Polly" Nooter Roberts[1]

Shirdi Sai Baba lives in narratives. As Govind R. Dabholkar explained in his introduction to the *Shri Sai Satcharita* as the volume through which he presented Baba's life and teachings, such stories "are enough to make the misfortunes of a creature recede at once," for "with reverence and faith, a simple, trusting devotee will surely and easily cross the ocean of worldly life" (Kher 2008: 20). Dabholkar himself averred that Baba made him "his instrument of writing" as the saint "held his hand to fashion the letters" of the *Shri Sai Satcharita*. Indeed, Dabholkar was "*but* the instrument moving mechanically*, as Baba *guided.*"[2] The *play* between the mechanics of craft-based skills and Baba's divine guidance is the theme of this essay. So will be realities of such intercession, for the *Shri Sai Satcharita* is not simply a book with spine and pages, although it is that: Baba intervened to assist Dabholkar in its composition, and so the volume is both *by* Baba and *of* him. The *Shri Sai Satcharita* bears his blessings, that is, and some devotees kiss its pages, caress its words, and cradle the book, bringing it to rest against a part of the body afflicted by dire malady or, like the belly of a pregnant woman, filled with potential.[3]

Many Indian and Mauritian artists have known such *play* between their "mechanical" capacities and Baba's interventions when realizing his active image to bring the saint's presence to circumstances and needs of everyday life.[4] Indeed, "play" in English recalls the joyously unexpected, hence "ludic" nature of Baba's appearances and intercessions known as *leelas*. As such, the saint's acts are manifestations of the "unpredictable and spontaneous.... Divine 'otherness'" of Hindu deities more generally (Babb 1983: 120).

Most famously, Balaji Vasant Talim (1888–1970), already an accomplished sculptor with a productive studio in Mumbai, found himself stymied when commissioned to realize the *murti* (embodiment) of Baba that has graced the saint's tomb in Shirdi since 1954. All available photographs of Baba were frontal and so permitted *darshan* (exchange of gazes) (see Figure I.1) but how could Talim then realize three-dimensional particularities of the saint's profile and back? As explained by Rajiv Talim (b.1963), the grandson who maintains the great man's practice, when Baba appeared in "a glow of light," B. V. Talim's "problems were solved in a fraction of a second of

darshan.... [and] the *murti* at Shirdi is so lively because of Baba's miracle"—
his apparition to the artist, that is (Figure 7.1). "Baba himself is there" in the
murti, Rajiv continued. "He is there to take care of everything. That divine
power is there. So many people go there [to Shirdi] and everyone just starts
crying. It is something different, some extra power, *jagrut*, it means 'alive.'
That statue is alive"[5] (Figure 7.2). Indeed, "every devotee who goes to the
Samadhi Mandir [tomb of Baba] feels that Baba is looking only at him or
her, no matter where they stand. In fact Baba is not just looking *at* them but
he is searching *for* them with his benevolent gaze" (Chitluri 2009: 143).

Figure 7.1 Balaji Vasant Talim putting finishing touches on the *murti* of Baba now
in Shirdi. Mumbai, India, c. 1952.

Source: Photographer unknown. Courtesy of Rajiv Talim.

Figure 7.2 The *murti* of Baba realized by B. V. Talim that has graced the Samadhi
   Mandir of Shirdi since 1954. Shirdi, India, 2009.

Source: Photograph by Mary Nooter Roberts.

Baba's intercession was a transformative *event*, not just for the artist him-
self but for those permitted to visualize and so receive Baba's blessing pres-
ence as empowered by his guidance of B. V. Talim. In a sense, that is, Talim's
well-known story becomes theirs, and like the artist, devotees hope for the
saint's *leelas*, just as myriad, similarly compelling accounts of Baba's gifts to
particular persons are shared in conversations, online, and through social
media.[6] As Hans Belting has asserted, a sacred "image is itself the event"
(2007: 38) as informed by shared narratives like Talim's (cf. Elison 2014: 163).
So it was in Mauritius when Rajinee Pillay, who trained in Beaux Arts and
was not yet dedicated to Baba, was asked to create *murtis* of the saint: Baba

came to her so she could capture his likeness in dimensionality and detail (Figure 7.3). Also in Mauritius, Baba guided Mr. Gungah's untrained hand as he fashioned the saint in cement to inhabit an ocean-side shrine longingly looking to India (Figure 7.4).

Visual hagiography results when exegeses like these mark moments of Baba's personal, creative presence.[7] Such convivial accounts also foster theoretical and cross-cultural scholarly considerations. In particular, Baba's "collaborative agencies" (Loar 2018: 492) through which he guides artists' hands can be understood as modified acheiropoiesis, after the Greek term for sacred portraits "made without [human] hands" so important to early
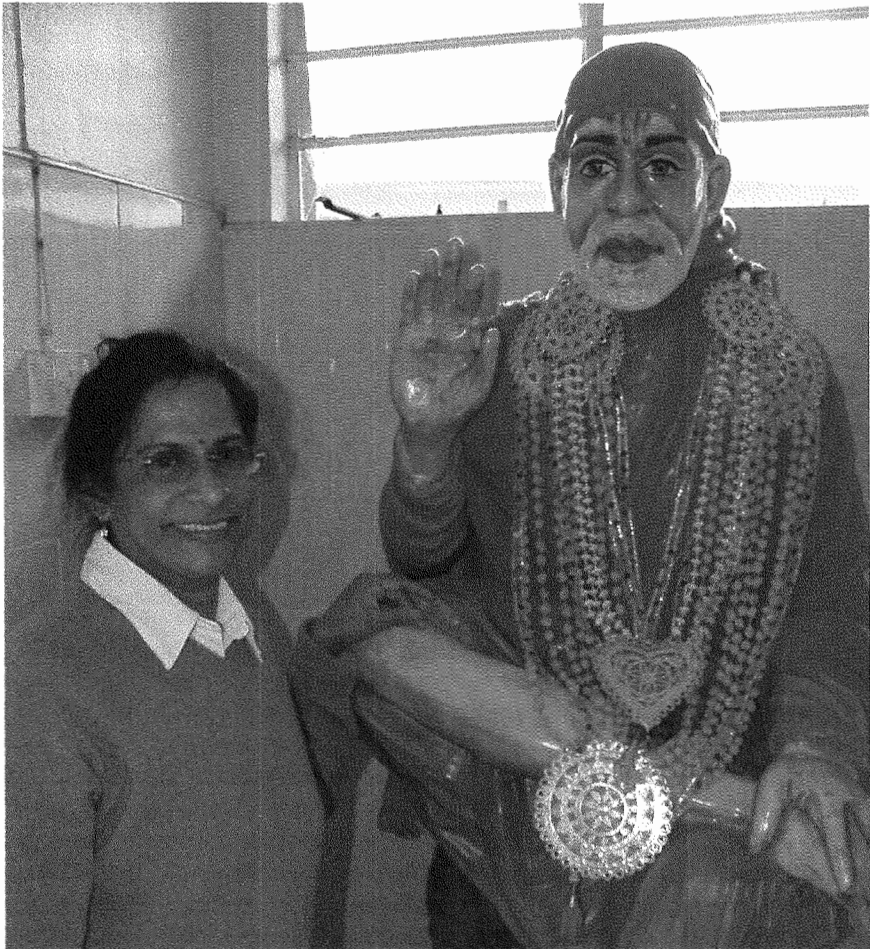
Figure 7.3 Rajinee Pillay and the *murti* of Baba that she realized with his guidance. Montagne Blanche, Mauritius, 2009.

Source: Photograph by Mary Nooter Roberts.

Figure 7.4 Murti of Baba realized in cement by Mr. Gungah. Cap Malheureux,
    Mauritius, 2009.

Source: Photograph by Mary Nooter Roberts.

iconophilic Christianity. One thinks of "the true images" of the Mandylion
and the Veil of Veronica created directly by divinity (Belting 2007: 78 and
passim). The event of Baba assisting Talim is somewhat different from these
profoundly significant instances of acheiropoiesis, however, and instead
recalls the story of how Saint Luke painted a portrait of the Virgin and
the Christ Child.[8] As David Morgan (2005: 15–21) explains, Luke's Gospel
offers the most detailed account of the birth and infancy of Jesus, so who
better qualified than he to limn such holy personages? Luke's original pic-
ture is understood by many to be the much-revered and infinitely replicated
icon of the Madonna and Child long held in the Santa Maria Maggiore of
Rome (ibid. 18). Yet the Evangelist had never seen Mary or Jesus with his

own eyes. Artists of the Late Middle Ages such as Jan Gossaert depicted Luke painting his portrait of the Madonna and Child, and in so doing, Luke is shown to be seeing them for the first time through his own work. Viewers of Gossaert's picture and others of the same theme were permitted to see the saint seeing, that is, but such complex visual events were only possible because an angel had guided Luke's hand (ibid. 15–20). Realization of the saint's treasured icon was possible because of his distinct knowledge of Christ's virgin birth, yet divine intercession was needed for Luke to complete the image that has conveyed its active blessings forever after.

True Images of Baba

When considering how "modified acheiropoiesis" is achieved in realizing *murtis* as did B. V. Talim with Baba's guidance, it is important to recognize that an understanding of the term *murti* should not be reduced to "figural sculpture" as it may become when sacred objects are exiled to art museums. One recalls the prescient complaint about Eurocentric mistreatment of colonized people's numinous possessions, that "when men die, they enter into history. When statues die, they enter into art" (Marker et al. 1953). *Murti* implies "embodiment," further implying the accessibility of divinity as framed in ancient treatises and rituals meant to bring works to life through transubstantiative "'establishment' (*pratistha*)" and "'awakening' of the image [that] centers around the opening of the eyes (*netronmilana*)" (Davis 1999: 32–35). Thereafter, darshanic exchange of gazes between deity and supplicant can occur, sometimes through haptic praxis as devotees touch *murtis* and then their own eyes to bring divine insight to bear upon personal existence.[9]

A dilemma nonetheless presents itself through the dialectic of *saguna* mundane form and *nirguna* divine formlessness. As Brahma asked Vishnu, "'how should humans worship him…. for He is not ever limited by any conditions, and his form cannot be ascertained…?' Vishnu answered firmly, 'He can be worshiped in embodied form only. There is no worship without manifest form.'" Icons thus "become an important entry of God into the world," while "the seeming paradox of the Highest Lord consenting to confine himself within an inanimate circumscribed piece of stone must be seen in light of Vishnu's benevolent disposition" (Davis 1999: 30–32). Like Vishnu then, Baba *condescends*—in the best sense of that term—to "come down to" and inhabit his portrait pictures and sculptures so that he may behold supplicants and they him.

Just as any sense that *murti* is equivalent to "statue" is both inadequate and misleading, so is translating the Sanskrit term *shilpin* as "artist," for while the word does suggest competence of craft and other aspects of artistry, in earlier times and to some degree still, such a person's "role and skill in facilitating… profound change in consciousness" has come to the fore. A *shilpin* looks to "transpersonal levels of reality, and to depict those levels in objective form" through reference to "the original creative act—the descent of Consciousness into matter—and the forms he creates facilitate the ascent

of matter into Consciousness" (Shearer 1993: 16). This last perplexity again reflects the paradox of *nirguna* and *saguna* as formlessness is given form to invite divinity to human circumstances.

When bringing to the fore the voices of artists like Talim, Pillay, and Gungah, the *efficacies* of their works must be kept in mind through locally defined understandings of *indexicality* that ensure Baba's presence and proximity despite diasporic dislocations and, nowadays, through unlimited digital/virtual availability of the saint's images. Western theories of indexicality articulated long ago by Charles Sanders Peirce (see Hartshorne et al. 1960–1966) are grounded in presumed ontological relationships between film technologies and photographed subjects. That which is deemed "indexical" provides you-are-there impressions of captured moments that viewers tend to accept as "real." South Asians have participated in and modified such conventions since photography became available to them in the mid-nineteenth century.[10] For Baba's devotees, "true images" (Belting 2007)—that is, those endowed with and bestowing the saint's living presence—can only be achieved with Baba's consent and in his mystical presence, as the case of B. V. Talim illuminates.[11]

Six to nine portrait photographs of Baba are widely deemed "authentic," while debate about the veracity of others proves perpetual. That even "true" pictures of the saint may strike some as portraying different individuals is recognized in local visual epistemology, for

> of the few pictures there are of Baba, we feel we could be looking at a different person in each of them.... Sri Babuji once described the phenomenon of the ever-changing features of the saint's face which he likened to a river: When we watch a flowing river, in one way, it is the same river, and in another way, it is always different, the river is always moving. The saint is one whose actions are free from the influences of past or future. In this way, he is constantly being reborn, each moment a fresh moment, each life a fresh life! That is why we never get tired of looking at a saint's face—there is always something new in it.[12]

Of especial significance is the matrix picture taken in 1911 by the Bombay-based professional photographer D. D. Neroy, who sent a print to Baba[13] (see Figure I.1). The saint quickly asserted that the image should be installed in the Dvarkamai mosque of Shirdi where he dwelled so that "thousands upon thousands of devotees will have the benefit of praying to it" (Chitluri 2009: 63). Baba gave copies of the picture to some of his devoted followers, saying to one that "through this photo I have come to your home" (Vinny 2002: 113, 124–125). Before the *murti* realized by B. V. Talim and based upon Neroy's photograph could be installed in 1954 to overlook Baba's tomb in Shirdi, the matrix image assured his presence. The photo is still dressed every day and reverently carried in weekly and festival processions around Shirdi (Figure 7.5).

Figure 7.5 The dressed iconic photograph of Baba is taken in procession to visit sites of Shirdi that the saint frequented. Shirdi, India, 2009.

Source: Photograph by Mary Nooter Roberts.

Baba inhabits his portraits so that he can make himself available to those in need, wherever they may be. As Vinny Chitluri holds, "without a shadow of a doubt, Baba is in the image. When you bring the idol home, it becomes so personal. I will bathe him like a child, place a *bindi* like I'm doing to my baby or a close relative. We have this personal relationship with Baba, with his pictures."[14] Devotees in India and Mauritius speak of how the eyes in Baba's photos blink and twinkle, how they follow wherever one goes, and how it is difficult to stare into Baba's eyes without weeping. Through such haptic visuality, people assert that taking *darshan* from Baba's image produces goosebumps and "electrical vibrations" in one's fingertips.[15] Sharing Baba's gaze can make the hair stand on end, and the saint sometimes walks right out of his picture. Some see Baba's lips move as he speaks from his images, and innumerable stories relate how Baba has cured disease and brought wellbeing, purpose, and solace via his portraits. Clearly, such embodied performative engagements effect life-changing transformations.

Four paintings of Baba are also "original" and called "photographs" by many devotees (cf. Pinney 2004). Painted by Shamrao Vinayak with Baba's consent and in his presence, devotees explain that these works are endowed with the same truths that photographs possess. One of Vinayak's works is
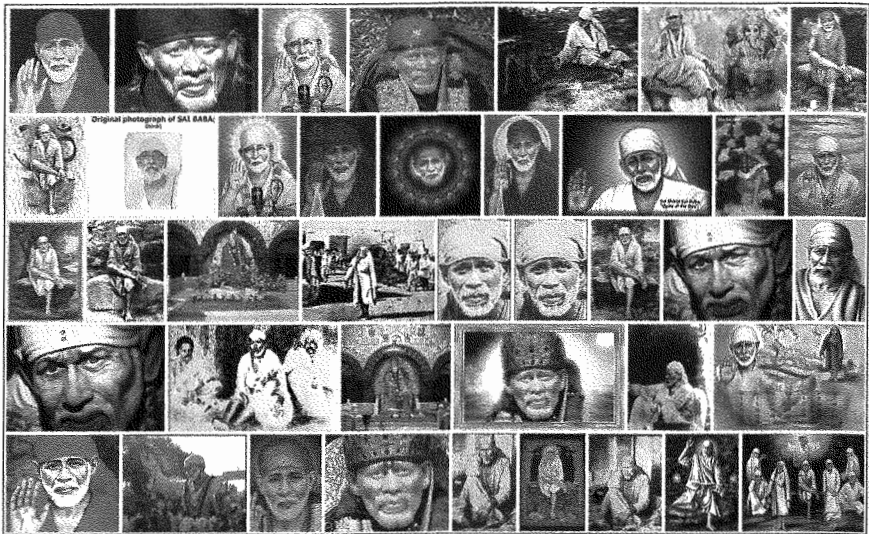
Figure 7.6 Screen-grab from Google Images resulting from the prompt "Shirdi Sai Baba," 2009.

Source: Photograph by Mary Nooter Roberts.

on display in the museum at Shirdi, as is a painting by the Bombay por-traitist Shamrao Jayakar that had long occupied the place where Baba sat in his Dvarkamai mosque in Shirdi but was removed to avoid drying from Baba's perpetual *dhuni* fire.[16] Narrative paintings of Baba by an artist named Pednekar as well as films and other media enacting Baba's life are respected and felt by some to bear the saint's presence and so permit *darshan*, while others find them to be more instructive than elementally "truthful"[17] (see Figures A.1 and 8.7).

Even global visual technologies bear special potencies recognized through local visual epistemologies, witness what occurs when one enters "Shirdi Sai Baba" into a search of Google Images. A virtual cascade of pictures contin-ues as one scrolls and scrolls until reaching "show more results," whereupon a click pours forth another river of portraits (Figure 7.6). Baba lives in such media-of-the-moment, and while many take *darshan* with any given picture, imagine the blessing effects of such infinitude![18]

Artistry and Guidance

As we have seen with regard to depictions of Baba, the artistic "mechanics"—again extending G. R. Dabholkar's use of the term (Kher 2008: 20)—may be enhanced by divine guidance. In B. V. Talim's case, the sculptor was highly proficient at his craft, as when he used a complex instrument called a "point-ing machine" as three-dimensional calipers to determine relative height,

Figure 7.7 Detail of the maquette prepared in 1952 by B. V. Talim to realize Baba's *murti*. Mumbai, India, 2009.

Source: Photograph by Mary Nooter Roberts.

breadth, and depth of Baba's face or foot by transferring such details from marks on his maquette still used by his grandson decades later[19] (Figure 7.7). As Rajiv Talim explained, "more than three thousand points" carefully placed by his grandfather permit accurate replication. "The back is very detailed, it is absolutely detailed," but again, only because Baba interceded to assist the artist even as he then used a non-local technology.

As Rajiv Talim explained of his grandfather's and his own realization of *murtis*, "Baba's statue is already there inside—we just remove the excess marble! Baba is already there." Such a sense was Michelangelo's as well, who "famously described stone sculpture as the slow release of a form as

it emerged out of the block" and that "his role as an artist [was] to liberate the human form trapped inside the block by gradually chipping away at the stone surface."[20] Yet only Baba's guidance permitted the work's perfection by B. V. Talim, including the release of the *murti*'s embodiment within the marble mass.

While B. V. Talim might have chosen Rajasthani marble because of its more ready availability and reasonable pricing, the "sugary grain" and crystalline structures of such stone can crumble during fine work. As Rajiv Talim told a Mumbai reporter, his grandfather was not satisfied with the quality of Rajasthani marble, but then one day a friend who worked at the port of Bombay phoned to say that an immense chunk of marble seemed to have been abandoned there. "When he went to the docks, it turned out to be a marble block shipped from Italy. He thought this was nothing but divine intervention and that is how the idol at Shirdi came into being."[21] Indeed, the block was of what many deem the world's finest marble for sculpting, as found in Italy's Carrara Michelangelo quarry. Its "powder-like crystal" permitted realization of tiniest details and could be finished to "a tremendous polish and shine." That it then "looks so pure" surely contributes to the resulting *murti*'s "liveliness," as Rajiv Talim put it. And that the Carrara Michelangelo marble unexpectedly became available to B. V. Talim was not due to easily understood slip-ups by unidentified persons: As an apparition, the block *occurred*.[22]

While the *murti* of Baba now in the saint's Samadhi Mandir is "a substantive presence in itself," the translucence of its material, especially as it is anointed with affusions (*abhisheka*), "also allows a viewer in the proper spirit of devotion and knowledge to glimpse with a devotional eye through it—imperfectly, since all human encounters with transcendence will be limited—to the transcendent reality of the deity."[23] Yet as Rajiv Talim explained, the water, honey, sugar, yogurt, and ghee of *abhisheka* "all contain chemical and the marble absorbs all these things. And they have been doing this for the past fifty years so the color of the marble has changed." Now, at the suggestion of Rajiv's late father Harish B. Talim, those caring for the *murti* "dilute the five nectars, and to clean the *murti* they dab it with a soft cloth."[24] Such an account subscribes to Richard Davis's (1999) sense of processual "lives of Indian images."

Rajiv Talim is his family's third generation of sculptors, and he is encouraging his only son to follow him. "It is Baba's wish. That is why we are here in life, to serve him." Rajiv reports that "Baba is kind enough to me that I have made fifteen full-sized statues" directly from his grandfather's maquette, as well as smaller ones including many cast in bronze at his foundry separate from the Mumbai studio.[25] In recent years, Rajiv has traveled to Carrara to select blocks of marble that he transports to Mumbai to realize wondrous *murti* of Baba that now grace important temples the world over. Yet such works are not "copies" of the *murti* realized by B. V. Talim, for as Rajiv explains, "Baba's body is there. This is not a replica. This is the original

body" of the saint as is present in the *murti* in the Samadhi Mandir of Shirdi and others realized by Harish Talim and now Rajiv: Each bears the perfection of Baba's acheiropoietic guidance as well as his blessing presence.

Baba in Mauritius

Baba is present everywhere in the world through the sharing of personal stories regarding his intercessions in ordinary people's lives, as well as portraits and *murtis* of the saint. Baba also guides the hands of artists far less famous than B. V. Talim and his descendants. Their more modest accounts are no less inspiring and instructive. Here follow the experiences of several artists from the island nation of Mauritius that lies in the southern Indian Ocean to the east of Madagascar.[26]

Mauritius is a member of the African Union due to relative proximity to the continent, histories of enslaved African labor on sugar plantations, and thirty percent of its present population self-identifying as Afro-Mauritian. South Asian Mauritians constitute some sixty percent, and while many are Muslim, Mauritius has a special relationship to Hindu India because of politico-economic realities of the Indian Ocean World as underscored by spiritual revelations: In 1897, a *pujari* named Shri Jhummon Gin Gosagne from the town of Terre Rouge had a vision that a deep lake in the island's forested highlands is a tributary of the Ganges. In time immemorial, Shiva and Parvathi circled the earth and Shiva decided to show his consort the beautiful Indian Ocean island beneath them. As Gangadhar "Upholder of the Ganges" and so "the embodiment of purity and divinity," Shiva bears the river in his coiffure to prevent the world from flooding. As Shiva and Parvathi descended toward what would become Mauritius, a few drops fell from Shiva's locks to form the "emerald jewel" of a lake flanked on one side by "a 'Shiva Linga' in the form of a temple-shaped hillock."[27] Mauritian Hindus soon began visiting the sacred place, and in 1972, the association was recognized more formally when Pandit Vidya Nidhi poured water from the Ganges into Ganga Talao, "Lake of the Ganges" in the Bhojpuri language of Bihar, India.[28] The lake is now recognized as directly connected by the holy river that leaves the Subcontinent, plunges under the Indian Ocean, and emerges in the sylvan heights of Mauritius. Ganga Talao's water blesses and heals. A friend confided that when her father realized death was near, he hailed a taxi to drive him to Ganga Talao so that he could wade into the blessed waters and leave this world—and that he did.

For more than a century, an elaborate Maha Shivaratri ritual has been held that now attracts hundreds of thousands of pilgrims to Ganga Talao. Indeed, it is said to be the largest Hindu devotional congregation anywhere in the world outside of India itself. The festive occasion requires months of planning and weeks of rigorous discipline, and for three days "men, women, children of all religions, all dressed in white, in their thousands, from every nook and corner of the island [as well as from overseas], travel to the lake on

foot, in a slow and never-ending procession."[29] Pilgrims in twos and fours carry great *kanwar* structures of bamboo bearing *murtis* and festooned with colorful paper streamers and flashing with mirrors. At the entrance to Ganga Talao they pass a thirty-three-meter-tall *murti* of Shiva dedicated in 2007 as a faithful extension of the god's sublime "embodiment" rising from Sursagar Lake in Vadodara (Baroda), Gujarat (Barrun 2002: 195–199). A great Shiva Lingam named Mauritiusewar Mahadev located in a temple on the shore of Ganga Talao is the thirteenth Jyotirlingam, with the first twelve in India and a fourteenth in Australia. From the base of Shiva's *murti* extend "one hundred and eight steps, like beads in a *japa mala* (rosary), climb[ing] to the top of the hill which is crowned with a life-size marble statue of Hanuman." The place is especially blessed, and of interest here is that Rajinee Pillay (Figure 7.3) is among artists commissioned to realize *murtis* of Hindu deities for Maha Shivaratri processions and events at Ganga Talao.

When visited in 2009, Mme. Pillay was enjoying substantial success through her ceramics studio.[30] Her Beaux Arts training was manifest in some of her works, as in an elaborate fountain she had crafted to include two Romantic female figures in alluring, scantily clad recline; but most of her output was devoted to creating a great many small *murtis* for the Maha Shivaratri and then larger works for personal shrines and community temples. These latter follow the accessible aesthetics of "calendar art" that brings esoteric aspects of divinity to popular eyes and devotional practices (Jain 2007). The walls of Mme. Pillay's studio hold many such images, and stylistic influences of the genre are reflected in her realization of the aforementioned *murti* of Baba for which the saint interceded to assure its perfection (Figure 7.3).

A self-taught Mauritian artist named Mr. Gungah has also experienced revelations (Figure 7.4). Over the course of four decades, he has created a temple complex at Cap Malheureux (Cape of Misery), so named for early shipping accidents and colonial battles along the northernmost tip of the island. In 1980, a small red *murti* of Baba presented itself to Mr. Gungah from among rocks exposed at low tide, and the apparition was soon followed by a dream in which the saint asked Mr. Gungah to create a beautiful place where he could reside, for at the time Baba had no such haven along the northern shores of Mauritius. So Mr. Gungah has done, building a most remarkable shrine set against the sun-dappled waters of the Indian Ocean, prayer flags snapping in the winds of tropical storms (Figure 7.8).

First Mr. Gungah created a small grotto for Baba's *murti* from the beach, but with fasting and prayers and by saving money from his modest income as a building contractor, he and his family were soon able to create an entire environment dedicated to Baba. As someone long involved in construction, Mr. Gungah was adept at laying cement, but the *murti* of the saint was the first he had ever sculpted from the material. As Mr. Gungah says, he had no idea how to do such a thing, but Baba came to him, took his hand,

Figure 7.8 Mr. Gungah's shrine presenting Baba and other Hindu deities. Cap
Malheureux, Mauritius, 2009.

Source: Photograph by Mary Nooter Roberts.

showed him how to shape the cement and then how to bring the *murti* to life.
Thereafter, Mr. Gungah could add a Shiva Lingam and *murtis* of Hanuman,
Kali, and Ganga to the shrine.

On another occasion, Baba came to Mr. Gungah in a dream to show
him his previous life. The saint explained that Mr. Gungah had lived in
Chandigarh, India, and that he had the same wife and the same two daugh-
ters that he has now as well as the same career, but when he was forty all were
killed in a railroad accident. Mr. Gungah was reborn here in Mauritius.
As he holds, "I think that Baba sent me here to do this [construction of a
shrine], because people now come here from all corners of the earth. When
they are tired or sick, they come for tranquility, to talk to Baba, to pray, and
to take some *vibhuti*," the sacred ash that has healing properties and ema-
nates from Baba's images in the shrine within the Gungahs' home. Through
his reincarnation in Mauritius, Mr. Gungah added, "Baba has given me a
great deal of courage, and when people are sick, I take care of them and heal
them. Baba showed me the path."

The temple complex of Mr. Gungah is now but one of innumerable places
in Mauritius and throughout the Indian Ocean world that embody what
Michael Lambek calls "the hermeneutic spiral" whereby spiritual practices,

relationships, ideas, and trajectories are "paralleled in the activities of the inhabitants of the region." As they make "sense of their lives, setting ethical and practical goals and standards at multiple levels of inclusion," people may draw "on trans-oceanic ties to establish local identities" (Lambek 2002: xv). Indeed, while innumerable religious practices are undertaken in Mauritius (see Barrun 2002), devotions to Shirdi Sai Baba are especially pertinent for understanding how sacred environments like that of Mr. Gungah embody both the fluid movements of water and the fixity of landscapes that enable Asian/African connections to come alive. Destabilization of points of origin is inherent to Baba himself who offers a palimpsest of devotional imaginaries.[31] Yet his is also an active blessing presence to one and all, transcending any perceived differences of the sort. As Mr. Gungah states, the apparition of ash on Baba's images *is* his presence. The saint said "I am still living and I am always with you," and the ash is a confirmation of his presence, Mr. Gungah concludes. Baba also stated very plainly that images of him are only vehicles to *nirguna*, or formlessless, as the ultimate goal of devotion. His presence is paradoxical, then, as he gives form to diasporic transactions, previous births and rebirths, lives led and lives yet to come (cf. Rush, this volume).

Transnational Devotions, from Mauritius to Germany

Finally, let us briefly consider a third evocative case of Baba's guidance in Mauritius that now extends to an ashram in Springen, a town west of Frankfurt, Germany. When we first visited Swamiji Vishwananda in 2003 at his *mandir* (temple) in Quatre Bornes, he was warmly hospitable as he showed us his most remarkable place of practice.[32] Swamiji is given to both Baba and the Virgin Mary, reflecting the religious cosmopolitanism of Mauritius with around one quarter of its population Roman Catholic.[33] On the ground floor was a roofed seating space otherwise open to the air, facing a large *murti* of Baba realized in black stone with eyes of white gazing upon all assembled (see Figure I.8).

Behind this focal *murti* were two doors, one squared at the top and leading into a warm room dedicated to Baba and graced by his *murtis* and a portrait photograph of Swamiji, smiling at all entering (Figure 7.9). A panoply of other saints, yogis, and deities important to Swamiji's spiritual trajectory such as Babaji, Jesus, Krishna, and Durga also figured prominently. To the right as one faced Baba's primary *murti* was an arched entrance to a second sanctum. A preternaturally cool room was filled with iconic images and figures of the Virgin based upon her apparitions around the world and across time, and accompanied by the presence of Jesus, again through hallowed visions including the Mandylion acheiropoieton (Figure 7.10). The configuration of these animated places changed over the years as Swamiji and his community realized or obtained divine "embodiments" through two- and three-dimensional works. As the Marian shrine appeared in 2009, behind a Crucifix stood the Black Madonna and Child of Czestochowa. The dove
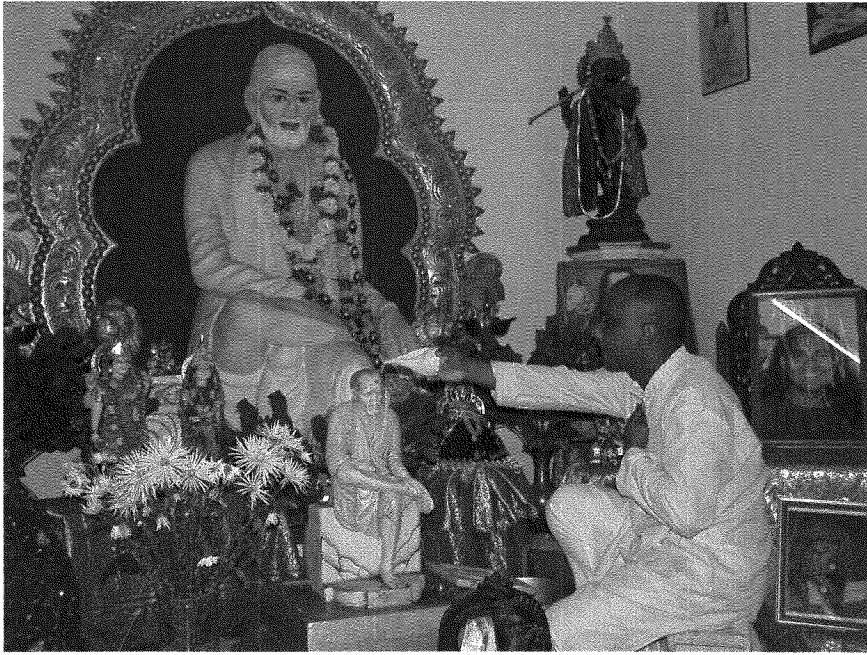
Figure 7.9 Abhishekha ritual performed for Baba in Swamiji Vishwananda's *mandir*. Quatre Bornes, Mauritius, 2003.

Source: Photograph by Mary Nooter Roberts.

of the Holy Spirit above her head was flanked by icons of Saint Martin of Tours, renowned for his pacifism and religious tolerance, and Saint Nicholas of Myra, the wonderworker so generous to the poor and afflicted.

In addition to the two sanctuaries were alcoves dedicated to Babaji and important yogis, one to Lakshmi and Hanuman, another to Kali, and yet another to Hindu gods present in black stone. An image of the Kaaba of Mecca hung in the central courtyard, and Mary's chapel presented a stained glass window inscribed in Hebrew. Above these public places was a floor of Swamiji's chambers and other private spaces. In 2003, he welcomed us to experience an upstairs shrine filled with *murtis* to Baba and other sacred presences. Some, including Baba and Jesus, were covered with miraculously produced ash and *kumkum* vermillion, affirming the presence of divinity (see Figure 8.8).

A 2009 visit to Swamiji's temple in Mauritius revealed significant additions since 2003. New rooms were filled with painted images of myriad Christian saints rendered in the style of Eastern Orthodox icons. In addition, holy relics were positioned near paintings. One room was dedicated to Saint Nektarios, a Greek Orthodox saint celebrated for his healing, and especially of life-threatening cases of cancer.[34] Adjacent to a Sai Baba

Figure 7.10 Sanctum of Swamiji Vishwananda's *mandir* dedicated to the Virgin
Mary. Quatre Bornes, Mauritius, 2009.

Source: Photograph by Mary Nooter Roberts.

mandir in the nearby town of Rose Hill, Swamiji constructed a small chapel
lined with icons of the Virgin, the martyred soldier-saint George, and the
benevolent saints Nektarios and [Padre] Pio. Many of these icons were
painted by Swamiji himself or his followers in Springen, where Swamiji has
opened an ashram that houses some sixty long-term residents and receives
innumerable visitors.

Swamiji's devotion to Baba is manifest in Germany, where daily rituals
are performed in a *mandir* dedicated to the saint[35] (Figure 7.11). Adjacent
is a visual *event* reminiscent of an Eastern Orthodox iconostasis, with blue
walls covered with paintings, many incorporating relics of the saints they
depict and make present (Figure 7.12). A draped sarcophagus contains relics
of seven Christian saints, and devotees may meditate beneath it to receive
inspiration. An altar room behind the chapel holds still more icons, includ-
ing one of the Virgin that miraculously exudes Holy Oil. Every evening, dev-
otees obtain blessing from an icon of the day's patron saint and associated
relics. During my visit to Springen in October 2009, devotees looked to the
image and relics of the beloved Saint Teresa not unlike how they undertook
darshan with images of Baba earlier the same day. Those visiting Swamiji's
ashram are blessed in many ways.

Figure 7.11 Swamiji Vishwananda performs Aarti ritual to Baba. Springen, Germany, 2009.

Source: Photograph by Mary Nooter Roberts.

Envoi

Networks of devotion like those of Swamiji Vishwananda reinforce Mauritius as a pivot-point of the Indian Ocean world linking the Subcontinent, Africa, Europe, and beyond. Mauritian artists, like their counterparts in India, contribute mightily to such diasporic spiritual transactions, for in the works they realize, Baba is present in tangible forms helpful to those in need or, more abstractly, in sympathy with the generosity of the saint, however unpredictably "playful" his intercessions may be. As Richard Davis (1999: 36) might suggest, even more significant is that viewers "in the proper spirit of devotion and knowledge" may "glimpse with a devotional eye... the transcendent reality of the deity" through such evident presentations. Baba's liberating formlessness (*nirguna*) may be perceived by those sufficiently reflective, that is, but only because of the divine guidance that Baba has provided to artists seeking to realize his "embodiment" through two- and three-dimensional works. As necessary as Baba's gifts are to achieving such perfection and the often desperately needed blessings so conveyed, his true boon is release from all that is worldly through *nirguna*.

Figure 7.12 Iconostasis presenting Christian saints realized by Swamiji Vishwananada and his followers. Springen, Germany, 2009.

Source: Photograph by Mary Nooter Roberts.

Notes

1 This essay is offered posthumously, for Polly Roberts "left her body" in 2018. In 2009, with generous support from the Wenner Gren Foundation, she interviewed artists in Mauritius, India, and Germany engaged in the realization of works bringing Baba to his devotees worldwide. Polly was and I remain very grateful for the kind assistance and generosity of the many who participated in those encounters, and especially the Shri Sai Baba Sansthan for help navigating and photographing holy sites of Shirdi, Swamiji Vishwananda and his communities in Mauritius and Germany, and research associates Danielle Violette in Mauritius and Ram in India. The present essay offers unpublished artists' exegeses, materials broached in the only publication from Polly's 2009 research (Roberts and Roberts 2016) but cast differently here, and her thoughts from a dozen presentations at academic meetings and invited lectures. Allen F. Roberts has assembled Polly's materials and prepared the endnotes accompanying this essay.

2 Ibid., slightly paraphrased. As Dušan Deák notes (pers. comm. 2021), such statements have appeared in many South Asian accounts and one can assume that Dabholkar understood Baba's interventions in established as well as his own personal ways.

3 From Polly Roberts' conversation with an unnamed woman in Shirdi, December 2009. The present essay is an "excursion in the anthropology of credibility" (Babb 1983: 116) and follows the author's conscious efforts throughout

her academic career to decolonize the *credulity* ascribed to other people's religious truths still found in many social-science and humanities accounts. As the anthropologist Clifford Geertz quipped, "if we wanted home truths, we should have stayed at home" (1984: 276).

4 On Baba and other recent Indian deities as "saints," see White (1972).

5 Interview of Rajiv Talim (mostly in English) by Polly Roberts and Neelima Jeychandran, Mumbai, December 2009. *Jagrut* is also "awake" in Sanskrit. Rajiv Talim maintains a website about his grandfather's work at http://saiamrithadhara.com/mahabhakthas/talim_talimb_v.html, viewed December 2020.

6 With assistance from the UCLA Center for Digital Humanities, Polly and Al Roberts launched www.shirdisaibabavirtualsaint.org in 2012 (viewed June 2021). The site was meant as the platform for a major museum exhibition and book to be hosted by the Wellin Museum of Art at Hamilton College that Polly, Neelima Jeychandran, and Al would guest-curate. Sadly, Polly's cancer precluded realization of the project. Warm thanks to Wellin director Tracy Adler and her staff for their encouraging support of the initiative.

7 Hagiographies are not understood as such by their narrators, who recount what they know to be true to their personal and community experiences. Such accounts are accepted respectfully in these pages. Nonetheless, study of culturally determined epistemologies permits outsiders to understand the social processes at play in creation of visual and other hagiographies following epistemologies different from paradigms of Eurocentric positivist History; see Roberts (2013).

8 As Donald Cosentino has asserted (2005: 234, note 9), "a comparison between material representations of the sacred in Hinduism and Catholicism is long overdue. The veneration offered to Hindu statues in the form of *darsan* has instructive parallels to the veneration offered to holy statues, at least in popular Catholicism"—and vice versa.

9 Eck (1981). For comparative insights from sub-Saharan African cultures, see Roberts (2009).

10 See Pinney (1997). Clare Harris' assertion (2004: 132) obtains more generally: "The Tibetan photograph is more than just a 'certificate of presence' (Barthes 1984: 87), it is a socially salient object that literally embodies and enacts relationships with the past, present and even the future."

11 As William Elison (2014: 167) correctly notes with regard to true images of Baba, "the distinction between signification and a metaphysics of presence... as theologically important in... discussion of the photo's effects does not obtain in Peirce's system."

12 https://holyshirdi.saibaba.com/mosque/baba-portrait-1.html, viewed December 2020. Instructive films on "original" and "false" photos of Baba feature the Shirdi-based Baba scholar Dr. Vinny Chitluri; see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qH8f0VTgt6Q and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rZ7sC_r_VAE, produced in 2020 and viewed May 2021.

13 "Matrix image" is from Kunzle (1997: 25). D. D. Neroy's work is only mentioned in passing in consulted literature (e.g., https://holyshirdi.saibaba.com/mosque/baba-portrait-1.html, viewed December 2020), and deserves focused research, as do the visual epistemologies of artists realizing two- and three-dimensional icons of Baba based upon Neroy's photograph.

14 From conversations in Shirdi with Polly Roberts and Neelima Jeychandran, December 2009; thanks to Dr. Jeychandran and to Dr. Peter Hafner for transcribing Polly's taped interviews from her research in 2009. Dr. Vinny Chitluri is "a walking talking encyclopedia about Baba" in the words of "K S" in blogged response to one of Dr. Chitluri's recent films (https://youtu.be/mCYiz_2kiXA,

viewed May 2021). Another reported that Baba smiled in the portrait behind Dr. Chitluri when she recounted a humorous anecdote about one of Baba's ardent devotees.

15 On haptic visualities through which "the eyes themselves function like organs of touch," see Marks (2000: 22); cf. Babb (1981); Pinney (2004); Roberts (2009); Morgan (2012). Optical technologies deployed in industrial production of images of Baba may reflect and contribute to such haptic experiences. For example, a lenticular "flip" image purchased by the author in Shirdi presents two shifts so that as one passes in front of the picture, Baba turns his head to the right or left to follow a person with his gaze. On religious use of such optical technologies, see Roberts and Roberts (2008).

16 https://holyshirdi.saibaba.com/mosque/baba-portrait-1.html, viewed December 2020.

17 A number of Shri Pednakar's narrative paintings are presented by the Shri Sai Baba Sansthan; see https://pdfslide.net/spiritual/shirdi-sai-baba-pictorial-life.html (viewed April 2022).

18 "Digital darshan" remains controversial; see Srinivas (2008: 104–110), where "an ontology of multiple presences" is discussed with regard to communication by and with Sathya Sai Baba.

19 This and the next paragraphs are drawn from conversations among Rajiv Talim, Polly Roberts, and Neelima Jeychandran, Mumbai, December 2009. Mr. Talim referred to a "pintograph compass" as what his grandfather had employed, without showing the instrument to the researchers. Pintograph compasses permit two-dimensional replication, and it is likely that the tool used by B. V. Talim was instead a "pointing machine" with which three-dimensional replicas have long been realized by sculptors around the world; see Partridge (1895: 91–94).

20 *The Encyclopedia of Sculpture*, http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/sculpture/marble.htm, viewed December 2020.

21 Marpakwar (2020); cf. https://saisatcharitraparayana.wordpress.com/2016/03/26/thrilling-experience-of-b-v-thalim-sculptor-who-made-baba-murthi-for-samadhi-mandir/ (viewed December 2020). Rajiv Talim stressed that in his grandfather's day, British colonial bias suggested that an Indian sculptor could not possibly achieve the brilliance of English artists; Baba's guidance of B. V. Talim was all the more significant as a consequence.

22 Ingold (2011: 30), here redirecting Ingold's insight to suggest that properties of materials like Carrara Michelangelo marble "do not *exist* – like the objects of the material world – but *occur*" as "processual and relational.... condensed stories," in this case of such extraordinary marble becoming available to B. V. Talim.

23 Davis (1999: 23, 36). Marble is largely composed of calcite ($CaCO_3$), whose "low refractory index... permits light to penetrate into the stone (as it does the human skin), resulting in the typical 'waxy' look which gives the stone a human appearance" when marble is sculpted (http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/sculpture/marble.htm, viewed December 2020).

24 Rajiv Talim follows his father Harish B. Talim (1923–1999) in producing *murtis* of many Hindu deities and statues of Indian persons of historical importance.

25 In 2009, Rajiv Talim estimated that half of the *murtis* produced by his staff of ten are embodiments of Baba.

26 The author's 2009 studies in Mauritius were preceded by research in 2003 through a UCLA Chancellor's Fund for Academic Border Crossing grant awarded to Edward Alpers and Allen F. Roberts that permitted several UCLA faculty and graduate students to explore possible projects with Mauritian colleagues.

27 Information and quotations in this and the following paragraph are from http://anshikasawaram.wordpress.com/2014/02/27/pious-maha-shivaratri-from-mauritius; and www.mauritius-guide.net/pilgrimage-sites/, viewed December 2020.

28 Carsignol-Singh (2014: 56–57). On Mauritian popular Hindu practices and globalization, see Chazan-Gillig and Ramhota (2009).

29 This quotation and the next one are from http://anshikasawaram.wordpress.com/2014/02/27/pious-maha-shivaratri-from-mauritius; and www.mauritius-guide.net/pilgrimage-sites/, viewed December 2020.

30 Words of Mme. Pillay, Mr. Gungah, and Swamiji Vishwananda in following paragraphs are transcribed from recorded conversations with Polly Roberts (2009).

31 See Roberts and Roberts (2016). On Baba as "a signpost on the border, occupying a mediatory position," see Elison (2014: 183).

32 On Swamiji's life and devotional practices, see https://www.bhaktimarga.org/about-paramahamsa-vishwananda, viewed May 2021. The "we" of this paragraph refers to the author and her spouse, Allen F. Roberts.

33 Catholicism is especially prevalent among Mauritians of African heritage as a community often referred to as "creole"; see Barrun (2002) and Romaine (2003).

34 In 2009 when Polly spent several days at his ashram in Springen, Swamiji gave her a contact relic of Saint Nektarios. Given how people seek Nektarios' intercession to heal cancer, Swamiji's kindness proved a most prescient gift, for a few months later Polly was diagnosed with the metastatic breast cancer with which she would live for eight years.

35 The present tense here refers to Polly's visit of 2009, and one must assume that devotional opportunities continue to develop within Swamiji's most vital community; see https://paramahamsavishwananda.com/ (viewed May 2021).

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Interleaf D: India Spirits, Hounkpode Baba, and Powers of the Sea in the Republic of Bénin

Dana Rush

Along the West African coast of the Republics of Togo and Bénin, the sea is deemed a source of immeasurable divine energies because of its intensity, potency, vigor, and unpredictable temperament. In our days, the ocean is also home to the most powerful divine forces: Mami Wata and her India Spirits. Commonly known as the Vodun god of wealth and beauty, Mami Wata is recognized for her prowess in addressing the needs of a quickly changing society with aesthetic and spiritual flair.[1] Offering riches, seduction, desire, fidelity, femininity, business success, and modernity as understood locally, while accounting for human anomalies, gender ambiguities, and otherworldly fluctuations in time and space, Mami Wata and her coterie of deities provide intervention and guidance to Mamisi, as her devotees are known. Hounkpode Baba is among Mami Wata's India Spirits (Figure D.1).

Defying predictability, Mami Wata embodies unfettered potential. Her presence is non-quantifiable and infinite, encompassing possibilities outside of time and space. Imported chromolithographs animate Mami Wata's superpowers to gain access to and make sense of simultaneous yet disparate experiences, offering release from illusions of stasis, linearity, and binary logic so often imposed through Eurocentric paradigms. Mami Wata is now known through a widely distributed image of a late-nineteenth-century Samoan woman who was a snake charmer in a German traveling circus (Drewal 1988). Although known to scholars, the woman's identity is irrelevant to Mamisi who *live* pertinent features of her portrait.

Nearly as prized is an image of Mami Wata's husband Densu whom Hindus would understand to be Dattatreya and who travels instantaneously from India across the waters to the West African coast and back at his spouse's behest (Figure D.2). In Vodun parlance, "India" and "the sea" are synonymous as boundless aesthetic and spiritual *opportunities*. They extend beyond any visible, tangible, human domain into a world where eternity and divine infinity are collapsed into the here and now. Indeed, virtuosic Mamisi effortlessly condense weeks, months, and years as well as thousands of kilometers forward and backward in time and space. How else can Mamisi spend months in India during an afternoon at a West African
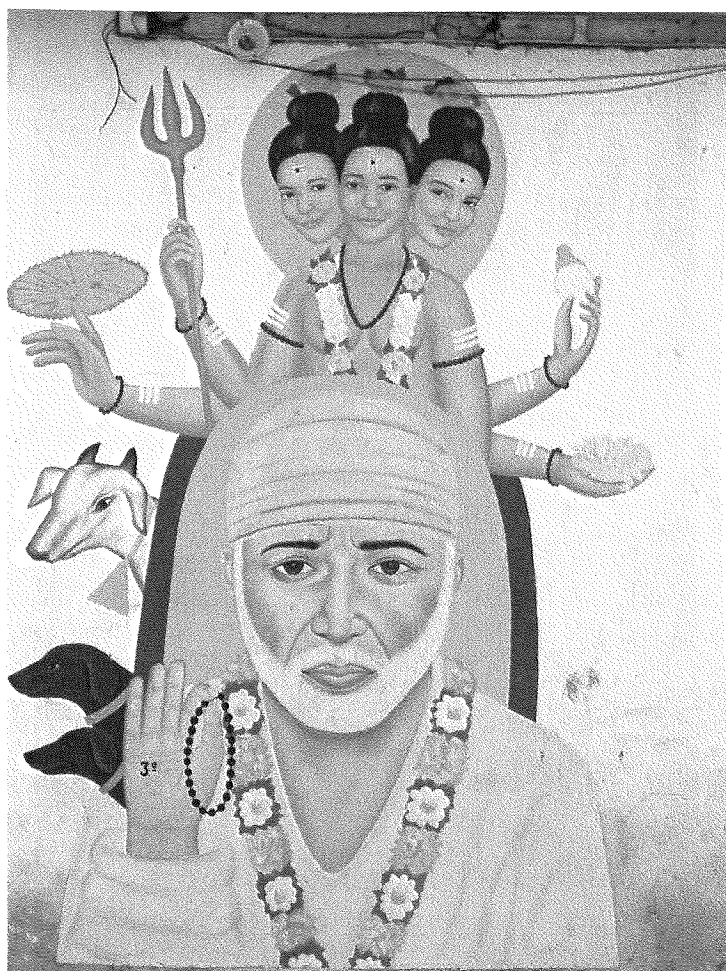
Figure D.1 Painting of Hounkpode Baba present in a Vodun temple. Unknown artist. Comè, Republic of Bénin, 2010.

Source: Photograph by Dana Rush.

beach? In an unbounded spiritual system like Vodun, such achievements are not only possible, they are commonplace.

Mamisi describe their travels through time and space as multisensorial experiences. While pointing to a chromolithograph, for example, a Mamisi might say she has been shown beautiful and powerful things in India—lots of jewels, lots of gold, lots of light, all as depicted in the image. Such descriptions may be complemented by other sensorial evocations such as feeling vibrations in the air, hearing soft flutes or rhythmic drumming, smelling fragrant flowers and incense, or tasting ambrosial fruit. Such experiences go hand-in-hand with Mami Wata's artistic and spiritual propensities: a

Figure D.2 Mami Wata/Densu performing in a festival. Unidentified artists. Ouidah, Republic of Bénin, 1995.

Source: Photograph by Dana Rush.

superabundance of flowers, gold, jewels, coins, and other luxurious items surrounding powerful deities seen in chromos linking viewers to particular India Spirit sensibilities. For example, a three-dimensional Mami Wata shrine in a Vodun temple overflowing with bottles of perfume, cosmetic powders, fruits, candies, incense, cowry shells, and many other desirable things can be informed by what one sees in a two-dimensional chromolithograph or even an image from one's cellphone as an ethereally collapsed, ready-made image-as-shrine. The immediate visual impact of such photos of the gods (cf. Pinney 2004) is aesthetic, and spiritual synesthesia quickly induces godly presence and opens passageways to otherworldly travel. Visual and

spiritual saturation is economical and portable, and digital formats now catapult space- and time-travel into dimensions informed by the unlimited revelatory potential of chromolithography and related imagery in Vodun. Such multisensorial travels permit Mamisi to fully embrace and transcend their femininity, allowing pure expression of their spiritual gender whether recognized as male or female at birth.

Mami Wata oversees India Spirits associated with the seemingly infinite distance to an India understood by non-Indian West Africans as a place of great spiritual and healing efficacies (Wuaku 2013). India Spirits have been born, so to speak, in imported chromolithographs. As calendar art, such images have "floated" from original devotional purposes of Hindu South Asians resident in Ghana and now depict local deities of very different names and purposes (Rush 1999). In other words, gods as understood by Hindus have not been combined with but, instead, *are* local deities (cf. Cosentino 2005). In league with Mami Wata, India Spirits implement and normalize seemingly paradoxical space+time+gender variations in the always-adaptive Vodun universe.[2]

Even though the incorporation of India Spirits into Vodun practice probably became established in the mid-twentieth century, it is the ancient, essentially elastic conceptual system of Vodun that has allowed India Spirits to prove so essential to local needs. Integration of Hindu pictures into Vodun exemplifies the incorporative yet eternally unfinished and so inexorably ongoing sensibilities of Vodun. Although at some point chromolithographs of Hindu deities were newly seen, they have been approached and apprehended as already familiar within Vodun. Richly suggestive, astonishing imagery permits India Spirits to embody an ever-expanding range of ideas, themes, beliefs, histories, and legends. Specific animals, foods, drinks, jewelry, body markings, and accouterments revealed in these pictures are recognized as sacred to the already-known Vodun spirits they portray.

In the world of Mami Wata, nothing is irreconcilable nor is anything static. The hybrid India Spirit known as Hounkpode Baba is the divine merging of a benevolent elderly presence known as Baba ("Father" in the Yoruba language) with Mami Wata's multi-headed husband Densu, otherwise known as Shirdi Sai Baba and Dattatreya, respectively (Figure D.1). Hounkpode Baba's name means "the father spirit who is watching over [something]," although more often he is simply conflated with and so referred to as Mami Wata or Densu. Hounkpode Baba is recognized as a powerful source of healing light and clarity from India. His three additional heads—that is, his own plus those of Densu—are interpreted in multiple ways. *This* Baba fosters simultaneous spiritual activity in the past, present, and future; in human, spirit, and ancestral forms; as male, female, and androgynous; on land, underwater, and in the sky; in India, Africa, and everywhere else. With smooth synchronicity, Hounkpode Baba can see ahead, behind, and to the sides concurrently in both time and space. His three upper heads are also known for changing gender, manifesting different genders at different

times, or combining them to form a purposefully ambiguous deity. Indeed, such indeterminacy is *determinant* of who Houkpode Baba is and what he can bring to people's lives (see Roberts and Roberts, this volume).

While images of Hindu deities are now commonly found in Mami Wata temples in Togo and Bénin, depictions of Shirdi Sai Baba are rare—so far. Aside from a wall mural in a Vodun temple in the town of Comè, Bénin (Figure D.1), I have only seen one other portrait of Shirdi Sai/Houkpode Baba in a Vodun context. This was a framed picture gracing the wall of the private consultation room of a Mami Wata priest in Lomé, Togo, who denied my request to photograph his temple. I have also seen a few such images in Indian-owned shops in Lomé. In Ouidah, Bénin, however, Shirdi Sai Baba seems to be recognized as Saint Salomon, as seen on the façade of a diviner-healer's apothecary and office[3] (Figure D.3).

Mamisi at the Vodun temple bearing Houkpode Baba's presence (Figure D.1) explained that he is a potent India Spirit of "eternal light" who receives his powers from Mami Wata and Densu. As a permanent source of brightness and clarity, Houkpode Baba serves more as a beacon and guide than a quick and easy fix for community members' particular problems. That is, he is known to offer limitless healing light from India but should only be called upon when difficulties cannot be solved otherwise. To meet dire needs of Mami Wata devotees, however, Houkpode Baba arrives

Figure D.3 A diviner-healer's shop depicting "Saint Salomon." Unknown artist. Near Ouidah, Republic of Bénin, 2019.

Source: Photograph by Degenhart M.G. Brown.

directly and instantaneously from "India" (the sea) in a flash of lightning followed by strong winds. He will intervene and assist before disappearing in another blinding flash.

Hounkpode Baba's association with light may stem from images of Shirdi Sai Baba in which a blessing beam emanates from his upraised right hand (Figure D.3). While I have never seen this image for sale in a market in Togo or Bénin despite a wide variety of other Indian chromolithographs and other prints being available, over the past decade, internet image archives have granted accessibility to anyone with a smartphone who seeks visual access to India Spirits. The realm of inspiration is thus greatly expanded (see Figure 7.6 and Introduction, this volume). Indeed, that Hounkpode Baba and other India Spirits exist in digital worlds reinforces Vodun epistemologies of an inexorably unfinished aesthetic.

In short, Mami Wata's India Spirits can only function in a domain in which sacred spatio-temporalities and gender ambiguities are unquestioned. Such an atemporal spiritual zone allows gender-fluid India Spirits and Mamisi to thrive. Through India Spirits, Mamisi expand and contract time and space while transcending chronology, geography, theology, and gender. The combined superpowers of Densu and Hounkpode Baba accelerate and expand their individual capacities, and through their *presence*, Mamisi find release from illusions of predictability inherent to Eurocentric models of Modernity. Such boons fully and freely permit them to ride the sea-like, immeasurable potential of Mami Wata.

Notes

1 A great deal has been written about Mami Wata as a deity of many regional guises to whom devotions are offered by communities throughout most of sub-Saharan Africa and the African Americas (see Drewal 2008). In some circumstances, Mami Wata is understood as the apotheosis of capitalism, for she can bring astonishing economic success to those giving themselves to her, but hers are Faustian promises inevitably leading to a devotee's demise. On Vodun as a collectivity of religious practices in coastal regions of the Republic of Bénin and adjacent states, see Rush (2017 [2013]).
2 Such topics have been central to my research and writing; see Rush (1999, 2010, 2011, 2016, 2017 [2013], 2019).
3 Given that Vodun is open-ended by definition, that someone may understand a portrait of Shirdi Sai Baba to be Saint Salomon does not preclude his also being Hounkpode Baba for the owner of the apothecary or anyone else. Degenhart Brown took this photograph in 2019 as he was riding in someone else's vehicle and could not stop to inquire about Saint Salomon or the proprietor's practice; further research awaits!

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8 A Sheltering Gaze

Darshan with Baba,
Baraka from Bamba

*Allen F. Roberts and
Mary "Polly" Nooter Roberts*[1]

The eminent South Asianist scholar Philip Lutgendorf, then teaching at the University of Iowa as were we, visited our home for the first time in the late 1990s. Finding our living room graced by myriad images of the Senegalese Sufi saint Sheikh Amadu Bamba (c.1853–1927), he asked who was so portrayed. Based upon our then-ongoing research, we explained that Bamba welcomed followers across local social distinctions, was a pacifist despite French colonial persecution, and that his depictions are icons, for through them Bamba is present and bestows *baraka* blessings upon all in proximity. Professor Lutgendorf commented that the Senegalese saint seemed like "a twin separated at birth" from Shirdi Sai Baba (d.1918), Bamba's contemporary half a world away. Phil's introduction was so compelling that even as we continued to work toward a traveling exhibition and accompanying book called *A Saint in the City: Sufi Arts of Urban Senegal* (2003), we began studying the life lessons of Baba and visual and performance practices of those devoted to him.

Followers of Baba and Bamba would know that there was nothing fortuitous about our learning of Baba during a congenial supper with a friend. Indeed, many of Baba's followers have begun or intensified their devotions when Baba has come to them via unexpected discovery of an image, a dream, or an intercession through which he has made his presence and sheltering gaze especially evident (see Roberts, this volume). Similarly, Senegalese friends have told us many times that nothing happens by chance. Our research regarding the Mouride Sufi movement *had found us*: We may not have anticipated any such opportunities, but what we would achieve working with Mouride friends was preordained by the saint and, through him, by Allah.[2] Confirming as much, early in our research we were granted an audience with Serigne Saliou Mbacké, Caliph of the Mourides as one of Bamba's two surviving sons. Once our project was explained to the venerable gentleman, he issued an *ndigel* asserting that we *would* proceed. We were not being coerced, for Serigne Saliou was merely confirming the Order of Things.[3]

Baba's Determinant Indeterminacy

A defining aspect of Baba's identity was and remains his defiance of religious nationalism, and whether he was born Muslim or Hindu was a subject that he purposefully obfuscated. Ideas and practices associated with Baba emanate from Maharashtrian spiritual dynamics that have existed since medieval times or earlier, when Hindu *bhakti* (devotion) poet-saints and Sufi poet-mystics cultivated active transactions, fostered overlapping devotional communities, and participated in similar spiritual goals and practices despite competition and conflict that arose at various points in time (see Hawley et al. 2019). As is asserted today, Baba's devotees may be outwardly different in their personal practices and religious allegiances, but they are inwardly the same, as realized through the saint.

While little is known of Baba's early days, many agree that his youth was steeped in mystical Islam through intense studies in the Aurangabad region, and that his insights and the beneficences he bestowed throughout life included those of a Sufi saint.[4] As Narasimha Swami concluded, "the ideas in which Baba was thoroughly soaked in up to the last were in no way distinguishable from Sufism."[5] That Baba chose to dwell in the mosque of Shirdi is deeply significant, for he named the place Dvarkamai, one meaning of which is "the many-gated mother." Everyone had access: "outcasts, lepers," and "Baba particularly enjoyed the company of untouchables and the ill" (Rigopoulos 2020: 58, 76). All were equally within "a mother's embrace" in the hallowed confines, for "Baba was himself the refuge, the support for all" (Kher 2008: 169). And so he remains, for as Navind Beeharry holds, "there is space for everyone, whichever way you want to approach, this is what Baba says."[6]

Baba was a fakir, or Muslim renunciate. Such a holy person is often known as a dervish, a Persian term meaning "seeking doors" with reference to mendicancy, but more poetically, as "'one who is at the sill of the door' to enlightenment."[7] Indeed, Baba and his "twin," Amadu Bamba, not only stand "at the sill" or threshold to divinity, they traverse and so transcend oft-rigid social distinctions. As Baba stated, "one who has not discovered the gate to God remains blind in the world" (Kher 2008: 301).

In his early years, Baba was "known to be singing songs in strange languages (as Arabic and Persian would have seemed to his hearers in Shirdi)" (Narasimha Swami 1978: 152) in what were local Muslim performance idioms. Some have asserted that "the five daily orthodox prayers of the Muslims, al-fatiha, the recitation of the opening chapter of the Qu'ran, and the 'seven oft-repeated verses' from the Qu'ran were said intermittently in his masjid along with other rituals of Muslim festival times" (Warren 2009: 58, 30). A large Quran was kept in the Dvarkamai that the fakir Abdul read at Baba's behest as the saint's devoted follower for many years. After such recitations, Baba "would elucidate points concerning Islamic theology and history and explain Sufi schools and other related matters."[8]

Balaji Pilaji, who knew Baba well when he was a boy, told Antonio Rigopoulos that "many faqirs used to come to Shirdi and meet Baba. Baba used to stay with them, take his food with them, and do as they did. Baba always said 'Allah Malik,' 'God is one.' He would always raise up his finger when saying this" in an emphatic gesture to Divinity.[9] Shivner Swami, who was too young to have known Baba in life but who resided in Shirdi for many years, held that

> what Baba gave the most importance to.... was to remember God always, in every moment. It is *namasmaran*: it means repeating constantly the names of God, Baba himself repeated constantly the name of Allah on his lips. He himself practiced this and became an example for all his devotees and followers. He always said that remembering God was the most important thing.... Even if one is doing heavy physical labor, mentally he can continue the repetition of the name.... The important thing is to repeat it incessantly until it becomes such a habit that one recites the name of God with every breath, inhaling and exhaling.... Then God's name will automatically arise in you even in the moment of death. This was the teaching that Baba underlined (quoted in Rigopoulos 2020: 93–94; cf Warren 2009: 61, 189, 243).

Such a statement would remind many Muslims of Allah's exhortation in Surat 2:151–152 of the Quran, "Remember me, that I may remember you." They would also understand the embodied practice called for by Baba to be *dhikr* (*zikr*), an essential piety through which one *becomes* the holy names, and in such self-effacement, gains proximity to Allah.[10]

In 1985, more than one hundred Muslims lived in Shirdi and took Baba's *darshan* daily, and many said that in those days, twenty percent of pilgrims visiting Shirdi were Muslim (Rigopoulos 2020: 65). While *darshan* is the distinctly Hindu "interocular devotion" (Srinivas 2008: 5) of seeing and being seen by Divinity, as in the fifth of Baba's eleven assurances, "Look to me and I look to you" (Kher 2001: 162), the same intimate visual transaction exists in Sufism and, indeed, many other world religions without necessarily possessing its own name.[11] As a Senegalese friend said of Sheikh Amadu Bamba, "when we look at the image of the sainted man, he is looking at us at the same time" (Yelimane Fall, pers. comm., 2006), and indeed, Bamba's portraits are living icons as are Baba's.

While Baba has become increasingly understood through Hindu perspectives, the saint famously refused any so singular an understanding of his personal history and mission on Earth.[12] Rather than an either/or position, Baba espoused and embodied the "inbetweenness" (Basu 2017; cf. Stoller 2009) of a dervish, for as Narasimha Swami held,

> the fusion of Hindu and Muslim had to be perfected first in his own person before he [Baba] could effect [sic] any fusion of the Hindu-Muslim

elements in society.... We may well note how the conflicts are resolved when the two trends are mixed up in himself.... The essence of both Sufism and Bhakti marga is development by love to reach the goal.... In his case, by providential arrangement, the fusion had become perfect, and Baba often referring to God or Guru could use with equal felicity the word Allah or Fakir or Hari. Baba has used all these terms.... All who had his spiritual guidance were also learnt to identify Hari with Allah.[13]

As a distinctly "polyvalent," "composite" figure more generally, Baba realized what Lawrence Babb has evocatively termed "determined indetermination."[14] Indeed, one may add that such purposeful ambiguities were determinant of who Baba was, is, and will ever be.

Finally, despite the enigmas of Baba's identity and the purposeful ambiguity that he cultivated, devotees place enormous importance on the culturally determined "authenticity" of certain images of the saint as indexes of his life and personhood (Figure 8.1). Set in motion by two dialectical concepts, *saguna* (form) and *nirguna* (formlessness), portraits of Baba are both modalities for concentration and frames to be transcended (see Roberts, this volume). Baba told his devotees that his image is he, yet the saint also held that he cannot be confined to any corporeal or material reality. As we shall see, the saint's depictions affect corporeal transformations for his devotees through which they know that he is present in the picture, despite being formlessly everywhere (see Roberts, this volume). As Swamiji Vishwananda has asserted, "the image of Baba is a gateway from the other side to this side. Behind Baba's eyes is a door" (pers. comm., 2009). Yet as Baba himself said, "No door is necessary for my entry. I've neither shape nor size. I'm always everywhere" and, indeed, "I'm in everything and beyond" (Vinny 2002: 13, 80).

Baba's Senegalese "Twin," Sheikh Amadu Bamba

Indeterminacies also characterize the Senegalese Sufi saint Sheikh Amadu Bamba (c.1853–1927), half a world away from Baba's South Asia. Significantly, in their own days and still, both Baba and Bamba have been recognized as Qutbs—"Perfect Masters," as Meher Baba explained in so describing Baba (cited in Warren 2009: 65). Following Sufi understandings of the term, as such, Baba and Bamba are axes mundi around whom revolve the lives of their tens of millions of devotees around the world, even as these same souls center their existence upon the Prophet and direct their prayers toward Mecca.[15] As a Hindu friend articulated a resonant thought, "Baba is like all the tributaries that meet in the ocean" (Mukund Raj, pers. comm., 2010), and for many, he is a *tirtha* pivot-point of heaven, earth, and the afterlife (cf. Eck 1982: 145–146).

Bamba knew turbulent times. Small kingdoms of what is now the Republic of Senegal had long participated in trans-Saharan and transatlantic slave
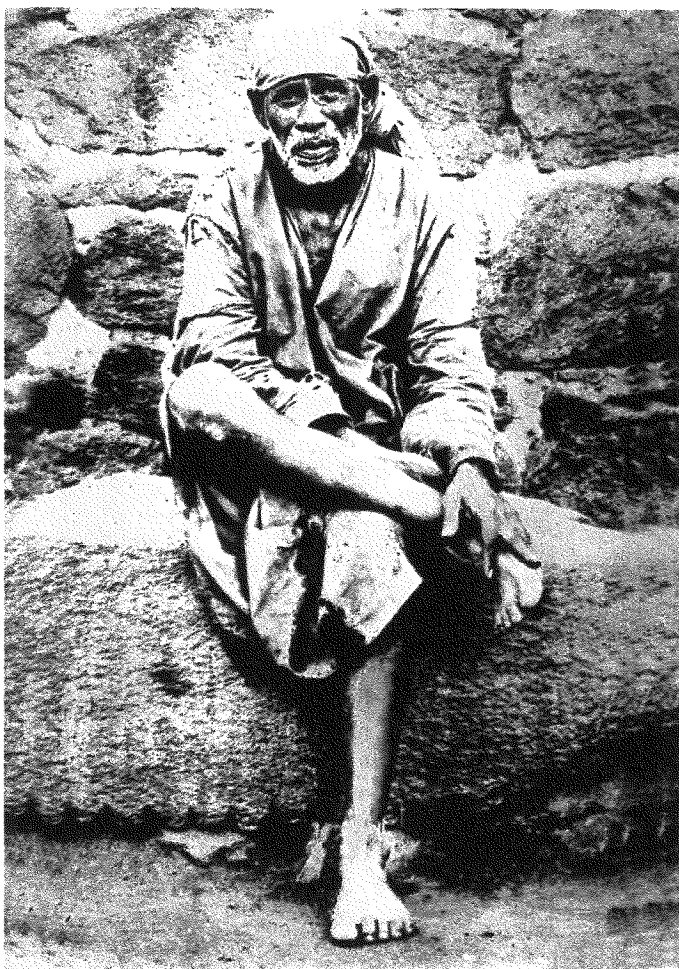
Figure 8.1 The matrix photograph of Shirdi Sai Baba by D. D. Neroy. Shirdi, India, 1911.

Source: Public Domain.

trades, but in Bamba's days such political economies underwent revolutionary transformations, heightened by abolition but forced into collapse from increasingly violent French colonial conquest in the latter part of the nineteenth century (Barry 1998). Sufism, with its stress upon strong bonds between *taalibe* followers and *marabout* holy men like Bamba (known as *pirs* or fakirs in India), provided a useful structure for adaptive practices in transitional and later (post)colonial years (Babou 2021).

Bamba's relevance to Senegalese political contexts was more evident than that of his contemporary, Sai Baba, for even though greater India was

afflicted by heavy-handed British policies as resisted many times and in many ways by local factions, Baba "never discussed politics" and was not subjected to personal persecution by colonial authorities as was Bamba.[16] The Senegalese saint proclaimed his pacifism, holding that the sole weapon he would wield would be a stylus with which to compose holy verses, as he did so prolifically that it is said that the ocean alone is sufficiently vast to hold his writings. He also asserted that the only jihad (holy struggle) he would wage would be against the imperfections (*nafs*) of his own soul (Babou 2007). Even so, French colonial administrators feared that Bamba's ever-increasing following, attracted by the wisdom he brought and the blessings he conveyed, was subversive to their hegemonic goals. As a result, Bamba was exiled to a political prison in what is now the Republic of Gabon from 1895 to 1902. Not long after his return to Senegal, the saint was sent off again, this time to Mauretania for another four years, and thereafter he was held under house arrest in the Senegalese town of Djourbel for the rest of his days.

Through such harsh measures, French authorities hoped to diminish Bamba's prestige. Yet for Bamba, "suffering was the price of sainthood," as the Senegalese philosopher/poet Muusaa Ka asserted in an epic poem. Furthermore, "from the outset, Murids interpreted the expulsion" from Senegal to Gabon "as part of the ordeals Bamba pledged to face... to fulfill his primordial missions" of "mercy, salvation, and intercession decreed before his birth" (cited in Ngom 2016: 116, 124). In all naïveté, then, the French created a sacred martyr, for "a combination of suspicion and antagonism towards Muslim leaders, coupled with the secular influence of the colonial state, effectively transformed Islam into a grass-roots ideology of opposition to colonialism in Senegal and elsewhere in French West Africa" (Stewart 1997: 57).

During Bamba's house arrest, a photograph was taken around 1914, seemingly as a surveillance instrument, and it has long remained his only known portrait[17] (Figure 8.2). Given such ends, the image remains truly perplexing, for the saint's face is so shadowed as to be nearly devoid of identifying detail, except insofar as such enigma is recognized in his visage and no one else's (Roberts and Roberts 2019). In other words, the photograph only reveals its own obscurity. As a consequence, the picture was and remains impossible to interpret in any single manner, and its determinant indeterminacy is timeless. For Senegalese Sufis, though, an exchange of gazes with Bamba reinserts the image in time, bringing its blessings to bear on a viewer's present concerns and reflections.

Such an unpretentious photograph was meant to have simple, practical, denotative purposes rather than any aesthetic appeal or elaborated significance. In the early colonial period, photographs were *taken*, not "made," and Senegalese were usually unwilling objects rather than engaged subjects of French photography, even though, as early as the 1850s, Senegalese people—and especially cosmopolitan coastal women—avidly directed

Figure 8.2 Sheikh Amadu Bamba, Djourbel, Senegal. Photographer unknown, c.1914.

Source: Public Domain.

the new medium to their own ends (Buggenhagen 2014; cf. Pinney 1997). Nonetheless, photography remained a common tool of imperialism, and Bamba may have had no choice as to whether or not he wished to be photographed. Nonetheless, because of the Holy Light that Bamba emitted from his sainted personage, photographing him would have been impossible without his consent—as is also said of Baba.[18] Many feel that Bamba must have acceded then, and so it was therefore the saint's *achievement* that his self-presentation should be as indeterminate as it is (Roberts and Roberts 2019: 197–198, 202).

Following the visual epistemology shared by Mourides, Bamba's photograph offers signs and ciphers to those who contemplate it, as so many unceasingly do. To understand how this is so, one must be willing to "move away from the insular security" of Euro-American conventional wisdom concerning photography (Pinney 1997: 8) to grasp Mouride visual culture as Mourides themselves conceive and practice it. Indeed, the technical, "coincidental," and therefore seemingly irrelevant details of the 1914 photograph need not be dismissed as trivial or insignificant. All is Allah's will, including the revelation of divine signs (*aya, ayah, ayat*) in something so seemingly mundane as a surveillance photograph of Amadu Bamba. At work are what David Morgan has termed "visual pieties" as "the set of practices, attitudes, and ideas invested in images that structure the experience of the sacred."[19] Morgan's surprising use of the verb "to structure" suggests that although they appear to be inanimate, sacred pictures may possess active agency realized through revelatory praxis. Bamba's portraits possess vital presence and divine signs that inspire and change lives. To extend W. J. T. Mitchell's (2006) evocative phrase, development of visual hagiography is what these pictures "want" as they instigate pious actions.

The term "cipher" is also apposite regarding Bamba's depiction, for while it may refer to a code or some similarly abstruse system, its etymology alludes to "the Arabic system of numerical notation" (Morris 1966: 243), and many Mourides understand the image of their saint to reveal deeply arcane but hugely meaningful numerological relationships. As the Dakar-based portraitist Assane Dione has averred, every time he paints Bamba's countenance based upon the 1914 photograph as he does over and over again as a devotional task (Figure 8.3), he "pierces" superficial aspects of the image to discover something new in its otherwise hidden ciphers (Roberts and Roberts 2003: 73–83).

However one understands Bamba's 1914 photograph, the saint's face is composed of shadowy forms readily suggesting calligraphy. In the late 1990s, a Mouride mystic told us that he understood the "black" of shadow to be expressed by the word *el-nur* in Arabic, which, paradoxically, refers to light, hence enlightenment. As he added, "darkness is the mother of light." While the saint's visage offers no signifiers of moment or mood, the presentation emphasizes the full potentiality of *batin*—the hidden side of profound signification that, following our interlocutor, enlightens by its darkness.[20] Paradox of the sort would remind Shirdi Sai Baba's devotees of his play between *saguna* form and *nirguna* formlessness.

Sufis have long understood the face of the Prophet as "a marvelously written manuscript of the Quran" (Schimmel 1975: 413), for the line of His nose is an *alif*, the downstroke that instantiated Creation and so is the first letter of Allah's name. The Prophet's eyebrows are the Basmallah, "In the Name of Allah," as the blessing that Muslims intone at thresholds and all other beginnings. Particular persons' eyes and mouths, also inscribed by God, suggest different letters according to their shapes, thus making any

Figure 8.3 Oil painting of Bamba by Assane Dione. Dakar, Senegal, c.1998.

Source: Allen F. Roberts and Mary Nooter Roberts' collection.

face a distinct text. Understanding that the saint's countenance is "written" through divine signs revealed in the 1914 photograph readily leads to creation of calligrams—*hurufiyya* in Arabic—that reflect a devotional achievement expressed by Rumi: "I have prayed so long I have become prayer itself" (cited in Schimmel 1975: 413), thus bespeaking both effacement and transubstantiation (Figure 8.4).

Those who look to Bamba understand him to afford a portal to divinity, and when the Saint's image is "received into writing" it is reflected "in all its breadth," for writing "alone is able to make seen, *by being read*" and so narrated, as the otherwise "veiled dimension of sensed reality" (Hirt 1993: 14).
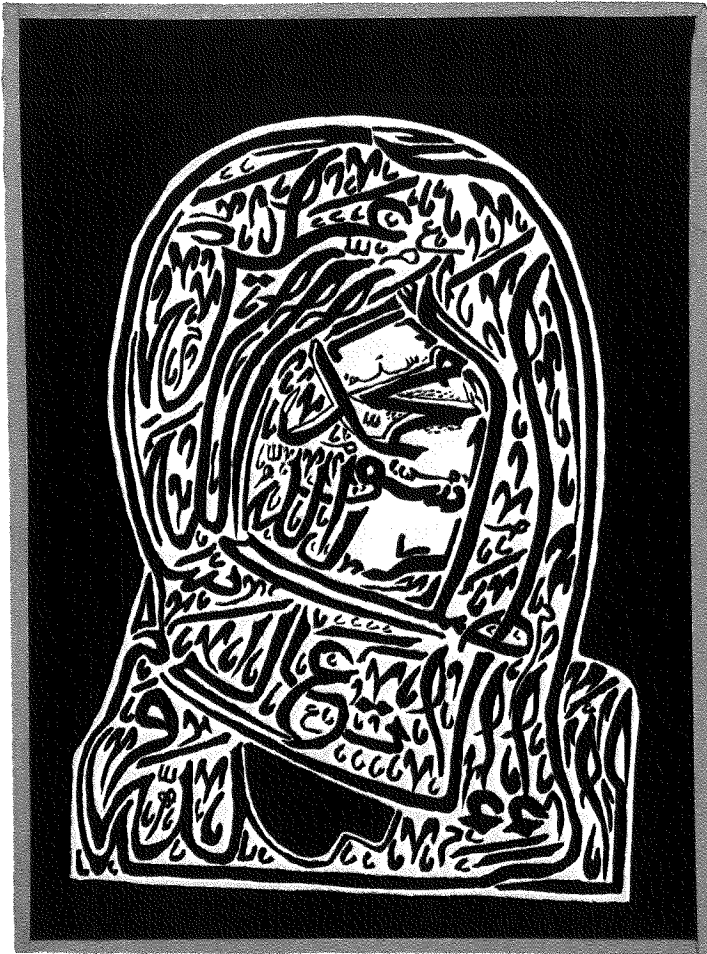
Figure 8.4 Reverse-glass calligram based upon Assane Dione's portrait of Bamba and composed of the Shahada. Reverse-glass painting by Serigne Gueye, Dakar, Senegal, 1999.

Source: Allen F. Roberts and Mary Nooter Roberts' collection.

The visible becomes legible not only to the eyes of the body but also to those of the soul, and in this way, the image is the sill "between the reality that it shows and the reality to which it alludes" (ibid., 15, 32, 223). As the Senegalese scholar Fallou Ngom suggests, "the saintly calligram of Bamba... emphasizes the full potentiality of *batin* (the hidden side of profound signification), and suggests the state of spiritual *fana* (effacement) into the Word of God through the kind of textual transubstantiation that is the ultimate goal of Sufism" as one *becomes* the Word.[21] In the works illustrated here, the Saint's countenance as painted by Assane Dione is "received into writing"

as the Shahada, or declaration of Muslim faith. That the work is a reverse-glass painting makes its realization the more remarkable, for Dakar-based artist Serigne Gueye produced the calligram backward so that it would be seen correctly from the front of the pane (Roberts and Roberts 2003: 56–59).

Many divine signs have been revealed in the 1914 photograph of Bamba, but none is more impactful than the saint's missing right foot. Granted, many Senegalese are altogether aware of photographic technologies includ-ing the play of shadow, but as an opportunity for visual piety, such superfi-cialities (*zahir* in Arabic) are irrelevant, for if Bamba's foot cannot be seen, where can it be? Here is an instance of what Mark Taylor has termed "the non-absent absence of the holy," for the saint is "never present without being absent" (1992: 25). As he steps into the plane of the 1914 photo, Bamba confirms his assertion that he is not of this world, as proven in a Miraj-like miraculous journey in the course of his exile from Senegal when Bamba came into proximity with the Prophet and through Him, with Allah.[22] That is, the picture captures the saint's return to this world, even as his right foot has yet to emerge from the Beyond. As he steps forth, Bamba brings *baraka* divine energies to bless all in his presence through the photograph and its infinite repetitions realized in popular arts[23] (Figure 8.5). In such sheltering presence, Bamba and Baba again converge (Figure 8.6).

Baba's Visual Pieties

Questions arise from these instances of visual piety when looking from Bamba back to Baba. Have devotees—whether Muslims, Hindus, or of other faiths—discovered similar signs and ciphers in Baba's six to nine portrait photographs widely deemed "authentic," and especially the matrix picture taken in 1911 by a professional photographer named D. D. Neroy (Figure 8.1)? He sent a print to Baba, who quickly asserted that it must be installed in the Dvarkamai of Shirdi so that "thousands upon thousands of devotees will have the benefit of praying to it" (Chitluri 2009: 63). Baba himself gave the image to his closest followers, telling one that "through this photo I have come to your home" (Vinny 2002: 113, 124–125). Have "visual pieties" arisen from the picture though, not so much as practices such as when the image is dressed and promenaded around Shirdi as a living pres-ence (see Figures I.2 and 7.5), but as secret revelations from aspects of the photograph itself? Elizabeth Edwards (2001: 19) has asserted that a "photo-graph awakens a desire to know what it cannot show"; is this true of Baba's portrait as it is of Amadu Bamba's?

An intriguing passage in the *Shri Sai Satcharita* suggests such possibili-ties. In the Neroy photograph, Baba's carefully posed posture recalls Indian iconography denoting "sovereignty" as "the prerogative of gods and *rajas* alone" (Rigopoulos 1993: 68). In contemplating Baba's "Divine Form" as presented in the portrait and his desire to "meditate upon it, and bring it all the time before the eyes," author G. R. Dabholkar exclaimed "Oh, what

Figure 8.5 Vignette of mystical graffiti by Pape Diop. Gueule Tapée neighborhood, Dakar, Senegal, c.2004.

Source: Photograph by Allen F. Roberts and Mary Nooter Roberts, 2006.

a manner of sitting you always have! .... And that foot of yours—Oh, how does one describe it? One may say that like the connection between the moon and the branch of a tree, devotees satisfy their strong desire for your *darshan* by holding tightly to the big toe of your foot."[24]

Scrutiny of the same image's details permits one to posit hypothetical visual pieties of the sort that Senegalese Sufis might find revealed as the picture's divine signs. For example, do the shaped shadows around the saint's eyes, on his cheeks, or that obscure parts of his ears bear esoteric associations? The mandala of Figure 8.6 repeats Baba's face as produced from the Neroy picture to increase the intensity of an exchange of gaze through

Figure 8.6 Mandala of Shirdi Sai Baba by anonymous artist, available online via Google Images.

Source: Public Domain.

darshan; but why has the artist configured the twelve images around the central portrait so that the asymmetry of Baba's eyes is reversed every other time? Are the six thresholds between paired images significant, perhaps in distant reference to the Dvarkamai as a "many-gated mother"? Given that Baba's teachings included numerological symbolism (Srinivas 2008: 35), do the twelve and six of the composition contribute to blessings through an arcane algebra?[25] Are the shapes and juxtapositions of rips, folds, and shadows of Baba's humble *kafni* robe of esoteric significance, and are the granular details of the boulders beneath and behind him?[26] These are exactly the sorts of questions Senegalese Sufis would pose. For example, looking to Figure 8.2, deeply devoted Mourides discern faces of prophets and holy ancestors in the knots of the planks behind Bamba, while the horizontal patterns and hues of the wood's grain are sacred verses legible to those whose

mystical achievements are sufficiently advanced to perceive such wonders. Can Baba's matrix image be "read" in similar ways, and if so, what visual pieties result?

Transubstantiation through Ash and Ink

Although many others are possible, a last comparison to be drawn between the "twins," Baba and Bamba, concerns their contributions to devotees' everyday problem-solving through apotropaic substances and agentive practices. Among Baba's miracles was maintaining an ever-burning wood fire (*dhuni*) within the Dvarkamai (Figure 8.7), following common practices among South Asian Sufis and Hindus.[27] Baba is said to have sat for hours before his *dhuni*, "repeating sacred formulas or rapt in silent contemplation," for "fire as one's focus of attention can be a crucial function in Sufi cosmology and mysticism, often in relation to the effects of *dhikr*" repetitive remembrance of Allah's ninety-nine names and other holy phrases (Rigopoulos 1993: 68). Following Baba's determinant indeterminacy, however, one can hypothesize that Hindu modes of being in and contributing to the world complement such views. "As the *Shri Sai Satcharita* notes, the *dhuni* represented the seat of the sacrificial oblation, the purificatory fire at which Sai Baba offered his whole being" (Swallow 1982: 147–148). Ash from
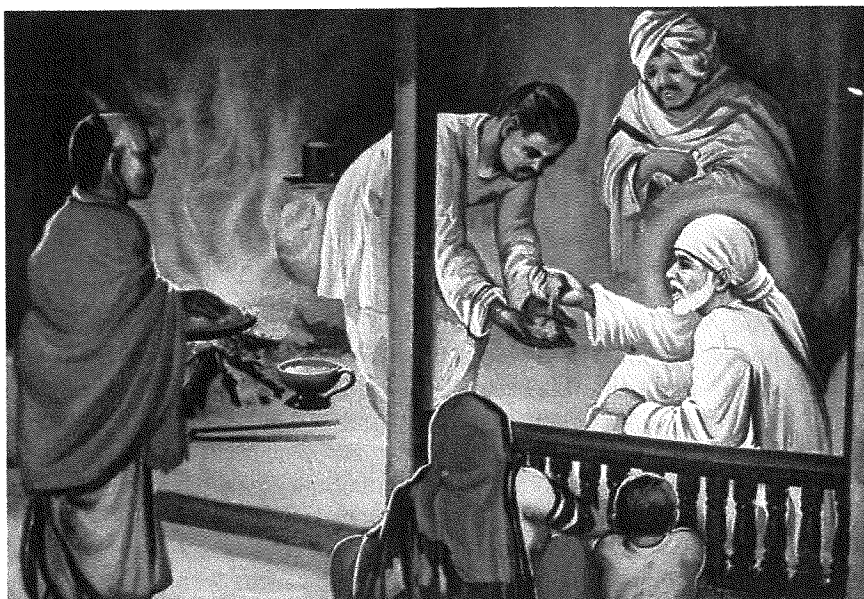
Figure 8.7 Painting of Baba sharing ash from his *dhuni* fire in the Dvarkamai mosque he inhabited in Shirdi. Unsigned work, perhaps by the artist Pednakar, photographed in Shirdi, India, 2009.

Source: Photograph by Mary Nooter Roberts.

the *dhuni* and more generally in Hindu thinking is "primarily associated with the element fire and with Siva in his ascetic capacity. It is the residue of the mortal body left after... the funeral pyre." Production of ash by Baba manifested his own "transformed life force" as "visible and tangible evidence of the god's creative and destructive powers."[28]

Healing was central to Baba's charisma. Some were soothed by his glance or being in his presence and so by taking *darshan* and perhaps engaging in other exchanges (Srinivas 2008: 34–35). In turn, such praxis has parallels in Sufi senses of presence and transaction. "Each of these different acts was not casual but had its particular significance, which Baba, however, never cared to explain" (Rigopoulos 1993: 83). Indeed, "such lessons as the sage has left us are cryptic or confrontationally gnomic in style" (Elison 2014: 156). At issue are esoterica bounded by secrecy, with all the epistemological implications of inbetweenness of the latter term (see Nooter 1993; cf. Basu 2017). As important as such moments were to those so touched, however, application and distribution of *udi* ash from Baba's *dhuni* perpetual fire was the saint's most common and significant mode of intervention (Srinivas 2008: 34–35). As a materialization of the saint's blessings, so it remains.[29]

Many devotees share *udi* that has been brought or sent from the *dhuni* of Baba's Dvarkamai in Shirdi as a cherished gift that instills hope and succor in times of distress. *Udi* may be touched to the center of one's forehead as a general blessing. It may be applied to afflicted parts of a diseased or broken body. Baba himself recommended that *udi* be mixed with water to drink as a daily prophylaxis.[30] Such use is reminiscent of Sufi practices around the world, including of those looking to Amadu Bamba as suggested below.

Most remarkably, in our days of vast, diasporic movement from the Subcontinent, *udi* sometimes spontaneously appears on images of Baba[31] (Figure 8.8). Such miracles have occurred in far-flung corners of the globe, and because such events may be shared and thereby bring comfort to fellow followers, they are fervently filmed and discussed through electronic media. What may be termed "spiritscapes" (Roberts and Roberts 2016) are so acknowledged as transactional geographies of human and otherworldly mobilities through which Baba is present wherever his devotees are to be found. As but one example, a most accomplished woman now living in the United States describes how, in 1980 at her home in Malaysia, a "visiting card" of ash astonishingly appeared on images of both Shirdi and Sathya Sai Baba on her family's shrine. A blind visitor regained sight, another became entranced and "pounded on the floor of the prayer room, declaring that God's power was present there." As she concludes, the ash so wondrously bestowed on her family and the community who participated in the blessings "protects, cures, and reminds spiritual aspirants to give up worldly desires and attachments."[32] Of particular significance is that when *udi* spontaneously appears on images of Baba, it is carefully removed and directed to apotropaic purposes, often taken first from the saint's eyes so that his sheltering gaze is unimpaired. In turn, *this* ash bears especial blessing vis-à-vis that removed from other parts of Baba's embodied image.

Figure 8.8 Ash has spontaneously appeared on an image of Baba in Swamiji
        Vishwananda's shrine in Quatre Bornes, Mauritius, 2003.

Source: Photograph by Mary Nooter Roberts.

Udi participates in "a metaphysics of presence" (Srinivas 2008: 96) as an
epiphenomenon of Baba's *dhuni* fire, but as it appears upon his images, ash
is also an epiphenomenon of the saint himself. Indeed, even as—and per-
haps because it is—the humblest of materials, *udi* undergoes an apotheosis
to become Baba's active relic (cf. Flood 2019: 73; Elison 2014: 167).

A query arises: When *udi* is mixed with water and ingested, to what degree
may resulting benefits be understood as a form of transubstantiation? The
latter term is most readily known from the miraculous effects of the Eucharist
when, through Holy Communion, Christians take unto themselves the blood
and the body of Christ and so *become* Him through absolute identification.

When devotees take Baba's *udi* unto themselves as it is mixed with water and imbibed, is similar transformation at play—with "play" recalling the almost ludic *leelas* for which the saint is remembered and with which he continues to astonish and bring joy? A further question may be asked that, in turn, is consistent with Sufi praxis: Can *udi* be understood as darshanic gaze made material? In other words, can the healing power of Baba's presence made manifest when *udi* miraculously appears realize deeply intimate, transformative identification with the saint as a form of transubstantiation? Baba's Muslim followers might well understand that ash transmits the saint's "efficacious charisma" through a substance "deemed impregnated with his baraka" blessing energies (Flood 2019: 22, 139). A final reference to Senegalese Sufi practices underscores such possibilities.

Amadu Bamba is famous for how prolifically he composed odes and other holy texts. Although Senegalese Sufis understand that the act of writing and the letters with which one does so convey *baraka* blessing energies, inscription—including that of the Quran itself—is meant to elicit recitation, thus viscerally engaging all senses in resulting soundscapes. Furthermore, just as an image of Amadu Bamba may be "received into writing" to reveal "veiled dimensions of sensed reality" (Hirt 1993: 14), such realities may meet the sorts of quotidian needs for which Baba's devotees apply and ingest *udi* so that they embody the saint himself. Following a procedure common throughout the world of Islam, prayer boards upon which sacred texts and mystical devices have been inked are rinsed and the water is carefully collected (Silverman 2007; cf. Flood 2019). Fluid receives the Word. Imbibed, such holy water affects "textual transubstantiation that is the ultimate goal of Sufism" (Ngom 2016: 48). One *becomes* the Word, and when every breath is an aspirated but otherwise silent *dhikr* of the holy name Allah, one embodies Divinity. May such thoughts and praxis have informed earlier uses of *udi* by Baba's devotees and may they still for some?

Envoi

The thoughts on these pages cannot resolve the determinant indeterminacies of either Baba or Bamba. On the contrary, such perplexities not only inform who the "twin" saints were and are but through transubstantiative processes, they bring blessings to bear upon everyday needs. Our purpose here, then, is to foster questions through the perspectives of comparative religion. May the many doors of the Dvarkamai forever remain open and welcoming to all!

Notes

1 Polly's contributions to the present essay are posthumous. We developed all research and theories together to which allusion is made here, and most of our academic writing and related activities about these and other case studies were also undertaken together.

2   While the Wolof name of the movement of those devoted to Amadu Bamba is Muridiyya as borrowed from Arabic, French orthography—"Mourides"—is used in most literature and will be here. More generally, *murid* in Arabic refers to "one who seeks" as guided by a sacred master, so, for instance, Abdul Baba (to be mentioned below) was Shirdi Sai Baba's *murid*. See https://reference works.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/murid-SIM_5542 (viewed June 2021).

3   We wish to express our deep gratitude to the late Serigne Saliou Mbacké and other members of Amadu Bamba's sainted family who received us so warmly over the years. We also thank our Senegalese "extended family" supporting our research, and especially Alhaji Ousmane Gueye and the much regretted Cheikhou Camara.

4   Warren 2009: 41. On histories of Sufism in what is now India and especially as centered in the region of Aurangabad, see Deák (2013); Green (2006).

5   Narasimha Swami (1978: 152). Srinivas (2008: 228–233) and McLain (2016: 111–117) discuss the importance of Narasimha Swami in bringing Baba to popular consciousness.

6   Polly Roberts in conversation with Navind and Monika Beeharry, Rose Hill, Mauritius, September 2009.

7   Warren (2009: 73). On the etymology of "dervish," see *Encyclopedia of Islam*, http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_1731, viewed November 2020.

8   Warren (2009: 264). The same work includes discussion and a translation of the notebook in which Abdul recorded Baba's exegeses at such moments and that became an important mystical text in its own right around which Abdul developed a spiritual practice.

9   Rigopoulos (2020: 75). "Malik" refers to a "supreme master" and is one of the ninety-nine holy names of Allah (idem, 1993: 293–294).

10 "Remembrance" may be narrative and corporeal, as through voiced repetition of *dhikr* or while taking every breath, sometimes reinforced by visual practices. On comparative study of memory as a cultural construction based upon human capacity, see Roberts and Roberts (1996).

11 See Morgan (2005). On *darshan*, see Eck (1985); Babb (1981). McLain (2011: 32) mentions the analogy between *darshan* and Muslims receiving *baraka* from the tomb of a Sufi saint.

12 On a festival day in 1916, Baba removed and burned his clothing. Standing naked, "his eyes glowed with anger. In a fit of rage and with glaring eyes, he said 'Now, decide, decide for yourselves whether I am a Muslim or a Hindu!'" (Kher 42:22–28, 2008: 692). The moment foreshadowed heated arguments between Muslims and Hindus as to how to proceed when Baba took *samadhi* in 1918; see Rigopoulos (2020: 82 and passim).

13 Narasimha Swami (1978: 153, 155, 156); cf. Rigopoulos (2020: 94); Elison (2014: 153); Warren (2009: 152), citing G. R. Dabholkar. Any sense of Baba presenting a model of and for Hindu-Muslim accord is currently controversial among some ultra-conservative Hindus; for example, see Srivastava (2014) and https://scroll.in/article/991155/labelled-jihadi-sai-babas-idol-demolished-in-delhi-hindu-hardliner-exults-devotees-despair (on events of April 2021, site viewed May 2021).

14 Babb (2000: 190), writing of Sathya Sai Baba, recognized by a great many as Shirdi Sai Baba's incarnation. Baba as "polyvalent" is from Srinivas (2008: 38), "composite" from McLain (2016: 117); cf. Loar (2018).

15 With reference to Chapter 7 of this volume and Polly Roberts' discussions with artists realizing embodiments of Baba in Mauritius, Amadu Bamba's devotional diaspora extends to several hundred Mauritians with whom we

also had the pleasure of working in 2003 and 2009. Such religious dynamism underscores the island's pivotal location between sub-Saharan Africa and the Indian Ocean world. On Islam in Mauritius, see Eisenlohr (2016).

16 Srinivas (2008: 231). Baba did receive certain Indian nationalists and so, at the very least, he was known to them (Smriti Srinivas pers. comm., 2020). Elison (2014: 174 and passim) considers political understandings of Baba in the early twenty-first century.

17 Paoletti (2018). The authenticity of other images of Bamba has been challenged by many. In May 2020, however, four snapshots from the 1918 album of a minor French colonial officer were brought to an online auction specializing in old postcards. Many feel that they do portray Bamba, and one wonders if they bear their own revelations vis-à-vis the photograph of 1914 and the saint more generally.

18 Warren (2009: 143). A related result occurred if someone photographed Baba without his permission. Vinny Chitluri discusses such a picture she calls "The Invisible Sai Baba" that was taken by Gopal Dinkar Joshi. The image clearly depicts those accompanying Baba, while the saint himself is a blur in which one can only discern his feet; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qH8f0VT gt6Q, produced in 2020 and viewed May 2021.

19 Morgan (1998: 2–3), writing about visual culture among Evangelicals and other Christians, primarily in the United States. Roberts and Roberts (2000) is an exposition of how Morgan's ideas can be extended to circumstances such as those discussed here.

20 Ideas in this and the next two paragraphs are developed in greater detail in Roberts and Roberts (2003, 2019).

21 Ngom (2016: 47–48). When we asked our Mouride friend Yelimane Fall how he would explain the recondite term *fana*, he responded that *"fana* is like when one drops sugar cubes into hot tea: they may disappear but we know they are present because of the tea's sweetness."

22 From Bamba's ode "Jaawartu" (no date). The Miraj is "a miracle second only to the revelation of the Quran" and refers to the Prophet's "night journey" beyond the Seven Heavens to come into Divine Presence. The event was "the ultimate source of strength and relief," and among the blessings that Muhammad brought back to humanity were Salah prayers as the "daily source of strength to Muslims" as they "communicate with Allah and draw closer to Him." https://muslimhands.org.uk/latest/2019/04/al-isra-wal-mi-raj-the-story-of-the-miraculous-night-journey, viewed November 2020.

23 In Figure 8.5, the repetition, varying sizes, and intensity of images of Bamba created by the street artist Pape Diop offer a three-dimensional stereopsis that draws passersby into the saint's embrace. "Hahad" refers to one of the ninety-nine holy names of Allah, "Diamono" is a local football club, and the chalked exhortation *confiance à personne* is "trust no one" in French. See Roberts and Roberts (2007).

24 Kher (2008: 351), slightly paraphrased; cf. Elison (2014: 164–165). Because of their reverence for the feet and footsteps of divinities (Babb 1981: 395–396), Hindus might offer interesting insights about Bamba's "missing" foot in the saint's 1914 matrix photograph.

25 As in the cosmic algebra of *yantra*; see Khanna (1997). Granted, the mandala is a single work in an infinitude, yet features like those mentioned suggest that the artist may have been asserting visual pieties s/he recognized in Baba's matrix photograph. Even if this were not the case, those who contemplate the work are free to discern revelations following the culturally determined visual epistemologies of their communities and their own mystical insights.

26　For example, devout Evangelicals told David Morgan (1998) that their close contemplation of Warner Sallman's "Head of Christ" (1940) painting revealed the silhouette of the Magi in a fold of Christ's robe.

27　As Robert Brown asserts, miracles such as a perpetual fire are "not outside of natural laws for... believers and thus [are] not unexpected" (1998:30). Cf. Babb (1983).

28　Swallow (1982: 155), writing about Sathya Sai Baba's production and use of ash. Despite associations between ash and funeral pyres, it must be remembered that Shirdi Baba was buried and not cremated.

29　As of this writing in 2021, COVID-19 raged in India. As Baba devotee and online healer Aushim Khetarpal asserts, science must be matched by faith, and he holds that *udi* protects from coronavirus; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QrITpjSBwhA. Online accounts of particular cases of healing with *udi* abound (e.g. http://www.saibabaofshirdi.net/csb/sai_story10.htm), and charitable persons and institutions send *udi* free of charge to those far from Shirdi or without financial resources (https://www.saidhamsola.org/free prasad.php), all sites viewed December 2020.

30　Rigopoulos (1993: 89). "Correct use" of *udi* is explained by a Baba devotee named Hemaji (Hema Teotia), including application to one's forehead when leaving the house, when healing particular afflictions, and as a panacea; see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hOtrxvrwZ5s (viewed June 2021). Much more can be said of such actions with other religious paradigms in mind, e.g. touching ash to the *agna chakra* between the eyebrows, https://isha.sadhguru.org/us/en/wisdom/article/vibhuti-the-sacred-ash (viewed December 2020).

31　Spontaneous appearance of ash on images of Shirdi Sai Baba presents an analeptic loop, for Sathya Sai Baba began producing and distributing ash "straight from nowhere" rather than from Shirdi Baba's *dhuni* or a perpetual fire of his own. "The fire is [now] internal," Sathya Sai Baba asserted, thus permitting him to generate ash from his own hands and body. It also began appearing on his own and other holy images, including Shirdi Baba's (Srinivas 2008: 91–93). Ash now sometimes appears on images of Shirdi Sai Baba in shrines and homes of persons only given to him and not to Sathya Sai Baba.

32　Dr. Mani Sangaran-Hull, "A Devotee's Personal Letter to Sri Sathya Sai Baba," written in 2011 and shared with the authors.

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