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# Yoga Powers

Extraordinary Capacities Attained Through  
Meditation and Concentration

*Edited by*  
Knut A. Jacobsen



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Cover illustration: Meditating *sādhu* at the Māgh Melā in Prayag/Allahabad, February 2008.  
Photo: Knut A. Jacobsen

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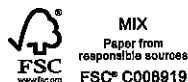
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## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

## SĀI BĀBĀ OF ŚĪRĪ AND YOGA POWERS

Antonio Rigopoulos

The wooden plank of absurdly  
meagre measure  
You turned into a hanging bed  
truly!  
Your yogic powers  
Were displayed to the devotees.  
The barrenness of many women  
You have completely eradicated.  
The diseases of many  
You have cured with the *udī*.

(Das Ganu, *Shri Sainath Stavanamanjari*, 100-101)

*Om*, to Him who grants yogic powers  
and realization, prostration!  
(24th in the series of Sāi Bābā's 108 names)

## INTRODUCTION

Nowadays Sāi Bābā of Śīrī (Shirdi) (d. Oct. 15, 1918) is the most popular saint in India, to whom all sorts of miracles and powers are attributed. His temples and shrines are found all over the country, and Shirdi in the Ahmednagar District of Maharashtra has become a national pilgrimage centre. The *samādhi mandir* and tomb of the saint are visited all year by huge crowds of devotees from all walks of life and bearing diverse religious affiliations, especially at festival times and on the occasion of the death anniversary of Sāi Bābā. The charismatic *faqīr* is venerated not just as a God-realized saint but as the embodiment of divinity by multitudes all across the subcontinent and even outside of it, his renown being largely due to his fame as miracle-

worker. His portrait is ubiquitous on town and village walls, in shops, cars, etc. and he has a place in almost all family altars and *pūjā* rooms.<sup>1</sup>

Although no historical evidence is available concerning the time and place of birth, the identity of his parents,<sup>2</sup> and his religious affiliation and training, it has always been evident that Sāi Bābā was an unconventional *faqīr* part and parcel of the Maharashtrian Sufi tradition of Shekh Muhammad (1560-1650) and Shah Muni (c. 1756-1807), who advocated an integrative spirituality or 'fusion of horizons' accommodating Sufism and Hindu devotionism (*bhakti*), above and beyond the orthodoxy (and caste strictures) of institutionalized religions. Such an orientation finds its paradigmatic model in the figure of Kabīr, the fifteenth-century Sant of Benares.<sup>3</sup> Sāi Bābā's life and teachings promoted the mystical recognition of the unity of being, of reality as a unified whole (*waḥdat al-wujūd, advaita*). His burning love of God was cultivated through the constant remembrance of his omnipresence, primarily achieved through the recollection of Allāh's name (*dhikr, nāmasmaraṇa*) and a life of poverty and renunciation.<sup>4</sup>

Even during his lifetime, Sāi Bābā's *faqīri*, Sufi character tended to be either downplayed or non recognized by the overwhelming majority of his Hindu *bhaktas*. Soon after his death, the complete 'Hinduization' of his persona and cult was achieved.<sup>5</sup> In an effort to 'restore

<sup>1</sup> The towering spread of Sāi Bābā's fame appears to have started rather late, that is, around the 1970s; up until 1950 the coming to Shirdi of 100-150 devotees for a festival celebration was considered a rush day; see M. Warren, *Unravelling the Enigma: Shirdi Sai Baba in the Light of Sufism* (New Delhi: Sterling, 1999), 27.

<sup>2</sup> The current legend is that he was born to Brahman parents in 1838 in Pathri, a village in the Nizam's Dominions. Even his actual name is unknown, since Sāi Bābā is an appellative which was attached to him by local people at Shirdi: Sāi is a term of Persian origin often attributed to Muslim ascetics meaning 'holy one' or 'saint'. Bābā, on the other hand, is a Hindi term attributed to respected seniors and holy men and literally means 'father'.

<sup>3</sup> Kabīr holds an important place in the religious tradition of Maharashtra. A significant hagiographic treatment of Kabīr's life is to be found in the *Bhaktavijaya* of Mahipati (1715-1790), written in 1762, chaps. 5-7, 11, 24.

<sup>4</sup> For an introduction to Sāi Bābā's figure and cult I would still recommend my 1993 book, *The Life and Teachings of Sai Baba of Shirdi* (Albany: State University of New York Press).

<sup>5</sup> From 1918 to 1922, the *faqīr* Abdul still acted in the role of a *pīrzada* or custodian of Sāi Bābā's tomb. In 1922, however, the influential devotee Hari Sitaram Dikshit (1864-1926), a high-caste Brahman, set up a Public Trust through the Ahmednagar District Court to administer the shrine following Hindu rules and rites. Abdul thus lost his position and was persuaded to file a counter-suit declaring that he was the legal heir to Sāi Bābā and that the Public Trust was illegal. He lost the case, however, and was deprived of all authority. Sāi Bābā's shrine became a Hindu

the balance' and counter the Hindu gloss which has always been dominant in the devotional literature, the late Marianne Warren wrote in 1999 an important book: *Unravelling the Enigma: Shirdi Sai Baba in the Light of Sufism*. Herein, she has emphasized Sāi Bābā's Islamic traits, historically reconstructing his life and teachings in the context of Deccani Sufism, and showing the various ways in which the *faqīr* tended to adjust or accommodate himself to Hindu rituals and beliefs.<sup>6</sup> The most precious contribution of Warren's book is the translation (from Urdu) and analysis of the notebook of Sāi Bābā's *faqīr* servant Abdul (1871-1954), who first arrived in Shirdi in 1889 and whose tomb rests near his master's temple. This notebook contains Abdul's notes of Sāi Bābā's utterances, taken while reading the *Qur'an* with the saint at the Shirdi dilapidated mosque (*masjid*).<sup>7</sup>

Although Sāi Bābā maintained a most sober attitude, living all his life as a humble *faqīr* depending on alms and mainly dispensing blessings to people, his fame as a wonder-worker possessing *siddhis* or *baraka* rapidly grew, especially from around 1900. If he didn't emphasize the miraculous, Sāi Bābā seems to have attributed special proper-

temple, the *samādhi mandir*, and in 1954 a huge white marble *mūrti* of the saint was installed behind the tomb. On H. S. Dikshit, also known as Kakasaheb, see B. V. Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba* (Madras: All India Sai Samaj, 1980-1985<sup>3</sup> [1955-1956<sup>1</sup>]), vol. 2, 155-211. Yoginder Sikand has rightly observed that the eclipse of Sāi Bābā's Sufi background "must be understood in the broader context of the growing assertion of Brahminical Hinduism in Maharashtra from the late nineteenth century onwards;" see Y. Sikand, *Sacred Spaces: Exploring Traditions of Shared Faith in India* (New Delhi, Penguin, 2003), 128.

<sup>6</sup> To please his *bhaktas*, Sāi Bābā himself, particularly towards the end of his life, allowed the Hindus to worship him as a *deva*, a god, and to perform various Hindu rituals at the mosque. It is reported that when on an occasion Sāi Bābā allowed a Hindu devotee to smear sandal paste on his forehead, as per the Hindu custom, he told a perplexed Muslim follower who witnessed the scene: 'While in Rome, do as the Romans do', i.e. when one is in a different country one should adopt the local custom; see Narasimhaswami, *op. cit.*, vol. 3, 179. The first author to counter the 'Hinduizing' tendency by presenting Sāi Bābā as a Sufi adept, possibly of the *majzūb* variety, was Kevin Shepherd in his book *Gurus Rediscovered: Biographies of Sai Baba of Shirdi and Upasni Maharaj of Sakori* (Cambridge: Anthropographia Publications, 1985). In a recent work, *Investigating the Sai Baba Movement: A Clarification of Misrepresented Saints and Opportunism* (Dorset, Citizen Initiative, 2005), K. Shepherd presents an updated study (or second installment) of the figures of Sāi Bābā of Śīrī, Upāsni Mahārāj of Śākūrī, and Meher Bābā of Ahmednagar, plus three appendixes on the controversial figure of Sathya Sāi Bābā of Puṭṭaparṭhi. It should be noted that in his presentation of Sāi Bābā (chap. 1, pp. 2-58) he strongly criticizes my 1993 book on a number of issues as well as Warren's study (albeit more limitedly).

<sup>7</sup> On Abdul's figure, for whom Sāi Bābā seems to have had a high regard, see Warren, *Unravelling the Enigma*, 261-274.

ties to the ash (*udī*) he would offer his devotees as a token of his favour.<sup>8</sup> While giving the *udī*, which he extracted from the *dhunī*, the fire he always kept burning inside the *masjid* where he resided, he would bless by saying *Allā acchā karegā* or *Allā bhalā karegā* i.e. 'Allāh will do good/provide',<sup>9</sup> thus referring all power and glory to Allāh and not to himself.

To be sure, the hagiographical sources present us with a wealth of *signa* and *portenta* operated by our *faqīr*, from turning water into oil to commanding nature, from curing all sorts of diseases to averting impending death, from having water springing from his toes to being ubiquitous. In particular, these sources insist on Sāi Bābā's omniscience (*antarajñāna*), offering a variety of anecdotes and stories 'proving' his extraordinary capacities.<sup>10</sup> Even the saint is reported saying: "My eye (of vigilant supervision) is ever on those who love me. Whatever you do, wherever you may be, ever bear this in mind, that I am always aware of everything you do."<sup>11</sup> Perhaps the most stunning type of miracle (*camatkār*, *karāmāt*) reported in the literature is the vicarious taking on of the suffering of a particular person, attracting the pain to his own body.<sup>12</sup> The 'transfer' of a disease from a devotee to himself, for instance plague with its buboes, proved a most spectacular feat.<sup>13</sup> Besides resorting to the saint as a healer, people would turn to Sāi Bābā to ask the blessing/miracle of granting them offspring.<sup>14</sup> This kind of request was and still is one of the most sought after, which devotees and pilgrims ask to Sufi as well as Hindu holy men. Thus Sāi Bābā became especially famous for his alleged capacity of curing barrenness: he would usually dispense his blessing and *udī*, coupled with a symbol of fertility such as a coconut, a mango or a tamarind fruit.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>8</sup> See G. S. Khaparde, *Shirdi Diary* (Shirdi: Shri Sai Baba Sansthan, n. d.), 37 (entry dated December 9, 1911).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 121 (entry dated March 15, 1912).

<sup>10</sup> See B. V. Narasimhaswami, *Charters and Sayings*. With Foreword by Justice M. B. Rege (Madras: Sai Nath & Co., 1942), 177-196.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>12</sup> See Warren, *Unravelling the Enigma*, 69-70.

<sup>13</sup> See G. R. Dabholkar (Hemad Pant), *Shri Sai Satcharita: The Life and Teachings of Shirdi Sai Baba*. Translated from the Original Marathi by Indira Kher (New Delhi: Sterling, 1999), 113-114 (chap. 7, vv. 100-110); Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba*, vol. 3, 61.

<sup>14</sup> See Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba*, vol. 3, 53. See also Warren, *Unravelling the Enigma*, 97.

<sup>15</sup> See Dabholkar, *Shri Sai Satcharita*, 412-413 (chap. 25, vv. 87-103), where thanks to the saint's blessing—Sāi Bābā's gift of eight mango fruits—eight children

Apparently, Sāi Bābā himself acknowledged that he had vast powers. For example, on December 7, 1910, the Brahman devotee Ganesh Shrikrishna Khaparde (1854-1938),<sup>16</sup> a highly educated man and a distinguished lawyer and political figure, member of the Central Legislative Assembly who served as an aide to B. G. Tilak (whom he also took to visit Sāi Bābā at Shirdi on May 19, 1917), noted in his diary the following words of the saint: "God is very great and has his officers everywhere. They are all powerful. One must be content with the state in which God keeps him. But I am very powerful. I was here eight or ten thousand years ago."<sup>17</sup> Moreover: "Sayin Baba also said that his order was supreme (Bala)."<sup>18</sup> In an entry dated March 12, 1912, Khaparde wrote: "Sayin Sahib said, 'People are very ignorant. When they do not see my physical body they think I am absent'.<sup>19</sup> Another *bhakta*, Rao Saheb Yeshwant Janardan Galwankar, a Brahman landowner from Bombay who first came to Shirdi in 1911, once heard the *faqīr* say "that he (Baba) was not the three and a half cubits height of body, that he was everywhere, and that the devotees should see him in every place."<sup>20</sup> Abdul Ghani Munsiff, a follower of Meher Bābā, reports that

during the war years [World War I], Sai Baba would often say: "I am formless and I am everywhere. I am not this body you call Sai... I am the Supreme Soul—the entire creation. I am everything and I am in everyone. I am in saints, criminals, animals, and everything else... Nothing happens without my wish. My light is of God; my religion is *Kabiri*—Perfect Mastery—and my wealth lies in the blessings I alone can give."<sup>21</sup>

The Brahman devotee G. G. Narke, a geology professor in Pune who first came to Shirdi in 1913, observed that Sāi Bābā appeared to be living and operating in other worlds, and that he was working in an

were born to the younger wife of one Damu Anna, four sons and four daughters.

<sup>16</sup> On his figure, see Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba*, vol. 2, 298-335. See also Khaparde, *Shirdi Diary*, 108-125 (Appendix 1, "More about 'Shirdi Diary' of Dadasaheb Khaparde," by V. B. Kher).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-4. See also Narasimhaswami, *Charters and Sayings*, 16.

<sup>18</sup> Khaparde, *Shirdi Diary*, 62 (entry dated January 22, 1912).

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>20</sup> It seems that this was told to him by Sāi Bābā in 1917; Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba*, vol. 3, 138-139.

<sup>21</sup> A. G. Munsiff, *Sai Baba: The Perfect Master* (Pune: Meher Era Publications, 1991), 57. This book is a compilation of Munsiff's writings, which originally appeared in the *Mehar Baba Journal* (1938-1942).

invisible body.<sup>22</sup> Though seated in his own place at the *masjid*, Sāi Bābā was thought to wander freely everywhere. As Narasimhaswami reports: "While sitting in front of the *dhuni*, he would often say to what distant places he went overnight and what he had done .... Baba did travel with the invisible body to distant places and there render actual service. Baba was often describing scenes in other worlds."<sup>23</sup>

Though he underlined the fact of being but a poor *faqīr*, on occasions he would plainly say "I am Allāh," and not infrequently he identified himself with *brahman* and the various gods of the Hindu pantheon.<sup>24</sup>

Sāi Bābā's eyes are described as having been especially powerful. He would gaze at people or even at inanimate objects such as his portrait, 'enlivening' it by his glance and touch,<sup>25</sup> as well as at space, directing his look towards the cardinal points.<sup>26</sup> A woman devotee, Tara Bai Sadasiva Tarkhad' of Pune, offered the following testimony:

There was such power and penetration in the glance that none could continue to look at his eyes. One felt that Sai Baba was reading him or her through and through. Soon one lowered one's eyes and bowed down. One felt that he was not only in one's heart but in every atom of one's body .... He was the *Antaryami* [Inner Ruler], call him God or Satpurusha [Perfect One] .... In his presence, no doubts, no fears, no questionings had any place, and one resigned oneself and found that was the only course, the safest and best course.<sup>27</sup>

G. G. Narke, who also recognized Sāi Bābā as the *antaryāmin*, recalled: "I still have the indelible impression of Baba sitting in the Chavadi<sup>28</sup> with piercing eyes." The saint's smile was also most charming. Khaparde, in a diary entry dated December 7, 1910, wrote: "Sayin Sahib spoke with such a wonderful sweetness and he smiled so often and with such extraordinary grace that the conversation will always remain engraved in my memory."<sup>29</sup> Moreover, on January 17, 1912, he noted: "Sayin Baba showed his face and smiled most benignly. It is

<sup>22</sup> See Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba*, vol. 3, 116.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>24</sup> See Narasimhaswami, *Charters and Sayings*, 9-11.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>26</sup> See Khaparde, *Shirdi Diary*, 84 (entry dated February 14, 1912).

<sup>27</sup> Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba*, vol. 3, 58.

<sup>28</sup> A local hostel where Sāi Bābā, from an early period, used to sleep. The saint developed the habit of sleeping one night at the *masjid* and the other night at the *cāvaḍī*.

<sup>29</sup> Khaparde, *Shirdi Diary*, 4.

worth while spending years here to see it even once. I was overjoyed and stood gazing like mad."<sup>30</sup>

Sāi Bābā used to look at people very intensely, which for a Hindu is reminiscent of *dr̥ṣṭi* or 'gaze concentration', a well-known *hathayoga* practice. By the same token, the spiritual, transforming power of a saint's glance is well-documented even in Sufism. Narasimhaswami observes that:

when Bala Saheb Bhate visited Baba in 1909... the very look of Baba pierced and transfixed him. He sat for half an hour, then for an hour, and when reminded by those near him that it was time to move away, had not the slightest inclination to move... It was with difficulty that he was pulled away from Baba. Here is a case of what we might term fascination.<sup>31</sup>

On December 11, 1910 Khaparde wrote: "...Sayin Maharaj looked at me with an eye that blazed wonderfully and sparkled with anger."<sup>32</sup> Moreover, on January 6, 1912, he noted: "Sayin Maharaj was in an exceptionally pleased mood, made mystic signs to Megha, and did what are known as 'Drishti pata' in Yoga."<sup>33</sup> Again, the following day he wrote in his diary: "Sayin Maharaj looked exceedingly pleased and gave Yogic glances. I passed the whole day in a sort of ecstasy."<sup>34</sup>

Even Meher Bābā (1894-1969), who first met Sāi Bābā in Shirdi in December 1915, emphasized the lustre of the *faqīr's* eyes. As A. G. Munsiff reported:

Avatar Meher Baba used to say that Sai Baba had lustrous eyes. The light in his eyes attracted most persons towards him. All Perfect Ones are unique. If there was a physical characteristic that set him above other men, it was his eyes. The eyes of this Perfect One were so luminous, with such power and deep penetration in his gaze that no one could look into them for long. One felt that he was reading the story of the soul from the time of his creation; nothing could be kept secret from that gaze. Once those eyes beheld one, that look was never forgot-

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>31</sup> Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba*, vol. 4, 34.

<sup>32</sup> Khaparde, *Shirdi Diary*, 10.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 46. *Dr̥ṣṭipāta* or *dr̥ṣṭinipāta* is the 'falling of the sight,' that is, a yogic look/glance believed to be most powerful and a token of the saint's grace (*dr̥ṣṭiprasāda*, *vikṣaṇa*).

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 47. In an entry dated January 13, 1912, Khaparde wrote that "Sayin Maharaj did not say a word today and did not even throw the glances which he usually does." Similarly, on January 19, 1912, he observed: "The Kakad Arti was done, but Sayin Maharaj did not show his face clear and did not appear to open his eyes. He never threw glances spreading grace."

ten. After seeing his face and eyes, people could only bow to him in worship as their Lord.<sup>35</sup>

Sāi Bābā's touch was also believed to be mighty and healing,<sup>36</sup> and he would often bless people by placing his palm upon their heads.<sup>37</sup> Narasimhaswami remarks:

He would simply touch with his palm the head of a devotee and this would have one kind of influence. Sometimes he pressed his hand heavily on the head of a devotee as though he was crushing out some of the lower impulses. On occasions, he would pat on the devotee's back or would pass his palm over the head. Each had its own effect affecting the sensations and feelings of the subject.<sup>38</sup>

To cite but one case: "Baba placed his palm over his head. That had a strange effect on him. He completely forgot himself and all surroundings, and was in an ecstatic trance."<sup>39</sup> Our *faqīr* was also in the habit of making signs in the air, which were mostly unintelligible to people. Narasimhaswami notes: "Baba in the morning would sit near his *dhuni* (or fire) and wave his arms and fingers about making gestures (which conveyed no meaning to the onlookers) and saying 'Haq', which means God."<sup>40</sup>

The combination of glance and touch were of course reputed to be most powerful. Again Narasimhaswami mentions the following instance: "Suddenly Baba turned back and fixed him with a glance and touched his left wrist. At once the Rohilla<sup>41</sup> cowered and sank like a lump of lead. He was not able to lift up either himself or the club. This man later left Shirdi for good."<sup>42</sup>

All in all, Sāi Bābā's whole persona, his glances, movements and utterances, conveyed an immediate experience of the sacred. As the old villagers of Shirdi told me when I interviewed them in October

<sup>35</sup> Munsiff, *Sai Baba: The Perfect Master*, 38-39. See also *ibid.*, 45.

<sup>36</sup> Narasimhaswami, *Charters and Sayings*, 55, reports that Sāi Bābā once cured a Bandra lady from her headache by touching and gently stroking her head.

<sup>37</sup> See Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba*, vol. 3, 32, 178.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 130. See also *ibid.*, vol. 4, 35.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 3, 138. The person who had such experience was Rao Saheb Yeshwant Janardan Galwankar; see also Narasimhaswami, *Charters and Sayings*, 199.

<sup>40</sup> Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba*, vol. 3, 66. See also Khaparde, *Shirdi Diary*, 80 (entry dated February 9, 1912), 101 (entry dated March 8, 1912).

<sup>41</sup> The term refers to a Muslim of Afghan descent.

<sup>42</sup> Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba*, vol. 3, 82.

1985, being in the presence of Sāi Bābā gave them the awesome feeling of being in the presence of God.<sup>43</sup>

Our *faqīr* appears to have assured his presence even after his death. The *Shri Sai Satcharita*, the veritable 'Bible' for all Sāi Bābā devotees, at chap. 25, vv. 105-108, quotes these words of the saint:

Even when I am no more, trust my words as the truth. My bones will give you an assurance from my grave. Not me alone, but even my tomb will speak to you. He who surrenders to it whole-heartedly, with him will it sway. Do not worry that I will be lost to you. You will hear my bones speaking to you of matters of your own interest. Only remember me, always, with a heart that is trusting. Worship me selflessly and you will achieve your highest weal.<sup>44</sup>

Also to Abdullah Jan, a *faqīr* who first visited Shirdi in 1913 and once expressed his fear that he would die, the saint is reported saying: "From within the tomb, I will beat with sticks."<sup>45</sup> Indeed, the tomb or *dargāh* of a Sufi saint is believed to be the repository of the saint's power (*baraka*). As Warren observes: "It is a well-known Sufi phenomenon that a Sufi saint's power remains at his tomb, so the saying goes that he never dies.... People continue to report that they have received posthumous help 'from the tomb' as he [Sāi Bābā] promised."<sup>46</sup>

#### SĀI BĀBĀ AND YOGA IN THE SHRI SAI SATCHARITA

The *Shri Sai Satcharita* or "The True Life of Lord Sai" is unanimously regarded by Hindu devotees as the most authoritative repository of the life and deeds of their beloved saint. This 'official' hagiography or devotional biography is revered as the most sacred book (*pothī*) by all Hindu *bhaktas*, who read/recite its chapters as part of their daily worship. The *Shri Sai Satcharita* was composed in Marathi by Govind Raghunath Dabholkar (1859-1929), who conceived it while Sāi Bābā

<sup>43</sup> The collection of these interviews constituted an appendix to my BA Thesis, which I discussed at the 'Ca' Foscari' University of Venice, Italy, in June 1987. Unfortunately, they were deemed too lengthy and not included in the *The Life and Teachings of Sai Baba of Shirdi*.

<sup>44</sup> Dabholkar, *Shri Sai Satcharita*, 414.

<sup>45</sup> Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba*, vol. 3, 183. For a similar assurance given to one Raghuvir and to H. S. Dikshit on October 3, 1918, see A. E. Bharadwaja, *Sai Baba the Master* (Ongole: Sai Master Publications, 1983), 110.

<sup>46</sup> Warren, *Unravelling the Enigma*, 204. Similar beliefs surround the tombs or *samādhis* of Hindu saints.



was still alive having obtained the saint's permission and blessings. Sāi Bābā, placing his hand on Dabholkar's head and handing him the *udī*, would have exclaimed (chap. 2, vv. 72-77): "Your wish will be fulfilled ... Make a collection of all the authentic stories, experiences, conversations and talks, etc. It is better to keep a record. He has my full support. He is but the instrument; I myself will write my own story ... He should subdue his ego and offer it at my feet."<sup>47</sup> The inspiration came to him after seeing Sāi Bābā performing one of his bizarre actions i.e. grinding large quantities of wheat at the mosque, and hearing his final command to the women of the village to throw the flour at the side of a brook at the village boundary. Local people in Shirdi gave the interpretation that in this way the saint banished a cholera epidemic, preventing it from entering the village: it was not wheat, but the terrible disease that he fed to the quern to be crushed (chap. 1, vv. 104-138).

Dabholkar, whom Sāi Bābā nicknamed Hemadpant (the famous thirteenth-century prime minister and court-poet of the Yadavas), was a Gaud Saraswat Brahman who served as a clerk of the Bombay government and later also as a magistrate in Bandra, a Bombay suburb. He came to Shirdi for the first time in 1910, just eight years before Sāi Bābā passed away, and became a permanent resident of the village in 1916 when he retired. He thus started gathering data and recording the main facts and incidents of the saint's life in the final years of Sāi Bābā's life (he had sketched two chapters before the *faqīr*'s death). The actual writing appears to have started in 1922-23, and was completed and published in 1929. The *Shri Sai Satcharita* is divided up into 53 chapters (51, plus an Epilogue and an Epitome), and is written in the traditional *ovī* verse form, comprising more than 9,300 verses.<sup>48</sup> With its unsystematic yet captivating mixture of stories and anecdotes of Sāi Bābā's life and teachings, it is a fine example of the hagiographic genre (despite its rather rough literary style),<sup>49</sup> under the evocative spell of celebrated works of the *advaitabhakti* tradition of the saint-poets of Maharashtra, such as the *Eknāthī Bhāgavata*. Indeed, Dabhol-

<sup>47</sup> Dabholkar, *Shri Sai Satcharita*, 22-23.

<sup>48</sup> The *ovī* meter, which originally used to be recited and sung, consists of either six or eight syllables, the quantity as a rule being that of a long syllable.

<sup>49</sup> On the relevance of hagiographic models and materials and the hagiographic literary genre, see F. Mallison, éd., *Constructions hagiographiques dans le monde indien. Entre mythe et histoire* (Paris: Editions Champion, 2001). On the cult of Muslim saints, see M. Gaborieau, "Inde," in H. Chambert-Loir—C. Guillot (éds.), *Le culte des saints dans le monde musulman* (Paris: Presses de l'École Française d'Extrême-Orient, 1995), 197-210.

kar conceived his work in the trail of the Maharashtrian Vārkarī movement, explicitly linking Sāi Bābā to it, so as to situate his beloved saint within a well established tradition. Thus Shirdi is praised as a sacred ford or *tirtha* along the Godavari river and as a modern Pandharpur, and Sāi Bābā is identified with Viṭṭhala/Viṭhobā (as well as with various other Hindu deities).

The actual model of the *Shri Sai Satcharita* appears to be the Marathi *Gurucaritra* ("Life of the Master"), the Gospel for all devotees of the god Datta/Dattātreyā, written by Sarasvatī Gangadhār around the middle of the sixteenth century.<sup>50</sup> Divided into 51 chapters containing more than seven thousand *ovīs*, this hagiography presents the miraculous lives of Shripad Shrivallabh (c. 1323-53) and Nṛsimha Sarasvatī (c. 1378-1458), the two seminal figures venerated as the first 'historical' *avatāras* of Dattātreyā. To be sure, Dabholkar as well as most Hindus viewed and still view Sāi Bābā to be a manifestation of Dattātreyā,<sup>51</sup> an integrative deity revered as highest *yogin* (*paramahansa* or *avadhūta*), supreme *guru*, and eternal *avatāra*, even accommodating Islamic tenets. Dattātreyā is a most important figure in the pan-Indian sect of the Nāths, a *śaiva* yogic tradition which became popular especially from the twelfth century onwards. Dattātreyā had and still has an important place in the Western, Deccani pantheon of the 'nine Nāths' (*navnāth*), being revered as an immortal *yogin* and one of the originators of the movement along with Gorakhnāth and Matsyendranāth. In the tradition of the Vārkarīs, the saint-poets Eknāth (1533-99)—advocate, via his *guru* Janardan, of a synthetic mysticism, open to all—and the encyclopaedic Dāsopant (1551-1615) are especially linked to Dattātreyā. The hagiographer Mahīpati offers accounts of the *darśanas* which Dattātreyā, as a Muslim soldier and as a Muslim *faqīr*, would have granted to Eknāth (*Bhaktavijaya* 45.82-85, 45.105 ff.; *Bhaktalīlāmṛta* 13.164-205). Mahīpati also narrates stories of the meetings between Eknāth and Dāsopant, in which

<sup>50</sup> Originally the *Shri Sai Satcharita* consisted of 44 chapters, the text ending with the narrative of Sāi Bābā's 'niryān' or passing away. However, precisely in order to conform itself to the model of the *Gurucaritra*, seven more chapters were later added, plus an epilogue and an epitome. For the text of the *Gurucaritra*, see R. K. Kamat, éd., *Śrīgurucaritra* (Mumbai: Samdeep Press, 1990 [1937]).

<sup>51</sup> For instance, Narasimhaswami in his *Life of Sai Baba*, vol. 3, 147, reports: "Baba was considered as Datta Avatar by Das Ganu and by those who heard his *kir-tans*." On Dattātreyā, see my monograph *Dattātreyā: The Immortal Guru, Yogin, and Avatāra. A Study of the Transformative and Inclusive Character of a Multi-Faceted Hindu Deity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998).

Dattatreya appears to the latter as the guardian of Eknāth's house (*Bhaktalīlāmṛta* 22.79-101; see also 22.48-65). After Eknāth and Dāsopant, in the development of the devotional and ascetic movement linked to Dattatreya we find significant *guruparamparās* of both *vaiṣṇava* and *śaiva* masters (many of Nāth inspiration) comprising also *pīrs* i.e. saintly figures of Sufi background, integrating Islamic mysticism with non-dual Vedānta. Besides Sāi Bābā, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries important *gurus* revered as incarnations of Dattatreya were Mānikprabhu (1817-1865), Akkaḷkoṭ Mahārāj (d. 1878), Vāsudevānanda Sarasvatī (1854-1914), Mahārāj Bālekuṇḍrikar (1855-1905), Nūri Mahārāj (1869-1923), Purohit Svāmin (1882-1941), Nisargadatta Mahārāj (1897-1981), and Raṅga Avadhūta (1898-1968). All these, often exhibiting a bizarre, antinomian personality following Dattatreya's pattern, are honored both as great *jñānins* and miracle-workers, givers of liberation, *mukti*, as well as mundane enjoyments, *bhukti*.

Beginning in 1923, the chapters of the *Shri Sai Satcharita* started appearing serialized in the Shirdi monthly magazine *Shri Sai Leela*. Following its book publication in 1929, the text was rendered in Marathi prose form and also translated in other Indian languages, such as in Gujarati. An English adaptation of the *Shri Sai Satcharita* appeared in 1944 written by Nagesh Vasudev Gunaji. It proved greatly successful and ever since it has had many editions. Recently, in 1999, Indira Kher has produced a fine, integral translation of the Marathi text, chapter by chapter and verse by verse.<sup>52</sup> This translation is important, since Gunaji's adaptation proved to be not always reliable. As noted by Warren, whereas Dabholkar, albeit from his Hindu perspective, was honest enough not to silence the Sufi aspect of Sāi Bābā—for example, reporting that he was circumcised, and quoting the saint's statement that he belonged to the Muslim caste (chap. 11, verse 62)—Gunaji tended to omit references to Sāi Bābā's Muslim identity, even adding sections of his own Hindu interpretation of the saint's actions, in an effort to present a purely 'Hinduized' picture of the *faqīr*.<sup>53</sup> Regarding every word and action of Sāi Bābā as sacred, Dabholkar felt a moral obligation to be most accurate in his account. Thus, whenever

<sup>52</sup> For the original Marathi, see G. R. Dabholkar, *Śrī Sāi Saccarita* (Shirdi: Shri Sai Baba Sansthan, 1982<sup>12</sup> [1929]).

<sup>53</sup> Warren, *Unravelling the Enigma*, 18, rightly criticizes my relying in my 1993 book on Gunaji's adaptation.

Sāi Bābā spoke in Deccani Urdu he recorded it<sup>54</sup> and also included some significant Muslim incidents: for instance, in chapter 38, verse 30, Dabholkar notes that Sāi Bābā would occasionally go through the special Muslim ritual known as *takkyā*, when a goat is to be killed on an altar so as to ensure that its meat be *halal* or appropriately purified. As Warren writes, it appears that Dabholkar "personally regarded Sai Baba as a Muslim, although he was limited in fully understanding Sai Baba's Muslim-Sufi identity due to his own ignorance of Islam and Sufism in Maharashtra."<sup>55</sup>

Utilizing Kher's reliable translation, I'll here quote what appear to me as the few relevant passages of the *Shri Sai Satcharita* in which Dabholkar describes Sai Baba as a *yogin* or presents incidents of his life which might be referred to the practice of yoga. Here and there, Dabholkar calls Sai Baba a *yogin*: in chapter 4 he defines him as "this greatest among *yogis*" (v. 38), whose "*samādhi* was unperturbed" (v. 49), "born a *siddha*" (v. 56), and in the final, 53rd chapter, he reiterates that Sai Baba was "the greatest of *yogis*" (v. 43).

The value of the *Shri Sai Satcharita*, steeped in Vedāntic lore, lies primarily in its being a testimony and most powerful propagator of the Sai Baba cult, offering a picture of how the saint was understood and worshipped by the overwhelming Hindu majority of devotees in the final years of his life.<sup>56</sup> Its historical, documentary value is also relevant and should be recognized, though it needs to be carefully evaluated and critically assessed. Besides Dabholkar's work there exist other memoirs of Sāi Bābā written by devotees as well as some holy figures who were his contemporaries. Among secondary authors, mention must be made of the contributions of B. V. Narasimhaswami (also known as H. H. Narasimha Swamiji), founder-president of the All India Sai Samaj: he collected the sayings attributed to Sāi Bābā in his *Charters and Sayings* (4th ed. 1942); in 1936 and 1938 he interviewed

<sup>54</sup> Narasimhaswami himself acknowledged that "Baba knew Arabic and Urdu, and taught *Koran* to Abdul," see *Life of Sai Baba*, vol. 3, 166. Moreover: "Baba prepared *khichdi* [boiled mixture of rice and split pulse] with mutton;" *ibid.*, 167, and "distributed not merely vegetarian food, but also meat for non-vegetarians prepared ... by himself," *ibid.*, 184.

<sup>55</sup> Warren, *Unravelling the Enigma*, 150.

<sup>56</sup> An important propagator of Sāi Bābā's fame during the saint's lifetime was the Citpāvan Brahman Ganesh Dattatreya Sahasrabuddhe, better known as Das Ganu (1868-1962), especially through his song-sermons (*kīrtans*). A presentation of this staunch Hindu nationalist and Maharashtrian chauvinist in relation to Sāi Bābā is afforded by Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba*, vol. 2, 122-154.

many Shirdi devotees, publishing in 1942 their experiences in 3 vols.; and in 1955-1956 published a *Life of Sai Baba* in 4 vols. Indeed, as the saint's 'apostle', Narasimhaswami was instrumental in the spreading of Sāi Bābā's renown throughout India, as he himself noted.<sup>57</sup> His emphasis on the miraculous (in vol. 4 of his *Life* he devotes the final three chaps. to Sāi Bābā's *siddhis* and *līlās*)<sup>58</sup> calls for discrimination on the reader's part, but does not diminish the overall relevance of his work. Most if not all of these documents concern the final part of the saint's life i.e. more or less his last ten years (1908-1918), when Sāi Bābā had become popular. They were written by urban, high-caste Brahmans, mainly coming from the Bombay area, who interpreted Sāi Bābā through their own Hindu perspective and thus reinforced the Hindu gloss over the saint.<sup>59</sup> I shall selectively utilize these contributions and the work of other more recent authors who have studied the complex figure of our *faqīr* when analyzing the passages quoted below, which can be reduced to five main narratives.

1. *The Seat of Sāi Bābā's Furu (Chap. 4, vv. 121-138)*

... He [Sāi Bābā] never visited anyone, but remained near the Neem tree, day and night.

....

A strange thing happened, one day! A few persons were possessed by the spirit of the deity, Khandoba<sup>60</sup>. In their frenzy, they started puffing and grasping and panting, emitting loud deep sounds. So people began to ask them questions.

"To which fortunate parents does this boy belong? From where and how has he come up to here? O Khandoba, at least you find the answers for us," one of them said to the god.

<sup>57</sup> See *ibid.*, vol. 3, 187.

<sup>58</sup> See chap. 10 ("Baba's *Siddhis*, Their Origin and Their Use"), chap. 11 ("Baba's Recent *Līlās* in the South and Their Purpose"), and chap. 12 ("Baba's Teachings as to *Siddhis*"), 129-192.

<sup>59</sup> Narasimhaswami nonetheless dedicated chaps. 13-15 of vol. 3 of his *Life of Sai Baba to Islam: "Baba and Muslims' Contacts," "Some Muslim Devotees,"* and "Other Muslim Devotees. Abdul (1871-1954)," 151-187.

<sup>60</sup> Popular pastoral god, typically identified with Śiva, whose home is the temple at Jejuri in Pune District.

And the god said, "Go, get a hoe, and strike at the spot that I show you. Strike here with your hoes and you will get your answers about this lad."

Then, in the same spot, near the enclosing wall of the village, under the same Neem tree, they struck blow upon blow with their hoes till they came upon some bricks.

The layer of bricks over, they found an underground cell with four metal lamps burning in it, the entrance to which was closed by a quern-stone.

The cell was paved with limestone and contained a wooden seat, a *Gomukhi*<sup>61</sup> with a beautiful rosary. Then the god said, "For twelve years this boy undertook penance at this spot."

All the people were wonderstruck at this and started plying the boy with probing questions. But the lad was full of playful mischief and told them a story, altogether different.

"This is my Guru's seat," said he, "and my most sacred legacy. Listen to me this once and preserve it as it is."

So said Baba, said the listeners who were present. But why is this, my tongue, moved to say that Baba was giving it a different turn?

I was amazed at myself. Why should I think in such terms about Baba? But now I have realized that this must have been his spontaneous sense of humour.

Baba dearly loved a joke. Maybe, the cell was his own dwelling. But what does one lose in saying that it is the Guru's? How does its importance suffer?

And so on his orders, the cell was, once again, sealed as his Guru's seat, by restoring the bricks to their former position.

The Neem tree was to Baba as great and as sacred as the *Ashwaththa* (*Peepul*) or *Audumbar* tree. He loved that Neem tree dearly, and greatly revered it.

Mhalsapati<sup>62</sup> and other old residents of Shirdi village bow to this place as the *samadhi* of Baba's Guru.

It is common knowledge among the villagers that Baba sat near this *samadhi*, in meditation, observing total silence for a period of twelve years.

<sup>61</sup> A glove, shaped like a cow's mouth, which covers the hand in counting rosary beads.

<sup>62</sup> The keeper of the local Khandobā temple and one of the first devotees of the saint. It was he who, according to our sources, first called him 'Sāi'. On Mhalsapati (d. 1922), see Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba*, vol. 2, 1-42.

2. *Sāi Bābā's Peculiar Way of Practicing Dhauti and His Feat of Separating His Limbs at Will (khaṇḍayoga) (Chap. 7, vv. 53-69)*

Baba knew 'dhoti-poti' (a *haṭhayoga* practice). Without anybody's knowledge, he would go to some secluded spot, take a bath and then bring out his intestines (through the mouth), which he would then wash and hang them up to dry.

Equidistant as the well from the mosque, was a banyan tree and beyond this tree was another well. To this latter, he used to go every two days.

In the scorching heat, at high noon, seeing that no one was around, he would himself draw water from the well and wash his mouth, face, etc. And so, on one such occasion, when he was sitting down to his bath, he hurriedly brought out his intestines and began washing them at that place.

When a goat is killed, its intestines are turned inside out, washed clean, and put, fold upon fold, to dry.

Similarly, he took out his intestines, and turning them inside out, cleaned them carefully. He then spread them out on the guava tree, to the consternation of the people around.

Even now, there are people alive in Shirdi, who have seen Baba in this condition with their own eyes, who say that he was a unique saint.

Sometimes he would practice *Khanda-yoga*, separating hands, legs, etc., from the trunk. And these parts of his body could be seen fallen off at different places in the mosque.

And when the people, in large numbers, came running to see the shocking spectacle of his body thus severed into parts, what they always saw was Baba, whole and in one piece.

Once a spectator was terrified in seeing such a scene and thought that some wicked person must have killed Baba and committed such an atrocity.

In the four corners of the mosque, parts of the body could be seen scattered at different places. It was the midnight hour and not a soul was around. He became greatly worried.

If he were to go and tell someone, he would himself get implicated. This was his difficulty. So he went and sat outside.

But that it could be some yogic practice of Sai, he did not even dream. The sight of the mutilated body struck terror in his heart.

He wanted very much to inform somebody of what he had seen, but the fear that, being the first informer, he would himself be accused of the crime, –

Prevented him from telling anyone. Doubts and fears crowded his mind. So once again, at dawn, he went to see and was quite astonished.

What he had seen earlier had vanished completely, and Baba sat in his usual place, hale and hearty. He began to wonder whether this was a dream.

These yogic practices of *dhoti-poti*, etc., were being practiced by Baba, since childhood. But nobody could comprehend the extent of his yogic powers and the mysterious behaviour consequent upon it.

3. *Sāi Bābā's 'Temporary Death' (Vhap. 44, vv. 62-89)*

It was the full moon in the brighter half of the month of *Margashirsha* (December), when Baba became restless with an attack of Asthma and in order to be able to bear the physical affliction, he went into *nirvikalpa samadhi*.

And Baba had already told everyone, "For three days from now onwards, I shall go into *samadhi*. Do not try to rouse me."

That corner of the *Sabha-mandap*<sup>63</sup> that you see, that was the place to which Baba had pointed his finger and said, "Dig the *samadhi* there and place me at that spot."

Addressing Mhalsapati, Baba had himself said, most positively, "Do not abandon me with unconcern, the next three days.

And put up two flags at that place as a sign indicative of the spot." So saying, he went into *nirvikalpa samadhi*.

And, as in a sudden fainting fit, his body fell down, motionless. Mhalsapati took his head on his lap; but the others gave up all hope.

It was night time; the clock had struck ten, when this incident took place. People fell silent, thinking, "Alas! What a sudden calamity!"

No breathing, no pulse—life seemed to have abandoned the body. To the people, it appeared a terrible state; but to Sai, it was a state of greatest happiness.

Thereafter, Mhalsapati, who was always alert in his mind, kept guard over Baba, day and night, sitting up wide awake, all the time.

<sup>63</sup> A portico in front of a temple, where people assemble.

Although it was a command from Sai's own mouth, to dig his *samadhi*, yet no one had the heart to do so.

The whole village gathered there to see Baba in the state of *samadhi* and people stared at him in utter astonishment. Bhagat,<sup>64</sup> however, would not put down Baba's head from his lap.

So that it may not be a sudden shock to the people to see that life had departed from his body, Baba had asked them to guard him for three days. "Really, Sai had deceived them," thought the people.

His breathing ceased; all the bodily organs became still, without any trace of activity and the glow of life over it dimmed, too!

Consciousness of the outside world was lost; speech fell silent. Everyone was deeply worried as to how he would regain consciousness.

The body would not gain consciousness. Two days passed in this way. *Mulla*, *Maulavi*,<sup>65</sup> *fakir*—all came and began discussing what was to be done next.

Appa Kulkarni, Kashiram came, and took a firm decision that Baba had attained his Eternal Abode. So his body should be laid to rest.

Some said, "Wait a moment, such haste is not good. Baba is not like others. His words are always true."

At once, the others replied, "From where will life come into a body that is already cold? How thoughtless all these people are!

Dig the grave at the spot indicated. Oh, do call all the people and give a timely burial! Get everything ready for it."

And even as the debate continued, the period of three days passed. Then, early morning, at three o'clock, they saw signs of life returning. Gradually, consciousness returned; the twisting and turning of the body began; breathing too, resumed and the stomach could be seen heaving up and down.

The face began to look pleased and happy, the eyes opened. The motionless state had disappeared and signs of life, of waking up, appeared.

...

Everyone was pleased to see that Sai had regained consciousness. By God's Grace, a great calamity was averted. But still, the devotees were filled with amazement.

<sup>64</sup> The term identifies Mhalsapati. It is popularly attributed to one who is possessed by a deity—in Mhalsapati's case it would have to be Khaṇḍobā—and acts as an intermediary between the god or goddess and the community of the faithful.

<sup>65</sup> These terms identify teachers of Islamic law.

Bhagat gazed into his face with fond admiration and Sai too, nodded silently. The *Maulavi* and *fakir* turned pale in the face. Thus a terrible situation was prevented.

Had Bhagat failed to obey Baba's command, on seeing the obstinate insistence of *Maulavi*, had his resolution wavered ever so slightly, then indeed, the situation would have been terrible.

#### 4a. Sāi Bābā's Wooden Plank (Chap. 10, vv. 15-21, 29-30)

A wooden plank, four times an arm's length, wide as an outstretched palm (the measure of the thumb and the little finger, extended) would be suspended from the rafter, like a swing, fastened at both ends by pieces of rags.

On such a plank Baba used to sleep. Earthen oil-lamps burned at the head and foot of his bed. No one ever understood when he climbed up or down from it.

He would either sit up there, with head bent, or would be sleeping on it. But when he climbed up or got down from it, nobody ever saw him doing so.

The plank was secured by strips of rags—but how did it balance Baba's weight? Well, when all the *Mahasiddhis* reside in you, is not the plank only for name's sake?

Where even the tiniest particle pricks the eye, a man who has attained the *siddhi* of *Anima* (ability to reduce oneself to an atom) can hide quite comfortably in it. Hence Baba's power to move with ease in the form of a fly or a worm or an ant.

He who has *Anima* as his slave, will he take long, transforming himself into a fly? And he who can stay suspended in mid-air, of what consequence is a wooden plank to such a one?

The *Ashtasiddhis*<sup>66</sup> like *Anima*, *Mahima*,<sup>67</sup> *Laghima*,<sup>68</sup> etc., and the *Navanidhis*<sup>69</sup> stood by his side with folded hands. The plank was to him but an instrumental cause!

....

Always Self-engrossed, sitting still in one *asana* (posture), without the bother of going or coming here and there; with his baton as the trea-

<sup>66</sup> The eight traditional yogic powers.

<sup>67</sup> The power to enlarge one's body at will, making it heavier and heavier.

<sup>68</sup> The power to make one's body light and thus be able to levitate.

<sup>69</sup> The nine mythical treasures of Kubera, the god of wealth.

sured staff of a *sannyasin*,—his was indeed a quiet peaceful existence, free from worldly cares!

Without the least desire for wealth or fame, and alms collection as the sole means of subsistence, he passed his days in this yogic state of withdrawal of all the senses (from the attraction of sensual pleasures).

4b. *Significance of Sāi Bābā's Sleeping on the Plank*  
(Chap. 45, vv. 130-142)

A detailed description of this plank has already been given in an earlier chapter (Ch. 10). So now, listen to its significance.

Once, as Baba was earnestly describing the importance of this plank, listen to the thought that arose in the mind of Kakasaheb Dikshit.

And he said to Baba: "If you are so fond of sleeping on the plank, I shall very lovingly, suspend it from the roof. Then you can comfortably lie down on it."

Baba said to him, "Leaving Mhalsapati below, how can I sleep up, alone? I am all right below, as I am."

So Kaka, very lovingly, said further, "I will suspend another plank. You can sleep on one, and Mhalsapati, on the other."

Just listen to Baba's reply to this. "Can he sleep on the plank, indeed? Only he can sleep on the plank who is an aggregate of virtues."

"Sleeping on the plank is not easy. Who can sleep on it, except me? Such sleeping is possible only for him, who can drive away sleep and keep his eyes open."

"When I go to sleep, I command him (Mhalsapati) 'Put your hand on my heart and keep sitting near me'."

"But even this work he cannot do. He keeps nodding drowsily, where he is sitting. To him, this plank is of no use. This plank is my bed only."

"In my heart the chanting of the Name goes on, ceaselessly. See for yourself, by keeping your hand there and if I happen to fall asleep, wake me up. When such is my instruction, to him,

"When he himself falls asleep instead, his hand becomes heavy as a stone. On my calling out '*Bhagat*', the sleep disappears from his eyes, causing him confusion and fright."

"One who cannot sit steadily on the ground, whose seat is not firm, the man who is a slave of sleep, i.e. *tamas*, how can he sleep on a height?"

Thus Baba pointed out, at the appropriate time, and out of affection for the devotees, "Do the duty ordained by your own nature and do not imitate the law of another."

5. *The Breaking of Sāi Bābā's Brick* (Chap. 44, vv. 45-46, 54-56);  
*References to Sāi Bābā's Death on October 15, 1918* (Chap. 43,  
vv. 63-64)

For years together, there used to be an old brick of Baba's, on which he rested his head, while sitting in *yogasan*.

Every night, taking support of that brick, Baba used to sit in the mosque, in solitude, very peacefully, in a *yogic asana*.

....

It was this same brick, resting his elbow on which, Baba would spend hour after hour, sitting in *yogasan*, all ready for *Yoga*. He naturally had great love for it.

"The brick, in the company of which, I go into a state of Self-absorption, and which was dearer to me than life itself—that companion of mine is broken and I too, cannot remain without it."

"That brick, my companion of a lifetime, has gone, leaving me behind." Remembering its many qualities in this manner, Baba started crying.

....

Now that the cause of the devotees is accomplished, therefore, it is said, he has abandoned the body. But who will believe these words? Does a *yogi* have *niryan* and rebirth?

Empowered with the ability of death-at-will that Sai Samarth<sup>70</sup> was, he burned down his body in the *yogic* fire and, himself merging into the Unmanifest, he yet dwells in the hearts of his devotees.

#### A TENTATIVE EVALUATION

##### *The Seat of Sāi Bābā's Guru*

With reference to Sāi Bābā's early years in Shirdi, it is reported that the saint was in the habit of living at the foot of a local *nīm* or margosa tree, practicing austerities and contemplative exercises. He appears to have kept aloof from the local villagers, living in solitude and wander-

<sup>70</sup> An epithet often given to *gurus* and saints meaning strong, powerful.

ing in the nearby woods. Because of his lonely, taciturn and apparently weird demeanour many considered him to be a *pāgal*, that is, a madman. If Sāi Bābā's connection with trees recalls the Hindu typology of the human (as in the case of the Buddha) and divine *yogin* (as in the case of Śiva), such behaviour is by no means exclusive of yoga adepts, being widely resorted to by both Hindu and Muslim ascetics. The utilization and incorporation by Sufi adepts of a variety of yoga postures and practices is well documented. Warren observes:

During Sai Baba's first advent in Shirdi he was seen sitting in the manner of a wandering *darvish* or *sa'ih* under a *neem* tree .... The practice of making the base of a tree, particularly a *neem* tree, a temporary resting place, is a typical Sufi mode of behaviour for an itinerant *faqir* .... It has already been noted that Sai Baba's contemporaries, Hazrat Babajan and Tajuddin Baba both made their home under trees. According to an old devotee, Sai Baba lived first under a *babul* tree, and later spent four or five years under a *neem* tree, and only after much persuasion moved to a more permanent home in an old *masjid*.<sup>71</sup>

In his early years at Shirdi, Sāi Bābā's ascetic disposition tallies with his dressing as an athlete and his involvement in wrestling,<sup>72</sup> and also with his being envisioned as a *hakīm*, a Muslim term denoting a doctor. Sāi Bābā

would collect herbs and inexpensive drugs from the local shops and apply them to the sick. He is said to have cured snake bite, leprosy by using snake poison, and 'rotting eyes' with *bibā* (washer-men's marking-nut) as an alkaline aseptic.... Such medicinal knowledge, coupled with his mastery of yogic practices, already suggest the connotation of a knower of the secrets of human physiology and of a thaumaturge.<sup>73</sup>

The story of the seat/tomb of Sāi Bābā's teacher (*gurusthān*), purportedly located under the same *nīm* tree which the saint elected as his temporary residence, is hagiographically significant since it estab-

<sup>71</sup> Warren, *Unravelling the Enigma*, 223. See also Rigopoulos, *The Life and Teachings of Sai Baba of Shirdi*, 48-49.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 66-67.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 65. Narasimhaswami writes that Sāi Bābā told his devotee H. S. Dikshit "that he went on saying Hari, Hari, and Hari appeared before him. Thereafter he stopped giving medicine and went on giving *udi* only. Therefore Hari and Allah were the same to Baba" (*Life of Sai Baba*, vol. 3, 156). In fact, Sāi Bābā's habit of preparing medicines is not restricted to his early years. On December 10, 1911, G. S. Khaparde noted in his diary that "Sayin Maharaj this afternoon prepared some medicine which he [one Balasaheb Bhat] took;" Khaparde, *Shirdi Diary*, 19. See also Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba*, vol. 3, 60.

lishes a connection between Sāi Bābā and the village. Such link, according to various authors, would extend to one of the saint's previous lives: a current belief is that the *guru* to whom Sāi Bābā referred to was Kabir.<sup>74</sup> Such belief is substantiated by the following statement attributed to our *faqir*: "Kabir was my Guru. I put up at that foot tree, for that reason. God will bless those who burn incense here on Thursdays and Fridays."<sup>75</sup> Interestingly, Narasimhaswami does not even mention this episode in his *Life of Sai Baba*, possibly judging it to be irrelevant or unbelievable.<sup>76</sup> To the contrary, this narrative is taken to have historical value by other researchers. In particular, Swami Sharan Anand, a devotee of Sāi Bābā, was seemingly told by him that his *guru* was one Roshan Shah Mian, a Sufi who would have shed his mortal coil in Shirdi. Sāi Bābā would have then buried him under or near his beloved *nīm* tree.<sup>77</sup> Leaving aside these conjectures concerning the saint's *guru*, what is noteworthy is that this story conforms itself to a hagiographic pattern. It may be usefully confronted with a similar one of the fifteenth-century poet Harihara who wrote about the life of Allama Prabhu, a Viraśaiva/Liṅgāyat holy man who hailed from Karnataka. A. K. Ramanujan summarizes the story as follows:

While he was sitting in an out-of-town grove, downcast, scratching the ground idly with his toenail, he saw something: the golden *kalāśa* (pinnacle, cupola) of a temple jutting forth from the earth .... When he got the place dug and excavated .... before him stood the closed door of a shrine. Careless of consequence, Allama kicked the door open, and entered. He saw before him a *yogi* in a trance, concentrated on the *liṅga*. His eyes and face were all aglow, his locks glowing, a garland of *rudrākṣi* seeds round his neck, serpent earrings on his ears. Like the All-giving Tree, he sat there in the heart of the temple. The *yogi*'s name was Animiṣayya (the One without eyelids, the open-eyed one). While Allama stood there astonished, Animiṣayya gave into his hand a *liṅga* .... This experience of the secret underground, the cave-temple, is what is probably celebrated in the name Guheśvara or Lord of Caves, which appears in almost every Allama *vacana*.<sup>78</sup>

The hagiographic theme of the underground cell of a great *yogin* in the proximity of a sacred tree (the *yogin* being understood to be an

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 101-102.

<sup>75</sup> Narasimhaswami, *Charters and Sayings*, 62. See also *ibid.*, 54.

<sup>76</sup> See Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba*, vol. 1, 21.

<sup>77</sup> See Warren, *Unravelling the Enigma*, 42-43.

<sup>78</sup> A. K. Ramanujan, trans., *Speaking of Śiva* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), 144.

immortal, absorbed in an eternal *samādhi*) is testified in the legend of Jñāndev appearing in a dream to Eknāth, asking him to open his tomb in Alandi so as to push aside the roots of an *ajan* tree that were hurting him, hindering his contemplation.<sup>79</sup> From Dabholkar's viewpoint, the statement that young Sāi Bābā undertook penance near a *nim* tree at the holy spot of the seat/tomb of his *guru*, practicing meditation and observing silence for a period of twelve years—symbolic of a totality or fullness of time—is aimed at portraying the saint as a great *yogin*.

Concerning Sāi Bābā's *guru* and his full absorption in him, Narasimhaswami reports that our *faqīr* once stated:

For twelve years I waited on my *guru* who is peerless and loving. How can I describe his love to me? When he was *dyanastha* (i.e., in love-trance) I sat and gazed at him. We were both filled with bliss. I cared not to turn my eye upon anything else. Night and day I pored upon his face with an ardour of love that banished hunger and thirst. The *guru's* absence, even for a second, made me restless. I meditated on nothing but the *guru*, and had no goal, or object, other than the *guru*. Unceasingly fixed upon him was my mind. Wonderful indeed, the art of my *guru*! I wanted nothing but the *guru* and he wanted nothing but this intense love from me. Apparently inactive, he never neglected me, but always protected me by his glance. That *guru* never blew any *mantra* into my ear. By his grace, I attained to my present state. Making the *guru* the sole object of one's thoughts and aims one attains *paramārtha*, the Supreme Goal. This is the only truth the *guru* taught me. The four *Sadhanas*<sup>80</sup> and six *Sastras*<sup>81</sup> are not necessary. *Trusting in the guru fully is enough.*<sup>82</sup>

With regard to the need of a *guru*, Sāi Bābā is reported saying:

"The way is difficult. There are tigers and wolves in the jungles on the way." I (Kakasaheb) asked: "But Baba, what if we take a guide with us?" Baba answered: "Then there is no difficulty. The guide will take you straight to your destination, avoiding wolves, tigers and ditches etc. on

<sup>79</sup> See J. E. Abbott—N. R. Godbole, trans., *Stories of Indian Saints: Translation of Mahipati's Marathi Bhaktavijaya*. With an Introduction by G. V. Tagare. Vols. 1 & 2 (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1995 [Poona, 1933<sup>4</sup>]), Part 2, 186 [chap. 46, verses 163-169].

<sup>80</sup> These are the four paths (*mārgas*) of action (*karman*), devotion (*bhakti*), discipline (*yoga*), and knowledge (*jñāna*).

<sup>81</sup> Also known as *darsanas*, that is, the six orthodox systems of Hindu philosophy: Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika, Sāṃkhya, Yoga, Mīmāṃsā, and Vedānta.

<sup>82</sup> Narasimhaswami, *Charters and Sayings*, 60-61.

the way. If there be no guide, there is the danger of your being lost in the jungles or falling into ditches."<sup>83</sup>

The fundamental practice advocated by Sāi Bābā, here recalled with intense emotion, was a burning love for his *guru*, to the point of absorbing/identifying himself with him. Everything is understood to be the *guru's* grace. Nothing else is needed but a heart full of love for one's *guru*. Such intense devotion is coupled with awe: thus the saint is reported saying "I would tremble to come into the presence of my *Guru*."<sup>84</sup> As Narasimhaswami puts it: "The *Guru* is the only *sadhana* of the pupil in Baba's school, and the *Guru's* knowledge and power sink into the *śishya* by the intensity of faith and love of the *śishya*."<sup>85</sup> Such practice of making the teacher the focus of one's contemplation is commonly prescribed in both Hinduism and Sufism. With respect to Sufism, France Bhattacharya notes: "La méditation sur le maître spirituel est caractéristique de la pratique des Soufis. Le disciple doit-il méditer sur un miroir qu'il voit à l'intérieur de lui même, ou bien se tenir face à un miroir..."<sup>86</sup> From a Sufi perspective, absorption in the teacher leads to *tawakkul*, that is, to the perfection of faith/trust in Allah. From a Hindu perspective, such emphasis on pure love, through the interiorization of the *guru* and the final 'universalization' of the *guru* principle (*gurutattva*, as may be gauged in a popular text such as the *Gurugītā*), is the acme of *bhakti* leading to blissful union with the Beloved. Narasimhaswami thinks that it is precisely through the *guru's* grace and one-pointed yogic contemplation upon him that Sāi Bābā acquired his powers: "Sai Baba had by the grace of his *Guru* and by his prolonged and continuous *dhyana*, *dharana* and *samadhi* on God-Guru-God, attained *laya*<sup>87</sup> in Him and all the powers flowing from God are found in such a devotee who had got *poorna laya*<sup>88</sup> in God."<sup>89</sup>

<sup>83</sup> N. V. Gunaji, *Shri Sai Satcharita or The Wonderful Life and Teachings of Shri Sai Baba* (Adapted from the Original Marathi of Hemadpant) (Bombay: Shri Sai Baba Sansthan, 1982<sup>10</sup>), 9.

<sup>84</sup> Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba*, vol. 3, 118.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>86</sup> F. Bhattacharya, "Un texte du Bengale médiéval: le yoga du kalandar (*Yoga-Kalandar*)," *Bulletin de l'École Française d'Extrême-Orient*, 90-91 (2003-2004): 86 n. 154.

<sup>87</sup> Dissolution or contemplative absorption.

<sup>88</sup> Full contemplative absorption.

<sup>89</sup> Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba*, vol. 4, 145.



Naturally, the Hindu sources frame Sāi Bābā's experience within an overall *bhakti* and Vedānta context. Narasimhaswami, nonetheless, occasionally recognizes Sāi Bābā's link to Sufism:

In Sufism the Guru is the only God that the pupil is to have in his mind. He must be swallowed up in the contemplation of his Guru and in the appreciation of his love, and think of nothing else. ... So, for years and years he [Sāi Bābā] gazed on his Guru with love and completely forgot everything else in the world. That is the concentration that Sufis want.<sup>90</sup>

One episode in a long story reported by Dabholkar appears to be biographical and betrays a Sufi character, which Warren has pointed out. In *Shri Sai Satcharita*, chap. 32 vv. 37 ff., Sāi Bābā narrates a tale of how he as a young man and three friends were discussing how to attain God-realization while wandering in a forest. What is stressed here is the greatness of the *guru*, imparting the teaching that only he who has love, without any expectation in return, is a true sage or *jñānin*. In particular, in verses 69-82 we read:

He took me to a well, tied a rope to both my legs and lowered me in the well in a feet-up head-down position. Gururaya<sup>91</sup> suspended me in the well in such a way that the hands should not reach the water nor should any water go in my mouth. There was a tree near the edge of the well to which was tied the other end of the rope. Gururaya then went away, who knows where, with a mind free from doubt or anxiety. About four to four and a half hours passed by, after which he came back. He then quickly took me out and asked me "Are you all right?" I replied "I was full of joy. The happiness that I experienced—how can a lowly creature like me describe it?" Gururaya was very pleased to hear these words. He moved his hand on my back, very affectionately, and made me stay with him. Even as I am relating this to you, love surges in my heart. The Guru then took me to his school, showing for me the same loving concern as the mother-bird who clasps her young ones under her wings. And oh, how fascinating was the Guru's school! So much so that I forgot my fond attachment to my parents; the chain of delusion, attachment was broken and I was liberated, quite effortlessly.... I felt like embracing the Guru, storing up his image in the eyes themselves. Unless his image lives in the eyes all the time, the eyes will be but two balls of flesh. Or, I would rather be blind without his image .... When Guru alone is the object of meditation for the eyes and all else is as Guru himself, so that there is nothing separate from him, then it is called single minded meditation. When thus meditating

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 3, 155.

<sup>91</sup> The *guru* extolled as supreme king.

on the form of the Guru, the workings of the intellect cease. Therefore, ultimately, only make an obeisance to him, observing speechless silence.<sup>92</sup>

Warren aptly comments:

A variation of ... normal *chillah*<sup>93</sup> is the *chilla-i-ma'kusa* in which the aspirant is suspended in an inverted position while performing secluded prayers and meditation. The idea of an 'inverted *chillah*' is very old .... The technique consisted of being hung upside down in a lonely place such as a well, for a number of hours a day .... When the *pir* thought the *salik*<sup>94</sup> was spiritually prepared, he would confer an experience of bliss through his own spiritual power known as *baraka*. This feat was considered to be one of the most challenging in *Sufi* asceticism. In the classical period of Sufism, the *Sufi* with whom the *chilla-i-ma'kusa* is most associated is the thirteenth-century Chishti Sheikh Fariduddin Ganj-shakar of Pakpattan, more familiarly known as Baba Farid .... Sai Baba is describing a conversion experience which is well-defined as *tawbat* in the *Sufi* path. His life changed thereafter, for he then relates how he at once joined the *guru/pir's* school, which we can now interpret as a *Sufi* school, known as a *madrasah*, where he was trained. The official biographers, however, treat this crucial event as a parable or as merely symbolic, due to their ignorance of the significance of *tawbat* in the *Sufi tariqat*.<sup>95</sup>

What is emphasized in this story is no special yogic technique but an intense outpouring of love. It is this 'intoxicated' love which is thought to promote the highest contemplation, ultimately leading to union with God through union to one's *guru/pir*. It should be noted that from a Hindu perspective Sāi Bābā's identification with Dattātreyā appears most fitting, given the fact that devotion to the *guru as God* is a paramount feature of the *Dattasampradāya*, in which Dattātreyā is revered as the supreme *gurudeva*. Significantly, most editions of the Marathi *Gurucaritra* have incorporated the Sanskrit *Gurugītā*.<sup>96</sup>

<sup>92</sup> Dabholkar, *Shri Sai Satcharita*, 521-522.

<sup>93</sup> A forty-day retreat in Sufi training.

<sup>94</sup> Adept along the spiritual path, disciple.

<sup>95</sup> Warren, *Unravelling the Enigma*, 213-215. The *ṭariq* or *ṭariqa* (plural *ṭariqāt*) is the Sufi path. If the episode of Sāi Bābā's being hung upside-down may well be biographical, still the impression is that this story is also highly symbolical.

<sup>96</sup> On the *Gurugītā* within the *Gurucaritra*, see my study *Guru: Il fondamento della civiltà dell'India. Con la prima traduzione italiana del 'Canto sul Maestro'* (Roma: Carocci, 2009); 225-299.

Sāi Bābā refused the traditional Hindu mode of instruction (*upa-deśa*) consisting in a formal initiation through a *mantra*.<sup>97</sup> This was confirmed to me by the old villagers of Shirdi who had known the saint, who repeatedly told me that Sāi Bābā never gave *mantra* or *upadeśa* to anyone. Apparently, he gave only *āsīrvād*, that is, blessings, and that's all.<sup>98</sup> As his own *guru* did not teach this way, Sāi Bābā never taught any kind of specific practice (*sādhana*) or ritual. In the *Shri Sai Satcharita*, chap. 10, v. 113, Dabholkar states: "Baba prescribed no *Yogasanas*, no *Pranayama*, no violent suppression of the sense organs, nor *mantra*, *tantra* or *yantra pooja*. And he did not ever whisper *mantra* in the ears of his devotees."<sup>99</sup> To a Hindu woman, Radhabai Deshmukin, who wished to fast until death in order to persuade Sāi Bābā to give her a *mantra*, he refused saying: "I do not instruct through the ear. Our traditions are different."<sup>100</sup> The *faqīr* further told her that his *guru* just asked from him the 'two coins' of faith in God (*niṣṭhā*) and courageous patience (*saburī*): "Mother, Saburi is courage, do not

<sup>97</sup> The Brahman Rao Bahadur Hari Vinayak Sathe, a retired Deputy Collector who first visited Shirdi in 1904, once specified that "Baba never gave *upadesha* or initiation to anyone, so I did not ask him;" A. Osborne, *The Incredible Sai Baba* (Delhi: Orient Longmans, 1970 [1957<sup>1</sup>]), 108.

<sup>98</sup> There is, however, one noticeable exception reported in *Shri Sai Satcharita*, chap. 27, vv. 166-167, where Sāi Bābā advises Mrs. Khaparde to practice the repetition (*japa*) of the *mantra* 'Rajaram'. See also Narasimhaswami, *Charters and Sayings*, 4, where the saint is said to have advised the repetition of his name, and *ibid.*, 252-254, where he approved the *japa* of his name. See also Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba*, vol. 3, 143, where Sāi Bābā is said to have revived the interest of one Rao Bahadur Moreshwar W. Pradhan for a *mantra* which the latter had received from his *guru* but had long neglected.

<sup>99</sup> Dabholkar, *Shri Sai Satcharita*, 158.

<sup>100</sup> Narasimhaswami, *Charters and Sayings*, 274. Narayan Govind Chandorkar, prominent among the saint's *bhaktas*, significantly reported that "all *mantras* that Baba spoke or recited were Arabic or Persian etc. and not Sanskrit;" see B. V. Narasimhaswami, *Devotees' Experiences of Sri Sai Baba*. 3 pts. (Hyderabad: Akhanda Sainama Saptaha Samithi, 1989 [Madras: All India Sai Samaj, 1942<sup>1</sup>]), 230. On N. G. Chandorkar's figure, see Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba*, vol. 2, 43-122. See also Narasimhaswami, *ibid.*, 251, where the saint discouraged his pupil Kashinath i.e. Upāsni Mahārāj (1870-1941) from practicing *mantra-japa*; he rather advised him to keep quiet and do nothing, that is, to simply await the *guru's* liberating grace. According to G. G. Narke, who thought that *bhaktimārga* was the main plank of Sāi Bābā, "in Baba's school, the *Guru* does not teach [through *mantras*]. He radiates or pours influence. That influence is poured in and absorbed with full benefit by the soul which has completely surrendered itself..." *ibid.*, vol. 3, 119. See also, *ibid.*, 125-126, 153-156.

discard it. It ferries you across to the distant goal. It gives manliness to men, eradicates sin and dejection and overcomes all fear."<sup>101</sup>

*Sāi Bābā's Peculiar Way of Practicing Dhauti and his Feat of Separating his Limbs at Will (Khaṇḍayoga)*

Through these stunning, 'theatrical' performances, the aim of the Hindu hagiographer is clearly that of depicting Sāi Bābā as an exceptional *yogin*, who had the power to sever the limbs of his body at will and who did not practice the *dhauti* or cleansing in the accustomed way i.e. by means of a long piece of cloth swallowed and left for some time in the stomach (as described for instance in *Haṭhayogapradīpikā* 2.24-25, where it is said to cure various ailments, among which is asthma). In my book *The Life and Teachings of Sai Baba of Shirdi*, I commented that "the hagiographic character of the narrative when it indulges in such details ... does not diminish the general impression of an assiduous practice of *haṭha-yoga* on Baba's part, repositing the hypothesis of a training in which Nātha influences might have played a role."<sup>102</sup> The terrifying *sādhana* of *khaṇḍayoga* is believed to be resorted to by extraordinary Nātha and Aghori ascetics, though these are by no means the only ones.<sup>103</sup> In nineteenth-century Maharashtra, that a Sufi might have practiced *haṭhayoga* and be exposed to Nātha influences is not at all exceptional. The 'Islamization' of yoga or the accommodation of Nāthism by Sufi adepts, establishing correspondences between the notions and practices of yoga and those of Sufi mysticism, has been a common phenomenon in medieval as well as modern India, at least from the fifteenth century.<sup>104</sup> As I noted in my 1993 book, citing Annemarie Schimmel, the performance of *khaṇḍayoga* finds an analogous Sufi counterpart: "A miracle which I have not found anywhere outside India is that some saints (in Sind, the Punjab, and South India) were seen during the *dhikr* when their limbs got separated from their body, each limb performing its own *dhikr*."<sup>105</sup>

<sup>101</sup> Narasimhaswami, *Charters and Sayings*, 43.

<sup>102</sup> Rigopoulos, *The Life and Teachings of Sai Baba of Shirdi*, 47.

<sup>103</sup> For a contemporary account, see R. E. Svoboda, *Aghora II: Kundalini* (Calcutta: Rupa & Co., 1994), 113-115.

<sup>104</sup> See, for instance, C. W. Ernst, "The Islamization of Yoga in the *Amrtakunda* Translations," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Series 3, 13, no. 2 (2003): 1-23.

<sup>105</sup> A. Schimmel, *Islām in the Indian Subcontinent* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1980), 132.

Meher Bābā was one of the first to highlight Sāi Bābā's Sufi characterization, declaring him to be the Perfect Master, the 'Centre/Pole of Creation' (*Quṭb-e-Irshad*) at the head of a spiritual hierarchy. He seemingly conceded that phenomena such as the one described as *khaṇḍayoga* by Dabholkar could actually occur. Commenting upon such episode in the *Meher Baba Journal*, sometime between 1938 and 1942, A. G. Munsiff wrote:

Sai Baba was a 'ghouse' type of spiritual personality. This *ghouse* type of master is very rare .... For their inner work, Perfect Ones sometimes enter the *ghouse* state and parts of their physical bodies separate. When that particular phase of work is finished, parts of their bodies automatically join together again when they return to gross (bodily) consciousness. It is a curious observation that Sai Baba had this *ghouse* characteristic. Since he was in charge of World War I, it could relate to all those human bodies that were shattered into pieces and their limbs scattered over the battlefields.... Each night, it seems, Sai Baba entered the *ghouse* state.... The *ghouse* state, according to some, is a rare state of spiritual ecstasy witnessed in saintly persons. It connotes, according to Sufis, a certain stage of spirituality (*Ghousiyat*) wherein the divine aspect of love is so very intense and overpowering as to effect visibly even the separation of the limbs of the physical body as stated above. It is also said that saints having this state of spiritual ecstasy do not long remain in it; they eventually outgrow the experience. This *ghouse* characteristic is also predominant in some God intoxicated persons—*masts*.<sup>106</sup>

Sāi Bābā is believed to have been detached from his body, his *guru* having freed him from this 'erroneous' identification. Once he is reported saying: "My Mourshad (Guru) has taken me away from this body. You can put the whole of this body on fire and I will enjoy the *ganath* (fun)."<sup>107</sup> These peculiar feats of our saint, which Dabholkar states were witnessed by various Shirdi villagers, are narrated by other sources besides the *Shri Sai Satcharita*. One Shivamma Thayee, a woman devotee, also claims to have witnessed Sāi Bābā performing both *dhauti* and *khaṇḍayoga* (the severing of his limbs she would have witnessed around 1915).<sup>108</sup> On the other hand, Narasimhaswami,

<sup>106</sup> Munsiff, *Sai Baba: The Perfect Master*, 41-42.

<sup>107</sup> Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba*, vol. 3, 28. See also *ibid.*, 118, where the body is said to be his house.

<sup>108</sup> Supposedly, Sāi Bābā would have told her: "Daughter Rajamma, I had done my 'Khaṇḍ Yoga' last night, which I some times do. I separate my limbs from my physical body, and then my physical life is no more there. My Soul (Spirit) had seen you moving in the street and stumbling against my mutilated legs and head but I did

though typically emphasizing the miraculous in Sāi Bābā's life, in this case refuses to give factual credit to such reports.<sup>109</sup> The question whether these narratives are true or false is of course not an issue here. While cultivating an empathic appreciation of hagiographical literature i.e. recognizing the importance the miraculous has in popular religion and in the cult of saints, one should avoid the two extremes represented by the uncritical acceptance of the devotional viewpoint and the rationalistic prejudice of refusing *a priori* all purported miracles or 'powers'.<sup>110</sup> The rejection of the charismatic dimension precludes the possibility of even trying to understand what it feels like to

not speak to you because, firstly, my physical body was dead as my limbs lay scattered, and secondly, although My Spirit was mutely observing your movement in the street I could not talk to you; I chose not to give you any assurance or sign of My presence there, lest you should be frightened in that pitch dark midnight. I will also teach you this 'Khaṇḍ Yoga' shortly;" Sri La Sri Shivamma Thayee, *My Life with Sri Shirdi Sai Baba (Thrilling Memories of Shivamma Thayee, 102 Years Old Lady, the Only Surviving Direct Devotee of Sri Shirdi Sai Baba)*. Interview and Presentation by Dr. Satya Pal Ruhela (New Delhi: Franksons, 1992), 9. Moreover, Shivamma Thayee reports: "On some occasions, Baba used to take me to the well outside Shirdi .... He used to take out His intestines from His mouth, then wash them with well water and then He would spread those intestines on the outer ring wall of the well. He used to entrust me the responsibility of guarding His intestines from eagles, crows and other birds, because I was His *shishya* (disciple). Baba sat at some distance near the wall waiting for the intestines to dry up. On one occasion, I saw a big eagle circling around in order to pick up Baba's intestines which I was guarding. I at once cried to Baba, 'Swami, the eagle is coming to take your intestines. Swallow them immediately.' Baba immediately replied: 'Don't worry. I will create another one.' The eagle ultimately did not take away those intestines and after a few minutes Baba swallowed them back;" *ibid.*, 10.

<sup>109</sup> "Coming to *siddhis* .... it is said that he performed *kandayoga*, that is, separated the various parts of his body and kept them far apart and appeared as a dead body, and later on reunited those parts. It is unnecessary to discuss whether *kandayoga* is a case of mass hypnotism or individual hypnotism creating the impression in the mind of the beholder that the body is in pieces. Physiologically the body cannot be cut into a dozen pieces and kept apart for a long time and reunited at a pleasure so as to form one organic whole, and hence the probabilities are very much in favour of this *siddhi* being the same as or similar to the obstruction to seeing—*antardhana*—following which heading, Patanjali says, a similar *antardhana* of ideas takes place. That is, a *yogi* can make his entire body invisible to people or he can black out their ideas about his body .... Whether in the case of Baba there was really any *kandayoga* and what exactly it represented, are matters about which definite information is not available. Again it is said that Baba performed other yogic feats, that is, that he took out his entire entrails and placed them on a tree for drying up. These confound our notions of physiology and serve no useful purpose. We shall not discuss these further;" Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba*, vol. 4, 189-190.

<sup>110</sup> For a discussion of powers in relation to the *guru's* supreme authority, see my *Guru: Il fondamento della civiltà dell'India*, chap. 3, 161-188.

come in touch with a saintly figure. Leaving aside all speculations, what is of interest is that *dhauti* as well as *khaṇḍayoga*—interpreted in a Sufi perspective as *ghousiyat* by Munsiff—could well have been incorporated by a Sufi adept who was not *strictu sensu* a *yogin*. Indeed, that Sāi Bābā might have been exposed to yoga and Nātha practices in his religious training is highly probable and not at all unreasonable, although it is impossible to estimate the actual weight of such hypothetical influence. For instance, he never prescribed *prānāyāma*, although breath-control is of paramount significance in Nātha ideology and practice. Our *faqir* seems to have even warned against it, saying that “whoever proceeds by means of *pranayama* will have to come to me ultimately for further progress.”<sup>111</sup>

#### Sāi Bābā's 'Temporary Death'

Sāi Bābā's apparent death is said to have taken place thirty-two years before his actual demise in 1918, that is, in 1886. The evaluations of this episode, which if only for its emotional, dramatic force is most noteworthy, differ considerably in the sources. The saint himself offered no explanation concerning the reason of such feat of temporarily 'going to Allah'. The *Shri Sai Satcharita*, strangely enough, presents the story in a plain form, with no miraculous overtones, saying that Sāi Bābā went into a 72 hours *samādhi* for bearing/ridding himself of an acute asthmatic attack. Narasimhaswami, however, develops a suggestive theory, interpreting the 'death' and 'resurrection' of the saint as a turning point, an event that determined the expansion of the *guru's* mission.<sup>112</sup> Even Warren takes this episode to be of utmost significance, marking Sāi Bābā's crucial experience of *fanā'* ('passing away'), that is, his loss of his 'lower self' consciousness through which he would have 'died to himself' achieving a new life in God.<sup>113</sup> This would have been the apex of Sāi Bābā's spiritual achievement, the attainment of the condition of a 'perfected man' (*al-insanu al-kamil*). She writes:

In 1886, when he was nearing the age of fifty, after having a number of mystical experiences, it appears that Sai Baba had a direct experience of union with God.... It was after this incident that his powers became

<sup>111</sup> Osborne, *The Incredible Sai Baba*, 106.

<sup>112</sup> See Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba*, vol. 1, 176-186.

<sup>113</sup> See Warren, *Unravelling the Enigma*, 253-254.

evident, and he became a *pir* or guide for wandering *faqirs* who came to Shirdi. After his enlightenment experience, he demonstrated God-like powers such as clairvoyance known in Marathi as *antarajñana* (and called *firasa* by the *Sufis*), the ability to appear in devotees' dreams, or to appear in distant locations.... He had acquired the power to cure illnesses and protect individuals even in distant places.... As can be gathered from stray conversations with devotees, there were thus two distinct phases in Sai Baba's life. Up to age forty-eight or so, Sai Baba was a *faqir* practicing daily austerities to the extent that he was often categorized as a madman or *paḡal* in the local language. After 1886... he became one of the *awliya*<sup>114</sup>. In the first period we can talk about his going through the steps and stages of the *Sufi tariq* as an aspirant. In the latter period from 1886 to 1918 he was a Realized Master guiding and teaching Sufi precepts to those who became his disciples...<sup>115</sup>

Moreover:

Four phases can be identified in the spiritual evolution of Sāi Bābā. The first was as a child under the care of a *Sufi faqir* for his first four years, and possibly also for the next twelve years with his *guru* Venkusha or Roshan Shah Miyan. The second was as a *salik*, an aspirant or traveller on the *Sufi* path, from age sixteen when he wandered around Marath-wada, meditated in a cave, lived under the *neem* tree and wandered in the jungle. At this time he displayed the typical characteristics of a 'mad *faqir*'. The third was after he returned to Shirdi permanently and began to live in the dilapidated *masjid*. The fourth was from 1886 onwards as a perfectly realized soul, a level which he apparently attained after his three-day ordeal.<sup>116</sup>

Dabholkar interprets the saint's feat as a yogic exploit, stating that he would have entered into a condition of *nirvikalpasamādhi*. Sāi Bābā himself is reported using the term *samādhi* in instructing his devotees not to rouse his inert body for three days. The technical term *nirvikalpasamādhi* ('concentration without distinction') is used in Vedānta as synonymous of *asamprajñātasamādhi* or 'unconscious *samādhi*' of classical yoga. It is understood as that perfect, objectless concentration in which only karmic impulses/residues are left (*saṃskāras*), which is achieved after having eliminated all mental functions (*cittavṛttis*).

Attaining a condition of apparent death is by no means the exclusive characteristic of Hindu ascetics. In India, it is also reported to

<sup>114</sup> 'Friends [of God]' i.e. saints.

<sup>115</sup> Warren, *Unravelling the Enigma*, 45-46.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

take place among Sufi saints and mystics. As I wrote in my 1993 book: "Certain *faqirs* ... are said to possess the power of remaining completely buried underground for a considerable time without detriment to their health. Indeed, this is a common theme in legends concerning heterodox Sufis, as in the case of Shah Madar."<sup>117</sup> Even the Sufi woman saint Babajan is said to have gone through a 'death experience' thirty years or more before her actual demise in 1931.<sup>118</sup> If the reference to Sāi Bābā's entering a state of *nirvikalpasamādhi* is an input of Dabholkar's Hindu over-interpretation, it is certainly not unreasonable to hypothesize that the saint as many Sufi *faqirs* before and after him was exposed—during the years in the company with his *guru/pīr*, or through various contacts during his itinerant life—to some kind of yogic training, which he integrated in his own 'synthetic' mysticism. On the other hand, it should be stressed that Sāi Bābā neither practiced nor taught *prāṇāyāma* or breath-control techniques, which as mentioned is a prominent feature especially among Nātha adepts.<sup>119</sup> He even reprimanded a man who, by *prāṇāyāma*, claimed to have developed the *siddhi* of clairvoyance, saying "I can never exhibit tricks."<sup>120</sup> Narasimhaswami thinks that Sāi Bābā's yogic capacities were not the result of any formal yoga practice—he advocated no particular *mārga*, such as the yoga *mārga*—<sup>121</sup> but rather came to him through the grace of his *guru* and the saint's perfect surrender to him. He writes: "About *Ashtanga Yoga* it is not known whether Baba performed *pranayama*, etc., but very probably these would have come to him easily by faith in his all powerful Guru."<sup>122</sup> The woman devotee Tara Bai Sadasiva Tarkhad observed that

other saints used to get into the *samadhi* or trance condition, and then they would forget their body. ... But in the case of Sai Baba, he never had to go into trance to achieve anything or reach any higher position. Every moment he was exercising a double consciousness, namely, (1)

<sup>117</sup> Rigopoulos, *The Life and Teachings of Sai Baba of Shirdi*, 94.

<sup>118</sup> See Warren, *Unravelling the Enigma*, 202. On Babajan, see K. Shepherd, *A Sufi Matriarch: Hazrat Babajan* (Cambridge: Anthropographia Publications, 1985).

<sup>119</sup> A. E. Bharadwaja reports that in 1910 Upāsni Mahārāj had contracted breathing trouble during the practice of yoga. Having reached Shirdi, Sāi Bābā told him to reside at the local temple of Khaṇḍobā, where his brother Balakrishna later found him cured of his illness; Bharadwaja, *Sai Baba the Master*, 21-22.

<sup>120</sup> Narasimhaswami, *Charters and Sayings*, 143. See also Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba*, vol. 4, 186-187.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 3, 66, 125.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 4, 190.

the ego called Sai Baba and (2) the *antaryami* of all .... His knowledge of the other people's minds was not a matter of effort. He was in the *all-knowing state always*.<sup>123</sup>

### *Sāi Bābā's Wooden Plank and its Significance*

This story is to be referred to about 1898<sup>124</sup> or even after 1900, and the plank seems to have been in use for a short time only. The crowds' expectation for the miraculous, for seeing how Sāi Bābā managed to ascend and descend from the wooden plank, was probably the reason why at one point the saint himself decided to break it to pieces. From his Hindu perspective, Dabholkar portrays Sāi Bābā as an ideal *yogin* and renunciant (*saṃnyāsin*), having all the eight traditional *siddhis* starting with *aṇiman* at his disposal. Most sources imply the saint's power of levitation and atomization through which he was able to mount upon the thin, narrow, precariously suspended plank, and was able to avoid it from crashing under his weight. A parallel to this story is found in an anecdote concerning Nityānanda (d. 1961), the *siddha* of Kanhangad and future preceptor of Svāmin Muktaṇanda (1908-1982), who is reported sleeping upon a suspended string.<sup>125</sup>

Sāi Bābā is presented as practicing a mental, interiorized form of recollection of the divine name, avoiding sleep. The impression that he did not sleep at all or slept very little is repeatedly mentioned in the sources.<sup>126</sup> Indeed, he is reported saying: "It is not easy to sleep up on the plank. He, who has many good qualities in him, only can do so. He

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 3, 61-62.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 2, 9 (footnote).

<sup>125</sup> "As is the custom with many Hindus, the narrator of this incident invited the thin, dark *sadhu* home to stay for the night, as he was impressed by the bearing of the young man. Given a room, the *sadhu* asked him for a string. Wondering at this strange request, the host decided to sleep in the same room. When he returned, he was surprised to see the young man carefully attaching the string to swing between two walls. The host was even more surprised a few minutes later, when the young *sadhu* climbed up on the string, stretched out, and went to sleep! He was apparently totally comfortable, as he turned this way and that, a picture of complete rest and tranquility. Remembering similar incidents in the life of Sai Baba of Shirdi, the devotee lay there, lost in the sheer wonder of it;" M. U. Hatengdi and Swami Chetanananda, *Nitya Sutras: The Revelations of Nityananda from the Chidakash Gita* (Cambridge: Rudra Press, 1985), 120. As is well-known, Muktaṇanda considered Sāi Bābā to be a great *siddha*, whom he would have 'seen' in the *siddha-loka*; see Swami Muktaṇanda Paramahansa, *Chitshakti Vilas* (Ganeshpuri: Shree Gurudev Ashram, 1974), 157.

<sup>126</sup> See, for instance, Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba*, vol. 2, 205.

who can sleep 'with his eyes open' can effect that."<sup>127</sup> Recollection of the name of Allah, that is, the Sufi exercise of *dhikr* leading to a state of union or identification with God, constituted the focus of his spiritual practice.<sup>128</sup> All his life Sāi Bābā appears to have performed *dhikr* for many hours a day, to the point that this remembrance must have become natural to him. Although he occasionally used to repeat other divine names (Islamic, such as 'Haq', as well as Hindu), the sources repeatedly inform us that our *faqīr* used to practice the remembrance of *Allāh Mālik* ('Allah is the Sovereign'), revered as one of the ninety-nine beautiful names of Allah. This he did especially when absorbed in contemplation seated in front of his sacred fire, the *dhunī* inside the *masjid*,<sup>129</sup> as well as during his night vigils,<sup>130</sup> always keeping earthen lamps near him. Sāi Bābā's remembrance of Allāh's name and incorruptible kingdom can be related to a mysticism of light. In Sufism, light (*nūr*) is viewed as the distinctive sign of Allāh's sovereignty. Methods of *dhikr* typically involve breath-control, the goal being to move from a kind of vocal remembrance (the *dhikr* of the tongue) to a silent *dhikr*, internalizing the formula within the heart (the 'presence' of the formula being attuned to the beatings of one's heart). The *dhikr* is then believed to take place 'by itself', spontaneously, with no special effort of the will. Narasimhaswami reports Sāi Bābā as saying "I lie down making mental *namasmarana*,"<sup>131</sup> and from his Hindu perspective interprets such practice as a yoga trance. He writes: "The ordinary sleep is a hindrance to the Yoga trance; it resembles it in some respects, but the heart beat at the *namasmarana* stage of trance differs from the heart beat of natural sleep."<sup>132</sup> Even some devotees of Sāi Bābā were capable of performing the repetition of the divine name while in their sleep. Khaparde, in a diary entry dated December 8, 1911, wrote: "Madhavrao Deshpande was here and fell asleep. I saw with my own eyes and heard with my own ears what I only read about but never

<sup>127</sup> Narasimhaswami, *Devotees' Experiences*, 57, 234.

<sup>128</sup> *Dhikr* is recommended in the *Qur'an*; see 3.190-191. On Sāi Bābā's practice of *dhikr*, see my *The Life and Teachings of Sai Baba of Shirdi*, 292-297.

<sup>129</sup> It appears that Sāi Bābā never leaned against the wall but sat a few inches away from it; see Bharadwaja, *Sai Baba the Master*, 65. This might be an indication that he usually sat keeping a straight posture, as required by all yoga schools.

<sup>130</sup> His avoidance of sleep was also meant for the protection of his devotees, Sāi Bābā being thought to keep constant watch over them; see Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba*, vol. 3, 23-25, 75.

<sup>131</sup> Narasimhaswami, *Charters and Sayings*, 116. *Nāmasmarana* is the Hindu recollection of the divine name.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*

experienced. With every outpouring and indrawing breath of Madhavrao Deshpande comes the clear sound of 'Sayin Nath Maharaj, Sayin Nath Baba'. This sound is as clear as can be and when Madhavrao snores the words can be heard at a distance. This is really wonderful."<sup>133</sup>

The highest form of *dhikr*, even beyond that of the heart, is the one called 'intimate' or 'mystery' *dhikr (sirr)*, subtler even than spirit, in which all dualities are transcended. Here the mystic, perfectly surrendered, abandons even the formula but the formula does not abandon him, *dhikr* having penetrated his innermost being. To be sure, the physiology characterizing *dhikr* is quite similar to that of Tantric yoga and the linking of the name to the natural 'rhythm' of breathing-in and breathing-out appears to betray the influence of *haṭhayoga* schools. Yet, although heart *dhikr* is akin to a silent form of *nāmasmarana* (and our *faqīr* himself apparently called it *nāmasmarana*) and has even been interpreted as a parallel to yogic contemplation i.e. *dhyāna*, Sāi Bābā's remembrance of Allah, despite similarities, need not and should not be interpreted as a yoga practice.

*The Breaking of Sāi Bābā's Brick. References to Sāi Bābā's Death on October 15, 1918*

Significantly, when referring to Sāi Bābā's last days, Dabholkar defines him a *yogin*, who in the end burned down his body in yogic fire. The breaking of the saint's brick, caused by the devotee Madhav Phasle who had lifted it and allowed it to fall, appears to have taken place at the beginning of October, 1918, just ten or twelve days before Sāi Bābā's passing away. According to Narasimhaswami's *Charters and Sayings*, at the breaking of the brick the saint, in grief, would have exclaimed: "My fakir's wife left me with Venkusha at Selu. I stayed with him twelve years, and left Selu. This brick (which Baba always lovingly used to support his arm or head) is my Guru's gift, my life companion. It is not the brick that is broken now, but my *karma (prarabdha)* it is that has snapped. I cannot survive the breaking of the brick."<sup>134</sup>

<sup>133</sup> Khaparde, *Shirdi Diary*, 119-120. The Shirdi villager Madhavrao Deshpande, also known as Shyama, was a Brahman teacher and an important figure, often acting as a precious intercessor mediating between Sāi Bābā and the devotees.

<sup>134</sup> Narasimhaswami, *Charters and Sayings*, 61. *Karmaprārdha* is the *karman* accumulated in previous births. See also Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba*, vol. 2, 20.

For Sāi Bābā the brick represented a *gurudīkṣā* of sorts, a concrete testimony of spiritual transmission or power transfer, also symbolic of his *guru*'s presence and a token of his grace. Its breaking is interpreted as signaling the exhaustion of the saint's karmic residues, calling for the relinquishing of all ties and of life itself. Dabholkar states that Sāi Bābā, all through his life in Shirdi, sat for hours in a yogic posture with the aid of this brick (upon which he rested his head or elbow). Sāi Bābā himself is reported to have said that in the company of the brick he would go into a state of Self-absorption. In particular, Dabholkar writes that every night, taking support of that brick, Baba used to sit in the mosque, in solitude, very peacefully, in *yogāsana*. Sāi Bābā would have kept to a yogic posture not so much during the day but during his solitary night vigils at the *masjid*, presumably while contemplating the fire of his *dhunī*. In *haṭhayoga*, *yogāsana* is typically identified with the yogic posture par excellence, that is, *padmāsana*, the lotus posture (see *Gheraṇḍasamhitā* 2.44-45). In fact, various contemporaries of our *faqīr* among whom Balaji Pilaji Gurav, an old Shirdi villager whom I interviewed in October 1985, reported that the saint never practiced any *āsana*. Evidently, at least during the day, Sāi Bābā was not seen performing any special yogic exercise or keeping to any yogic posture. Moreover, as Dabholkar himself tells us, Sāi Bābā prescribed no "*yogasanas*" (chap. 10, v. 113). That the saint kept to special postures during his contemplative exercises is quite probable, however, though it does not represent a proof of his being a *yogin*. Sufis are known to keep to definite postures while performing their *dhikr*. If Dabholkar's statement that Sāi Bābā sat in *yogāsana* might be attributed to his Hindu orientation, this possibility should not be ruled out. As a Maharashtrian saint upholder of an integrative kind of mysticism, it appears only natural that Sāi Bābā may have selectively incorporated yoga postures and practices: the contrary would frankly appear surprising if not unrealistic.

#### CONCLUSION: 'SWIMMING AT THE CONFLUENCE'

All in all, even though one comes across sayings attributed to Sāi Bābā as the following, "Life is lived in vain if no Yoga, Yaga,<sup>135</sup> Tapas<sup>136</sup> and

<sup>135</sup> Any sacrificial practice.

<sup>136</sup> 'Heat'. Any ascetic practice.

Jnana be achieved,<sup>137</sup> he actually never taught any *yogamārga* and he definitely cannot be classified as a *yogin*.<sup>138</sup> Even if our *faqīr* may have employed Sanskrit terms such as *nāmasmaraṇa*, *dhyāna*, *samādhi*, etc. one must take into account his integrative saintliness, plus the omnipresent cultural influence of 'Hinduism' and of the Hindu majority with whom he interacted.

If Sāi Bābā was not *strictu sensu* a *yogin*, he certainly lived his whole life as a genuine *faqīr* practicing renunciation and poverty, detachment and celibacy, stressing to his last day the importance of feeding the poor and of almsgiving.<sup>139</sup> According to Munsiff, "in his personal habits he was ascetic to the last."<sup>140</sup> Nonetheless, our saint always recommended moderation.<sup>141</sup> He was against extreme asceticism and taught the majority of his devotees, who were lay people, that they should realize their spiritual goal by remaining in the world and leading a simple, orderly life, regulating their meals, rest, etc.<sup>142</sup> Sāi Bābā was also against unnecessary fasting and even broke traditional dietary rules.<sup>143</sup> To his dear servant Abdul, himself a *faqīr*, our saint gave advice on how to live a 'faqīri' life. Narasimhaswami reports that Sāi Bābā told him: "Eat very little. Do not go in for a variety of eatables.

<sup>137</sup> Narasimhaswami, *Charters and Sayings*, 115.

<sup>138</sup> An oblique link of Sāi Bābā to yoga comes through the figure of Dattātreyā. Thus we read that the Brahman Kusa Bhav had as his *guru* one Datta Maharaj, who trained him in yoga and the raising of the energy of *kuṇḍalinī*. At a certain point, he was told by his teacher to go to Sāi Bābā, whom he referred to as his elder brother. Kusa Bhav reached Shirdi in 1908 and became an ardent follower of the *faqīr*, also purportedly obtaining from him the power to materialize the *udī* simply by holding forth his hands and remembering the saint's name. Sāi Bābā, however, never gave him any *upadeśa* or *mantra*, though Kusa Bhav felt the loss of mantric exercise keenly. Later on, the Shirdi saint would have left Kusa Bhav under the care of one Datta Baba or Pakir (Faqir) Shah, who would have told him that he and Sāi Bābā were interrelated as persons belonging to the same order; see Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba*, vol. 3, 132-137.

<sup>139</sup> See *ibid.*, 184, 205.

<sup>140</sup> Munsiff, *Sai Baba: The Perfect Master*, 45. In an entry of Khaparde's diary dated February 15, 1912, we read: "He was in a pleased mood and said that he had laboured very hard, had gone without food for months, fed on leaves of 'Kala Takal' Nimb and other trees. He said God was very good to him, for life never became extinct though all flesh got wasted and bones appeared to be in danger of crumbling away" (*Shirdi Diary*, 84-85). Most probably, however, Sāi Bābā was here referring to one of his 'former lives'; see Narasimhaswami, *Charters and Sayings*, 210.

<sup>141</sup> See Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba*, vol. 3, 67.

<sup>142</sup> See Narasimhaswami, *Charters and Sayings*, 109.

<sup>143</sup> The sources report instances of Sāi Bābā eating onion, disconcerting his Hindu devotees and especially a yoga adept. Onion is thought to be tāmasic and something which a *yogin* should always avoid eating; see 110-113.

One sort of dish will suffice. Do not sleep much." Abdul followed this advice. He kept awake all night, and in a kneeling posture was repeating his *Koran*, that is, Baba's words. He was meditating on them. Baba said: "Have *dhyan* on what is read, and think 'Who I am'."<sup>144</sup>

Through his authority and charisma, Sāi Bābā succeeded in creating an atmosphere of harmony between Hindus and Muslims. As Shepherd notes, our Sufi *faqīr* "was very socially adroit in maintaining a balance between two rival religious contingents in his following."<sup>145</sup> He disapproved conversion to a new religion<sup>146</sup> and advised people to keep to their own faith.<sup>147</sup> Indeed, if Sāi Bābā advocated universality over sectarianism as supreme value, devotees were invited to preserve their religious affiliations. Even Christians he considered his brothers<sup>148</sup> and he once sent away his devotee H. S. Dikshit who had been speaking ill of Christ and Christianity.<sup>149</sup> The saint recommended inter-religious brotherhood and tolerance, true to his conviction that all religions are but particular paths leading to one ineffable goal. For this reason, Sāi Bābā at some point renamed the *masjid* by the Hindu name of Dvārka-māi, that is, 'Many-gated Mother', stressing the fact that people of all castes and creed were welcome to come. As Narasimhaswami writes: "Baba would not allow the Hindus to interfere with his loud recitals of *Koran* at night.... nor would he allow the Rohilla to interfere with the Hindus' religious practice. Baba discountenanced intolerance in every class and in every person. To Baba, Vitthal and Allah were one and all saints were the same."<sup>150</sup> According to Rao Bahadur Dhumal, a Brahman pleader who first came to Shirdi in 1907, Sāi Bābā himself was above Hinduism and Islam i.e. transcended them.<sup>151</sup> As the saint is reported saying: "All Gods are one. There is no difference between a Hindu and a Mohamadan. Mosque and temple are the same. Yet I will respect your (people's) susceptibilities, and not

<sup>144</sup> Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba*, vol. 3, 174. Warren, *Unravelling the Enigma*, 203, states how Sāi Bābā "instructed the *faqīr* Abdul on the *Qur'an* and guided him along the ascetic renunciate *Sufi* path." It should be noted that Abdul, later in his life, married and had a family.

<sup>145</sup> Shepherd, *Investigating the Sai Baba Movement*, 18.

<sup>146</sup> Sāi Bābā once slapped a Hindu convert to Islam who had been taken to him by Bade Baba, also known as Faqīr Baba, saying: "Ah! You have changed your father!" Narasimhaswami, *Charters and Sayings*, 263.

<sup>147</sup> See Warren, *Unravelling the Enigma*, 89.

<sup>148</sup> See Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba*, vol. 3, 205.

<sup>149</sup> See Narasimhaswami, *Charters and Sayings*, 262.

<sup>150</sup> Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba*, vol. 3, 82-83.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

enter the temple (as you object to the entry). Look at Cokhamela's life."<sup>152</sup> Our *faqīr* was perceived as an outcaste by orthodox Hindus and his plea to consider Cokhāmeļā's life is significant, the latter being a celebrated fourteenth-century untouchable saint-poet.

Sāi Bābā wanted to be viewed as neither a Muslim nor a Hindu, that is, above and beyond all castes and religious affiliations, and when pressed on whether he was a Hindu or a Muslim he would get angry and abuse people. In an interrogation by a legal officer, which must have taken place during the saint's last years, Sāi Bābā is reported answering that his 'creed or religion' was 'Kabīr'.<sup>153</sup> As other integrative mystics, he viewed Kabīr as his spiritual model and more than once identified himself with him, even saying that Kabīr was his teacher. Khaparde, in a diary entry dated December 9, 1910, wrote: "He said he was Kabīr before and used to spin yarn."<sup>154</sup> And Narasimhaswami notes: "Kabīr according to Baba was his former Avatar ... Kabīr's songs were sung by Baba especially in his earlier days at the *takia*<sup>155</sup> .... Baba included Kabīr amongst his inspiring agencies, and once said: 'Kabīr was my Guru'."<sup>156</sup>

Shepherd has recently reiterated his idea that Sāi Bābā may be linked "to the *majazib* tradition of the Deccan, an unorthodox Sufi movement of very varied manifestations, and very much in the *qalandar* mould of eccentricity."<sup>157</sup> In Abdul's notebook, Warren has noted significant references to the beliefs of the Nizari Ismaili sect, which in the nineteenth-century was centered in the Bombay Presidency.<sup>158</sup> Following Warren's study, in 2005 Dominique-Sila Khan has pointed out other similarities. She writes:

... Sai Baba's words quoted in Abdul's manuscript, such as "From Needa Aneeda, from Aneeda, Shunya, from Shunya, Shana" etc. correspond—with very few differences—to the same words as listed in the

<sup>152</sup> Narasimhaswami, *Charters and Sayings*, 262.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, 256. Shepherd, *Investigating the Sai Baba Movement*, 19, thinks that Sāi Bābā "was referring to his liberal inter-religious approach when he asserted his 'Kabīr' religion."

<sup>154</sup> Khaparde, *Shirdi Diary*, 7.

<sup>155</sup> A resting-place for Muslim visitors.

<sup>156</sup> Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba*, vol. 3, 155-156. See also Narasimhaswami, *Charters and Sayings*, 62. On Kabīr as Sāi Bābā's model, see my *The Life and Teachings of Sai Baba of Shirdi*.

<sup>157</sup> Shepherd, *Investigating the Sai Baba Movement*, 10.

<sup>158</sup> See Warren, *Unravelling the Enigma*, 174-180, where she compares the avatāric cosmological genealogy given in Abdul's notebook to the lists of *avatāras* found in Nizari Ismaili Khoja texts.



Nizari and Imamshahi genealogies reproduced in the *duas*<sup>159</sup>. This is certainly not a coincidence: Sāi Bābā's Ismaili connections should be explored as they may be related to the tradition of the Nizari preacher Shah Tahir or the Sayyidkhani line of the Imamshahi main branch. I have started some research on this subject with the help of Zawahir Moir, whom I thank for this invaluable information.<sup>160</sup>

To be sure, Nizari Ismailism borrowed extensively from indigenous sources such as *vaiṣṇava bhakti*, both 'without attributes' (*nirguṇa*) and 'with attributes' (*saguna*), and the Nāth movement. In particular, there are striking affinities with the *nirguṇa* Sant tradition and the composite figure of Kabīr. As D.-S. Khan remarks: "Like them [i.e. the Nizari *pīrs*], the Sants seem to have consciously associated a number of Sufi concepts and terminologies with elements drawn from the Nāth heritage or from the indigenous idiom of *bhakti*, without identifying themselves with any of these traditions."<sup>161</sup> The liminality of Nizari Ismailism, where holy men simultaneously embody the personality of a *faqīr* and the character of a Hindu *sādhu* or renunciant, is certainly akin to Kabīr's model<sup>162</sup> and thus to Sāi Bābā's own liminal figure. That our saint may have been connected to Nizari Ismailism is thus a possibility which should be duly explored.

Leaving aside the issue of any specific affiliation what appears most significant is that, as in past centuries, even in Sāi Bābā's times Sufi-Hindu liminality favored an accommodation process, that is, the rapprochement between various faiths and communities, generating what may be called overlapping identities. These identities are not fixed but rather dynamic, flexible, constantly adapting themselves over time. So-called Hinduism and Islam have never been monolithic and unchanging 'essences'. As Carl W. Ernst points out, we need to "complicate our picture of Hindu-Muslim interaction, not to derive it from predetermined concepts of the essential characteristics of a religion.... To understand a multi-century process of inter-civilizational interpretation ... it is necessary to take seriously the hermeneutical structures and categories that guided the efforts of those interpreters."<sup>163</sup>

<sup>159</sup> Ritual texts.

<sup>160</sup> Dominique-Sila Khan, "Reimagining the Buddha," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 33 (2005): 326 n. 9.

<sup>161</sup> Dominique-Sila Khan, *Crossing the Threshold: Understanding Religious Identities in South Asia* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2004), 49.

<sup>162</sup> See *ibid.*, 62.

<sup>163</sup> C. W. Ernst, "Muslim Studies of Hinduism? A Reconsideration of Arabic and Persian Translations from Sanskrit," *Iranian Studies* 36, no. 2 (2003): 195. By the

In this perspective, even Warren's 'essentialization' of Hinduism and Islam, as when she argues that "Baba emerged from the dual Maharashtrian Bhakti and Sufi traditions whose goal was to directly experience God"<sup>164</sup>, appears inadequate. Historically, in the Deccan and in Sāi Bābā's own training and experience Sufism and *bhakti* were never two separate, distinct blocs. Sāi Bābā's figure is the result of a complex, 'non-dual' process of identity development, freely combining Hindu and Islamic elements 'on the ground.'<sup>165</sup>

Sāi Bābā's strong, reiterated belief in rebirth and prenatal karmic ties (*ṛnānubandha*) is part and parcel of his 'synthetic' identity.<sup>166</sup> He would say to have been in Shirdi 'thousands of years ago',<sup>167</sup> and would tell many cryptic, symbolic stories (*goṣṭis*) about former lives of himself and/or of his devotees and acquaintances.<sup>168</sup> Our *faqīr* even told Khaparde that in a former birth he was with him for two or three years and that he, Khaparde, went into royal service though there was enough at home to live in comfort.<sup>169</sup> Sāi Bābā would also claim to

same author, see also "Situating Sufism and Yoga," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Series 3, 15, no. 1 (2005): 15-43.

<sup>164</sup> Warren, *Unravelling the Enigma*, 205.

<sup>165</sup> In the words of Narasimhaswami: "The essence of both Sufism and *bhakti marga* is development by love to reach the goal, which is perfect *satchitananda* [Being, Consciousness, and Bliss] or love. Hence, in his own case ... 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;" *Life of Sai Baba*, vol. 3, 155. On the historical and social dynamics of Hindu-Muslim interaction in the bordering State of Karnataka, determining analogous hybrid identities, see the fine monograph of J. Assayag, *Au confluent de deux rivières: Musulmans et hindous dans le Sud de l'Inde* (Paris: Presses de l'École Française d'Extrême-Orient, 1995).

<sup>166</sup> Shepherd notes that this topic "was in currency amongst dissident Muslims over the centuries," *Investigating the Sai Baba Movement*, 53.

<sup>167</sup> Khaparde, *Shirdi Diary*, 3 (entry dated December 7, 1910).

<sup>168</sup> For one episode concerning Khaparde's wife Lakshmi Bai, see *Shri Sai Satcharita* chap. 27, verses 139-169. With reference to Khaparde's diary, see *Shirdi Diary*, 40 (entry dated January 1, 1912), 97 (entry dated February 29, 1912), 100-101 (entry dated March 8, 1912), 102-103 (entry dated March 10, 1912), 104 (entry dated March 12, 1912). See also Narasimhaswami, *Charters and Sayings*, 198-212. Warren, *Unravelling the Enigma*, 108-109, regards his storytelling as a method of Sufi teaching, and mentions the collection of short Sufi stories collected by Idries Shah. According to M. V. Kamath and V. B. Kher, Sāi Bābā "began to speak in parables and symbology from 1910 as the number of his visitors began to grow in volume;" M. V. Kamath—V. B. Kher, *Sai Baba of Shirdi: A Unique Saint* (Bombay: Jaico, 1991), 9. For an ethnographic account of storytelling in Maharashtra, see K. Narayan, *Storytellers, Saints, and Scoundrels: Folk Narrative in Hindu Religious Teaching* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989).

<sup>169</sup> See Khaparde, *Shirdi Diary*, 98-99 (entry dated March 3, 1912).

have the power to decide the time and place of his devotees' rebirth i.e. to control the destiny of departed souls.<sup>170</sup> For instance, on February 9, 1912, Khaparde wrote in his diary: "Sayin Saheb said that Pishya was a Rohilla in his previous birth .... He died and Sayin Saheb put him into the womb of his present mother."<sup>171</sup> Sāi Bābā also assured some of his devotees that he would be with them in future rebirths.<sup>172</sup>

In conclusion, even accentuating the Islamic, Sufi side of Sāi Bābā in order to 'restore the balance' and counter the Hindu gloss, as Warren repeatedly states, is a merely quantitative way of addressing the inextricably interwoven fabric of Maharashtrian nineteenth-century popular religion: it presupposes a dualist, 'essentialist' model in which Sufism and Hinduism 'face each other' as separate, even antagonistic religious objects. To unilaterally or too strongly emphasize either Sāi Bābā's Hindu or Sufi identity is not only to betray his mystical teaching of oneness and universalism but is also a historical, scholarly fallacy in that it does not recognize his liminal, hybrid character. The Shirdi *faqīr* may be said to swim at the brisk confluence of two rivers, Sufism and *bhakti*, the waters of which, so to speak, run very close to each other and often overflow, intersecting and mingling at various points of their path. Precisely for this reason, as Sāi Bābā himself pointed at, Kabīr's composite legacy stands as the most authoritative paradigm for understanding his integrative persona, mirroring the synthetic, overlapping identity of the Deccani *faqīr*.<sup>173</sup>

<sup>170</sup> See Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba*, vol. 3, 118.

<sup>171</sup> Khaparde, *Shirdi Diary*, 79-80. For another case relative to Rao Sahib Yeshwant Janardhan Galwankar, see Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba*, vol. 3, 138.

<sup>172</sup> See *ibid.*, 78, where he is said to have given such assurance to M. B. Rege, a judge of the high court of Indore.

<sup>173</sup> Warren, *Unravelling the Enigma*, 18, has criticized my 1993 book for merely acknowledging and not pursuing Sāi Bābā's Sufi aspect. In fact, I have portrayed the saint's figure from a triple angle, that is, Hindu, Islamic, and, lastly and most importantly, a 'Kabīrian' perspective, in an effort to highlight Sāi Bābā's universalism. Warren, *ibid.*, has also accused me of contributing to the Hindu gloss on Sāi Bābā, since, in presenting his teachings, I used the broad categories of the Hindu path to liberation i.e. love, knowledge, and action. She is in error, however, as even a scholar of the stature of William C. Chittick underlines the importance that these three categories bear in Sufism and mentions the hypothesis that they may correspond to the Hindu *mārgas* of *bhakti*, *jñāna*, and *karman*; see W. C. Chittick, *Il sufismo*. A cura di Francesco Alfonso Leccese (Torino: Einaudi, 2009 [2000]), chap. 6, 89 (significantly, he titles this chapter *La via dell'amore* i.e. *The path of love*, which is exactly the title I chose to give to chap. 9 of my book).

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## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

YOGIC POWERS AND THE RĀMĀNANDA SAMPRADĀY<sup>1</sup>

Ramdas Lamb

## INTRODUCTION

The concept of *siddhi*, technically translated with terms such as 'perfection', 'accomplishment', or 'mastery', is more commonly understood in the West as yogic or supernatural power. When the term first appears in the *Mahābhārata*, it refers to the skills or perfections that are attained through the performance of various practices and types of austerities (*tapas*, *tapasya*), which were often done in conjunction with yogic practices. From the outset, those who did *tapas* and yoga traditionally separated themselves from the prevalent society so they could focus all their time and energy in their chosen pursuit. Because of this, commoners knew little about them and thus looked upon them with both awe and fear. The present day renunciants of India, known by general labels such as *sādhu*, *swāmī*, *saṃnyāsī*, etc., are the inheritors of and builders upon the tradition of *siddhi* seekers. Over the millennium, there have been a large number of ascetic orders, often centered around a particular type or set of *tapas*. Many of these orders have disappeared, other have transformed into new orders, while some more closely maintain their ancient roots. Among the largest existing ascetic orders is the Rāmānanda Sampradāy.<sup>2</sup> It is also one of the orders in which the practice of yoga and the quest for *siddhis* remains an integral part of its focus. This chapter will begin with a brief overview of the development of asceticism and yoga in India as they are understood and relevant to the Rāmānandīs. It will then focus

<sup>1</sup> Earlier versions of various portions of this chapter can be found in other writings by the author (see *References*).

<sup>2</sup> When discussing Sanskrit literary sources, I will use a standard form of transliteration. However, because the Rāmānandīs are primarily Hindi speakers, I will use the common Hindi transliteration of those terms when specifically discussing Rāmānandi beliefs and practices, unless otherwise stated. Additionally, all translations are my own, unless otherwise stated.