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Some Modern Religious Groups and Teachers

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Table of Contents, Volume V

Prelims

Preface	xvii
List of Contributors	xviii
Notes for Users	xxxiii
Primary Sources	xxxv
Primary Source Abbreviations	lxviii
Journals and Series	lxxvii
General Abbreviations	xc

Religious Symbols

Cakra	3
Symbolic Meanings of the <i>Cakra</i>	3
History	4
Worship of Sudarśana	5
<i>Cakra</i> in New Age Movements	6
Conclusion	6
Colors	7
Color in Medicine, Magic, Metaphysics, and Ritual	7
Elements, Experience, and the Cosmos	9
Colorlessness, Purity, and Transcendence	10
Deities, Devotion, and Iconography	11
Red, Gold, and “Shining”: Vitality, Agni, Rudra, and the Goddess	11
Blue, Black, and “Dark”: Kṛṣṇa, Śiva, and Kālī	12
White and Ash Gray: <i>Soma</i> and Śiva	12
Perspectives on Color	13
Conch	14
Mythology	14
Iconography	14
The Conch as a Sign of Viṣṇu	14
The “Presence” of Viṣṇu’s Conch on Earth	15
Use in Ritual	15
Divine Attributes and Emblems	16
The Term “Emblem” in the Present Context	17
Ornaments	18
<i>Akṣamālā</i> (String of Seeds or Beads Used for a Contemplative Practice)	18
Animal Skin (<i>Carman</i>)	18
Arrow (<i>Bāṇa</i> , <i>Śara</i>)	19
Axe or Hatchet (<i>Paraśu</i> , <i>Kuṭhāra</i>)	19
Banner, Flag (<i>Dhvaja</i> , <i>Ketu</i>)	20
Begging Bowl (<i>Bhikṣāpātra</i>)	20
Bell (<i>Ghaṇṭā</i>)	20
Book, Palm-Leaf Manuscript (<i>Pustaka</i>)	20
Bottle, Waterpot, or Ewer (<i>Kamaṇḍalu</i> , <i>Kuṇḍikā</i> , <i>Kalaśa</i> , or <i>Bhṛṅgāra</i>)	20
Bow (<i>Cāpa</i> , <i>Dhanus</i> , or <i>Śārṅga</i>)	21
Chisel or Related Implement (<i>Ṭaṅka</i>)	21
Cloth (<i>Vastra</i>)	22
Club (<i>Gadā</i> , <i>Lakuṭa</i> ; <i>Musala</i> [Pestle])	22
Cobra (See Serpent)	23

Conch Shell (<i>Śaṅkha</i>)	23
Dagger (See Knife)	23
Deer (<i>Mrga</i>)	23
Discus or Wheel (<i>Cakra</i>)	23
Drinking Vessel (<i>Pātra</i> , <i>Pānapātra</i>)	23
Drum (<i>Ḍamaru</i> [a Small Hourglass-Shaped Drum]; <i>Ḍhakkā</i>)	24
Earth (<i>Mahī</i> , <i>Dharaṇi</i>)	24
Elephant (<i>Gaja</i>)	24
Eye (<i>Netra</i> , <i>Nayana</i> , or <i>Akṣa</i>)	24
Fire (<i>Agni</i> , <i>Jvāla</i>)	25
Flag (See Banner)	25
Flute (<i>Veṇu</i> , <i>Muralī</i>)	25
Fly Whisk (<i>Cāmara</i>)	25
Fruit (<i>Phala</i>)	25
Goad, Elephant Driver's Hook (<i>Aṅkuśa</i>)	26
Hammer (<i>Mudgara</i>)	26
Head, Bald Head (<i>Muṇḍa</i>)	26
Jewel-Filled Vessel (<i>Ratnapātra</i>)	26
Knife or Dagger (<i>Kartari</i> , <i>Karṭṛ</i> , or <i>Churī</i>)	26
<i>Liṅga</i> (Sign, Emblem, or Phallus)	26
Lotus (<i>Padma</i> , <i>Paṅkaja</i> , or <i>Kamala</i>)	27
Mace (See Club)	28
Mirror (<i>Darpaṇa</i>)	28
Money Bag (<i>Mātrābhastṛā</i>)	28
Mongoose (<i>Nakula</i>)	28
Moon Crescent (<i>Bālacandra</i> – Young Moon)	28
Noose, Lasso (<i>Pāśa</i>)	29
Parasol (<i>Chattra</i>)	29
Parrot (<i>Śuka</i> ; Tam. <i>Kīlī</i>)	29
Peacock Feathers (<i>Mayūrapattra</i> , <i>Mayūrapiccha</i>)	29
Pen, Reed Pen (<i>Lekhani</i>)	30
Phallus (See <i>Liṅga</i>)	30
Plow (<i>Hala</i>)	30
Pot of Riches (<i>Nidhipātra</i>)	30
Radish (<i>Mūlaka</i>)	30
Rooster (<i>Kukkuṭa</i> , <i>Kṛkavāku</i>)	30
Sacrificial Ladles (<i>Sruk</i> or <i>Śruc</i> , <i>Sruva</i>)	30
Serpent, Cobra (<i>Sarpa</i> , <i>Nāga</i> , or <i>Bhujaiṅga</i>)	30
Shield (<i>Kheṭaka</i>)	31
Skull, Skull-Cup (<i>Kapāla</i>)	31
Spear, Lance, or Javelin (<i>Śakti</i> , <i>Śūla</i> ; Tam. <i>Vēl</i>)	32
Staff (<i>Daṇḍa</i>)	32
Stringed Instrument Resembling a Lute or Stick Zither (<i>Viṇā</i> , <i>Vallakī</i>)	32
Sweet Balls (<i>Modaka</i>)	33
Sword (<i>Khaḍga</i> ; Also <i>Asi</i>)	33
Thunderbolt or Bolt of Lightning (<i>Vajra</i>)	34
Tooth or Tusk (<i>Danta</i> ; <i>Svadanta</i> [One's Own Tooth or Tusk])	34
Treasure (See Pot of Riches)	34
Trident (<i>Triśūla</i> , <i>Śūla</i>)	34
Water Lily (<i>Kalhāra</i> or <i>Kahlāra</i> , <i>Utpala</i> , <i>Nilotpala</i> , or <i>Indīvara</i>)	35
Waterpot (See Bottle)	35
Winnowing Fan (<i>Śūrpa</i>)	35
Wreath or Garland (<i>Mālā</i>)	35
Divine Musical Instruments	36
Musical Instruments	37
Myth, Drama, and Religious Practice	43
Dress and Adornment	45

Fire	50
Agni in Comparisons and Metaphors	50
Agni's Hiding	51
The Trifunctional Fire	52
Sexual and Procreative Fire	53
Gems, Gold, Seed, and <i>Soma</i> : The Multiforms of Fire	56
Concluding Remarks	57
Gemstones	59
The Conventional Properties and Meanings of Gemstones	59
The Origins of Gemstones	60
Diamonds, Pearls, Snake Gems, Emeralds, and Sapphires	61
Crystal	62
Notable Individual Hindu Gemstones	63
Magical, Idolatrous Hindu Gems in the Western Imagination	64
Hair	65
Practices	65
Meanings	69
Liṅga	72
Textual Sources	72
<i>Liṅga</i> in Ritual	77
Iconography	79
Lotus	82
The Lotus and Hindu Deities: Auspiciousness and Generative Power	83
Detachment	84
The Lotus and the Sun	85
Mālā	87
Fresh Flowers and <i>Pūjā</i>	88
Making <i>Mālās</i> : Devotion or Work?	89
Mudrās	91
<i>Mudrās</i> in Theatre	91
<i>Mudrās</i> in Iconography	92
<i>Mudrās</i> in the Tantric Texts and Rituals	92
The <i>Mudrās</i> as States of Consciousness in the Krama	96
New Field and Ancient Echoes	97
Om̐	100
Om̐ in the Vedas and Upaniṣads	100
Om̐ in Later Literature	101
Regional Traditions	101
Conclusion	102
Prasāda	103
Material <i>Prasāda</i> in Hindu Ritual	103
<i>Prasāda</i> in Vaiṣṇava Contexts	104
<i>Prasāda</i> in Śaiva Contexts	105
<i>Prasāda</i> in Śākta Contexts	106
General Observations on Contemporary Hindu <i>Prasāda</i>	107
<i>Prasāda</i> in Sanskrit Sources	108
Understanding <i>Prasāda</i> in Classical and Contemporary Terms	110
Rām	112
Literary Sources for Rām and <i>Rāmnām</i>	113
The Purāṇas	114
Tantric Tradition and Literature	114
Medieval Vaiṣṇava Upaniṣads	114
Svāmī Rāmānanda and His <i>Sampradāya</i>	115
The Written "Rām"	116
<i>Rāmnām</i> Banks	117
Sacred Threads	119
Sacred Threads in Hindu Rituals	119

The Sacrificial Cord of the Brahmins	120
The Ascetics' and Others' Threads	121
Śālagrāma	123
History of Śālagrāma Worship	123
Kinds of Śālagrāmas	124
Arcā and Śālagrāma	124
Narratives about the Origins of the Śālagrāma	125
Smell	127
The Sense of Smell and the Nature of Odors	127
Important Odors in Hinduism	128
Aromatic Materials and Perfumes	129
Later Developments	132
Sound	134
The Veda as a Paradigm of Sacred Sound	134
Brahman in the Early <i>R̥gveda</i>	135
The Language Goddess Vāc	136
Mantras, Melodies, and Nonsemantic <i>Sthobas</i>	136
Om̐ in the Upaniṣads	139
Holy Hearing and Acoustic Piety in Postvedic Literature	140
Tantric and Devotional Mantras – Mantra Power and Musicalized Devotion	141
Fluid Signs and Sonic Symbols – Language and the Alphabet in Scientific Contexts	143
The Postvedic Language Goddess and the Alphabet as Primordial Sound	145
Linguistic Metaphysics	146
The Nāḍabrahman as a Cultural and Transcultural Symbol	148
Svastika	150
Tilaka and Other Forehead Marks	152
Origins of the Mark	154
Life-affirming and Life-negating Values	154
Concepts of the Deity: Gods and Goddesses	155
Sectarian Traditions	156
Sectarian Marks and Their Connection to Caste and Stage of Life	156
The Three Horizontal Lines of Śaiva Devotees	157
The Sounds of the Sacred Name: Mantra and Meaning	157
Pilgrimage and Sacrality of Local Places; Physical and Moral Purity	158
Purity: Physical, Ritual, Moral	159
Meditation and the Eye of Wisdom	159
The Auspicious State of Being Married	159
Conclusion	160
Trees and Plants	161
Important Plants and Trees	162
Conclusion	166
Vāhanas	168
Vāhanas in Iconography	169
Ajā (goat)	170
Ākhu (mouse, rat)	170
Ananta (“Endless,” “Infinite”; also called Śeṣa)	170
Aśva (horse)	170
Bhāsa (vulture): see <i>gr̥dhra</i>	170
Bhūta (lit. living being): see Rāvaṇa	170
Gaja (elephant)	170
Gardabha (ass, donkey)	171
Garuḍa (“Devourer”)	171
Go (cow)	171
Godhā, godhikā (lizard, iguana)	171
Grāha (crocodile)	171
Gr̥dhra (vulture)	171
Hanumān (“Having [Large] Jaws”)	171
Haṃsa (wild goose)	171
Harin: see <i>mṛga</i>	171

<i>Kabandha</i> (a category of <i>gaṇa</i>)	171
<i>Kāka</i> (raven)	171
<i>Kāmadhenu</i> (“Wish-fulfilling Cow”)	171
<i>Kapota</i> (dove, pigeon)	171
<i>Khara</i> (ass): see <i>gardabha</i>	171
<i>Kola</i> (boar)	171
<i>Kukkuṭa</i> (cock)	171
<i>Kūrma</i> (tortoise)	171
<i>Mahiṣa</i> (buffalo)	171
<i>Makara</i> (dolphin, crocodile)	171
<i>Maṇḍūka</i> (frog)	173
<i>Mārjāra</i> (cat)	173
<i>Matsya</i> (fish)	173
<i>Mayūra</i> (peacock)	173
<i>Meṣa</i> (ram)	173
<i>Mīna</i> (fish): see <i>matsya</i>	173
<i>Mṛga</i> (gazelle, antelope, deer)	173
<i>Mṛtaka</i> (corpse): see <i>śava</i>	173
<i>Nakra</i> (crocodile): see <i>graha</i>	173
<i>Nāga</i> (snake)	173
<i>Nandi</i> (“Rejoicing,” “Gladdening”)	173
<i>Nara</i> (man)	173
<i>Preta</i> (the dead, departed)	173
<i>Rāvaṇa</i> (“Roaring” or “Causing to Cry”)	173
<i>Ṛkṣa</i> (bear)	174
<i>Śārdūla</i> (tiger, lion, panther, leopard)	175
<i>Sarpa</i> (serpent): see <i>nāga</i>	175
<i>Śava</i> (corpse)	175
<i>Śeṣa</i> (“Remainder”)	175
<i>Śikhin</i> (peacock): see <i>mayūra</i>	175
<i>Siṃha</i> (lion)	175
<i>Śuka</i> (parrot)	175
<i>Śūkara</i> (boar): see <i>kola</i>	175
<i>Sṛgāla</i> (or <i>śṛgāla</i> ; jackal)	175
<i>Śvan</i> (dog)	175
<i>Śyena</i> (hawk)	175
<i>Ulūka</i> (owl)	175
<i>Uṣtra</i> (camel)	175
<i>Vānara</i> (monkey)	175
<i>Vṛka</i> (wolf)	175
<i>Vṛṣan</i> , <i>vṛṣabha</i> (bull)	175
<i>Yāli</i> (leogryph)	175
South Indian Temple <i>Vāhanas</i>	175
Vibhūti	181
Yoni	184
 Hinduism and Migration: Contemporary Communities outside South Asia	
Afghanistan	189
Developments in the Late 20th Century	190
Restriction, Religious Persecution, and Expulsion Since 1992	190
The 21st Century – Discrepancies between General Improvements for Muslims and the Precarious Situation of Hindus and Sikhs	191
Summary	192
Australia and New Zealand	193
Australia	193
“Coolie” Diaspora	193
White Australia Policy	194
The Post-Independent Hindu Settlement	194
The Postcolonial and Postmodern Phase	195

Adaptation	196
Conclusion	199
New Zealand	199
Canada	206
China	212
Indians in China since the 1980s	212
Religious Practices among the Indian Traders in China	214
Conclusion	216
Denmark	217
The Indian Hindus	218
The Sri Lankan Tamil Hindus	219
Keeping Up Hindu Traditions in a New Setting and Under New Circumstances	221
East Africa	222
Social Background	224
Temples and Spiritual Gatherings	225
Conclusion	227
Fiji	229
The Religious Life of the First Generation	230
The Period as a Farming Community	230
Independence and Development of a Political Community	232
Conclusion	233
France	235
Gulf Countries	240
Hindu Communities	241
Hindu Traditions	241
Temple Worship	241
Life-cycle Rituals	242
Festivals	242
Oman	242
United Arab Emirates	242
Bahrain	243
Kuwait	243
Saudi Arabia	244
Qatar	244
Yemen	244
Concluding Remarks	244
Guyana	246
A South Indian-Based Religious Tradition	246
The North Indian-Based Religious Tradition	247
The Modern Challenges	248
International Connections	250
Conclusion	250
Indonesia	252
Religion in Indonesia	252
The Idea of Agama Hindu	253
Hindu Community	254
Of Solidarity, Place and Person	254
The Good, Collective and Otherwise	255
Italy	257
Malaysia	263
Mauritius	269
Temples and the Social Structure	270
Modern Developments	271
Conclusion	272
Netherlands	274
Processes of Loss, Maintenance, and Reorientation	274
Successful Integration?	276
Analysis and Typification	277

Norway	279
Portugal	285
Migration to Portugal after Mozambican Independence	285
Adaptation: Economic Integration	287
Sociocultural Integration	288
Russia	291
Singapore	295
South Africa	300
Social History of South African Indians	300
Emergence of Temple Culture	301
A Challenge to Ritualistic Hindu Culture: Neo-Hinduism	303
Bollywood Influence on Hinduism	305
Recent Non-Resident Indians (NRIs) in South Africa	305
Conclusion	306
Suriname	307
Religious Reproduction and Group Formation	307
Postwar Institutionalization	309
Some Specific Religious Issues	310
Conclusion	311
Sweden	312
Diaspora Hindus and Their Shrines	312
Diaspora Temples in Stockholm	313
Gujaratis in West Sweden	314
Shrines of the <i>Guru</i> Movements	314
<i>Yoga</i> in Sweden	315
Integration, Representation, and Visibility	316
Switzerland	317
Hindu Migrant Communities	318
New Religious Movements with a Hindu Background	320
The Presence of Global Hindu Movements	321
<i>Yoga</i> in Switzerland	322
Thailand	324
The Thai Brahmins	324
Various Communities of Indian Hindus due to Migration	325
The Hindus' Position in Thai Society	327
Trinidad and Tobago	329
Religion in the Village Setting	329
The New Hinduism of the Postwar Era	331
Conclusion	332
United Kingdom	334
Hinduism in Britain: Sources	334
Hindu Settlement and Communal Development	335
Home and Family	337
National Initiatives and Global Interconnections	338
United States	342
History of Hindu Ideas and Practices	342
Vivekananda and the Ongoing Messages of "Universalism"	343
<i>Yoga</i>	345
History of Hindus in the United States	346
Statistics and Taxonomy of Hindu Institutions in the United States	346
Domestic/Informal Groups	347
Global Organizations	347
Temple Communities	347
Cyber Societies	347
Cultural Groups	348
Temple Hinduism	348
Community Activities	351
Vietnam	353

Some Modern Religious Groups and Teachers

Ad Dharm	359
Mangoo Ram and the Founding Circle	359
The Ideology of a Political Religion	360
Schisms, Census, and an Epic Fast	361
Politics and the Decline of Ad Dharm	363
Ad Dharm Anew	364
Anandamayi Ma	366
Anandamayi Ma's Life	366
Ma's Teachings	368
Anandamayi Ma, an <i>Avatār</i> of Kālī	369
The Human Kālī after Her Death	371
Conclusion	372
Aramuga Navalar	373
Life, Activity, and Teaching	374
Criticism of Protestant Missionaries	376
Āgamas and Rituals	376
Caste	377
Images of Navalar	378
Art of Living Foundation	380
The Founder	380
The Teachings	381
Free Education: Ved Vignan Maha Vidya Peeth	385
Transforming Rural India	385
Peace	386
Politics	387
The Future	387
Arya Samaj	389
Origins, Doctrinal Basis, and Early Development	389
The Social Project of Aryanism: Education, Caste Reform, and Women's Uplift	391
The Political Entanglements of the Arya Samaj	393
The Arya Samaj in Independent India and Overseas	395
Aurobindo	397
Early Life	397
Major Works	398
Life during the 1920s and 1930s: the Mother and the Founding of the <i>Āśram</i>	400
Three Formulations of His <i>Yoga</i>	401
Later Life and Writings and Death: 1938–1950	402
Legacy	403
Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh/Osho	405
The Early Years	405
The First Phase: 1960–1974	405
Core Teachings under the Various Names Rajneesh Used	407
The Second Phase: The Pune <i>Āśram</i> , 1974–1981	407
The Disciples in Pune	409
The Third Phase: Passage to America, 1981–1985	409
The Fourth Phase: The Buddha Returns to Pune, 1986–1990	411
The Fifth Phase: The Contemporary Movement, from 1991	412
The Legacy	412
Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati	415
Historical Context	415
Early Life	416
Religious Practice	417
Missionary Work	418
The Gaudiya Math in Europe	420
Crises of Succession	420
Modern Hindu Personalism	420
Studies of Bhaktisiddhanta's Work	421

Bharat Sevashram Sangha and Swami Pranavanandaji Maharaj	424
The Child Manifestation of Śiva	425
Athletic Asceticism and <i>Brahmacarya</i>	426
Organization Development	427
The Divine <i>Guru</i>	428
Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha	432
Early History of BAPS	432
Line of Succession	432
Growth	433
Transnational Growth	434
Brahmo Samaj and Keshub Chandra Sen	437
Chinmayananda and Chinmaya Mission	445
Life	446
Teachings	448
Organizations	450
Dayananda Saraswati	453
Modern Search for Truth	453
Dayananda's Thought and Philosophy	454
Constructing Vedic Religion	454
Defining Ethical Hinduism	455
Aryans, Āryāvarta, and Unity among Hindus	458
Hindu Nationalism and State	459
Conclusion	460
Female Gurus and Ascetics	461
Women and Classical Definitions	461
Social Expectations for Women	464
Authority	466
Community	466
Hans Ji Maharaj and the Divya Sandesh Parishad	470
Biography	470
Contested Academic Sources	472
The Teachings of Shri Hans Ji Maharaj	473
The Heritage of Shri Hans Ji Maharaj	474
Hariharananda Aranya	476
Kāpil Guṇḍā (Cave of Kapila)	477
Preparation for Meditation	480
Meditation	481
Conclusion	483
ISKCON and Bhaktivedanta Prabhupada	485
A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami (Sri Prabhupada)	485
History and Development	487
Tradition, Doctrines, and Practices	488
ISKCON's Position About Its Relation to Hinduism	489
Jiddu Krishnamurti	491
Biographical Details	491
Philosophical Foundations	494
Dialogue	496
Education	496
Relationship	497
Krishnamacharya	498
Lakshman Joo	502
Life and Works	502
Philosophy and Spiritual Practice	504
Maharishi Mahesh Yogi and Transcendental Meditation	508
Mahima Dharma and Bhima Bhoi	515
Legendary Origins	515
Youth and Initiation	515
First Disciples and the <i>Āśrama</i> in Khaliapali	516

Disappearance and Succession	516
Themes of Bhima Bhoi's Poetry	516
Bhima Bhoi: The Blind Ascetic?	519
The Subaltern Voice	520
The Lay <i>Guru</i>	521
Institutional Splits with the Mahima Dharma Movement	521
Mata Amritanandamayi Mission Trust and Embracing The World	523
Mata Amritanandamayi	523
Disaster Relief	526
Housing/Care for Children/Fighting Hunger	527
Empowering Women	528
Education	529
Medicine	529
Critics	529
Melmaruvathur Movement	531
Origins of the Temple	531
The Goddess and Bangaru Adigalar	532
Innovative Rituals and Tradition	532
The Goddess Focuses on Social Problems	533
Local and Pan-Indian Deity	533
Modern Astrologers	535
Translators and Educators	535
The Appeal to (and of) <i>Nāḍigranthas</i>	537
Cultural Transmission and Western Practitioners	538
Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi	542
Biography	542
Concepts and Practices	545
The <i>Bhagavadgītā</i>	549
Muktananda and Siddha Yoga	552
The Practices	555
Narayana Guru	559
Life and Education	559
Literary Works	560
Philosophy	561
Religious and Social Reforms	562
Radhakrishnan	566
Radhasoamis	572
The Utopian Society of Dayalbagh	572
The Spiritual Kingdom of Beas	576
Ramakrishna	578
The Life and Teachings of Ramakrishna: Primary Sources	578
The Early Life of Ramakrishna	579
Spiritual Apprenticeship	580
A Brahman <i>Guru</i> and Middle-Class Devotees	581
The Gospel of Ramakrishna	582
Ramakrishna Math and Mission	586
Emic and Etic Literature on the Ramakrishna Math and Mission	586
The Origins and Early Development of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission	587
Landmarks in the Subsequent Development of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission	590
Conclusion	591
Ramana Maharshi	594
Life and Works	595
Philosophy	597
Rammohun Roy	602
Rammohun's Life	602
Rammohun's Works	604
Rammohun's Ideas	606
Rammohun's Legacy	608

Sarada Devi	610
Sarada Devi and Sri Ramakrishna	610
Ramakrishna's Passing and the Emergence of the Holy Mother	613
Her Later Years: Family Anxieties	616
Charisma, Wit, and Wisdom of the Holy Mother	617
Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami	619
Religious Lineage: Kadaitswami, Chellappaswami, and Yogaswami	622
The <i>Hinduism Today</i> Magazine	623
Sathya Sai Baba	625
The Conquest of Death: Charisma in the Imagination, Globalization, and Transcendence	625
Constructing the Sacred Person in Indic Theology: A Philosophy of Intimate Charisma	625
Sathya Sai Baba's Life Story, Personhood, and Charisma	626
Extending Sacred Personhood and Charisma	628
Theories of Charisma and Sathya Sai Baba's Personhood: Relationality, Affect, and Persuasiveness	629
Constructing and Deploying Sacred Personhood; Strategies, Narratives, Durabilities, and Logics	630
Beyond Humanity and Divinity: Tactical Captivity and Strategic Liberation	631
Towards Nomadic Charisma	631
Satnamis	634
Satnāmis in Early Modern India	634
The Satnampanth of Chhattisgarh	635
Formation of the Satnampanth	635
Critical Elaborations	637
Issues of Gender	639
Questions of Politics	639
Shirdi Sai Baba	641
The Life	641
The Teachings	646
Conclusion	648
Sivananda and the Divine Life Society	651
Sivananda and M. Eliade	652
Sivananda and Tantrism	653
Building the Divine Life Society	654
Sivananda and the All-India Tour	655
Creating a Transnational Community: The Divine Life Society and Worldwide <i>Yoga</i>	657
Swadhyaya Movement and Pandurang Shastri Athavale	659
Swadhyaya after Athavale	662
Swaminarayan and Swaminarayan Hinduism	664
The Life Story of Sahajanand Swami	664
Swaminarayan Teachings	665
Swaminarayan Social Reform and Discipline	666
Division	668
Transnational expansion	670
Conclusion	671
Tagore	672
Budding Poet	672
Religious Training and Experiences	672
Jivandevatā, God of Life	673
Public Universalist Hinduism and the Hindu Nation	674
Theology of Hindu Modernity	675
The Religion of Man	677
Theosophical Society	679
Theosophy, Evolution, and Spirituality	684
"No Religion Higher Than Truth"	686
Vivekananda	689
Vivekananda's Life	689
Points of Contention	691

Vivekananda's Works	692
Vivekananda's Ideas	692
Vivekananda's Legacy	695
Vivekananda Kendra	698
Eknath Ranade, the Founder of the Vivekananda Kendra	699
Emic and Etic Literature on the Vivekananda Kendra	699
The Origins and Development of the Vivekananda Kendra	700
Vivekananda Kendra's <i>Yoga</i> Way of Life	702
Conclusion	703
Yogananda and the Self-Realization Fellowship	704
Early Life in India	704
Traveling	705
<i>Autobiography of a Yogi</i> and Intersections	705
Self-Realization Fellowship: Then and Today	709
Conclusion	711
Appendix	
Devadāsīs/Courtesans	715
Courtesans between Power, Shame, and Fame	715
Power: The Eye of the Beholder	716
Power: A Logic of Practice	717
Between Shame and Fame: Shame	720
Between Shame and Fame: Fame	722
Power Revisited	723
Hinduism and Dravidian Identity	725
The First Key Moment: The Separation of Brahmins and Non-Brahmins	726
The Second Key Moment: Linking Dravidian Ideology with Tamil Śaivism and Śaiva Siddhānta ...	728
The Indigenization of Dravidian Ideology	728
P. Sundaram Pillay (1855–1897)	729
J.M. Nallaswami Pillai (1864–1920)	730
Maraimalai Adigal (1876–1950)	731
Feminism	734
The Woman Question	734
Catalyst by Elite Men	734
Women's Voices	737
Post-Independence and Post-colonial Feminisms: Methods and Issues	741
Nature and Praxis of Feminism	742
Interventions	743
Nationalism	750
Early Developments	750
Who Is a Hindu?	753
The Sangh Parivar	755
Conclusion	758
Politics and Media	760
Media and Religion in Colonial India	760
Media Theory and Practice in the Era of National Independence	761
A New Phase of Hinduism?	764
Mediatic Differences and Linguistic Divisions	766
Conclusion	767
Glossary	771
Sections for Future Volumes	775

Shirdi Sai Baba

Nowadays Sai Baba of Shirdi (d. Oct 15, 1918) is no doubt the most popular saint of India, mirroring the archetype of the holy man. His portraits are ubiquitous, and he has a place in almost all family altars and → *pūjā* rooms. Since 1977 he has been the subject of several films and, more recently, of television serials. His temples and shrines are found throughout the country, and Shirdi in the Ahmednagar district of Maharashtra has become a national pilgrimage center. Venerated as a wondrous miracle worker by millions across the subcontinent, his tomb is visited year round by crowds of people from all walks of life, primarily Hindus, but also Muslims, especially at festival times and on the anniversary of his death. He is worshipped by the Hindu masses as not only a god-realized person but also the full embodiment of divinity, a Satpuruṣa. His temples are found even outside of India – in the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, Australia, Malaysia, and Singapore – as the saint has many devotees in the Hindu diaspora and also among Westerners.

Sai Baba was an eclectic Sufi ascetic, a *faqīr* (lit. poor), part and parcel of the pluralistic religious landscape of the Deccan. He lived most of his life in a dilapidated mosque (*masjid*) in the village of Shirdi, advocating a spirituality accommodating Sufism and Hindu devotionism (→ *bhakti*), above and beyond caste strictures and the orthodoxies of institutionalized religions. To quote his words, “All Gods are one. There is no difference between a Hindu and a Mohammadan. Mosque and temple are the same” (Narasimha Swami, 1942, 262).

When pressed on whether he was a Hindu or Muslim, he would get angry and even insult people. During an interrogation by a legal officer, he is reported to have said that his creed or religion was “Kabīr,” the famous 15th-century → Sant of Benares. As other integrative mystics, Sai Baba viewed → Kabīr as his model and more than once identified himself with him, even saying that Kabīr was his → *guru*.

The Life

Sai Baba’s early life is enmeshed in uncertainty; no historical evidence is available concerning the

time and place of his birth, the identity of his parents, and his religious upbringing and training. Apparently, he first appeared in Shirdi at age 16, dressed in the white garb of a *faqīr*. Even his actual name is unknown, since Sai Baba is an appellative that was attached to him by local people. When he was young, he was simply addressed as Sai (*sāī* being a term of Persian origin often attributed to Muslim ascetics meaning “holy one”). The epithet Baba (from *bābā*, a common term ascribed to respected seniors and holy men meaning “father”) was added later on.

Among the sources on the saint’s life, the *Śrī Sāī Saccarita* (The True Life of Lord Sai) is regarded by Hindus as the most authoritative repository of his life and deeds. This hagiography is revered as a sacred book (*pothī*) by all *bhaktas*, who read/recite its chapters as part of their daily worship. It was composed in Marathi by G.R. Dabholkar (1859–1929), who started working on it while Sai Baba was still alive, having obtained his permission and blessings. Divided into 51 chapters (plus an epilogue and an epitome), the *Śrī Sāī*



Fig. 1: Shirdi Sai Baba as a young *faqīr*.

Saccarita is written in traditional *ovī* verse form and comprises more than 9,300 verses. G.R. Dabholkar conceived his work in the trail of the Maharashtra → Vārkarī Sampradāy, explicitly linking Sai Baba to it and praising Shirdi as a modern Pandharpur. The actual model of the *Śrī Sāi Saccarita* is the Marathi *Gurucaritra* (Life of the Master) written by Sarasvatī Gaṅgādhara around the mid-16th century, the gospel for all devotees of the god → Dattātreya. Like many Hindus, G.R. Dabholkar thought Sai Baba to be a manifestation of Dattātreya, a synthetic deity revered as an immortal *yogī*, *guru*, and → *avatāra*, even accommodating Islamic tenets.

The legend prevalent among Hindu followers – construed from occasional utterances of Sai Baba himself – is that he was born to a Brahman couple around 1838 in the village of Pathri, in the then *niẓām*’s (Muslim ruler) dominions. In his infancy, his parents would have given him away to a *faqīr* and his wife. At the death of her husband, when the child was only four or five, his widow-mother would have left him with one Venkusha in the village of Selu, located 15 km northwest of Pathri. Venkusha – possibly a *bhakta* of the god → Veṅkaṭeśvara of Tirupati – is identified with a Brahman *guru* with whom young Sai would have stayed for 12 years (a number symbolic of completion). Before dying, Venkusha gifted him with a brick – his *dīkṣā* (consecration) – which he treasured until the end of his life (it was accidentally broken by a devotee just a few days before his demise, an episode that the saint interpreted as an omen of his own “breaking apart”). Sai Baba would have then led the life of an itinerant *faqīr* until reaching Shirdi around 1854.

Alternatively, Venkusha is interpreted as Venku Shah, identifying him as a Sufi master (*pīr*). After a few years of staying with him, young Sai would have left Selu in the company of another *faqīr*, perhaps Roshan Shah Miyan. With this *faqīr* as his *guru*, Sai would have traveled along the Godāvarī River to Paithan and Aurangabad. In the course of their wanderings, they eventually reached Shirdi; here his teacher would have died, and Sai Baba would have buried him under a *nīm* tree, a spot that locals revere as the tomb of his *guru* (*gurusthān*). This site, however, is commonly believed to be the burial ground of the *guru* from one of Sai Baba’s previous lives, even identified with Kabīr.

After staying in Shirdi for either a few months or two to three years, Sai Baba would have left the

village. He would have come back to reside in it permanently around 1858 or as late as 1872. There are hints that prior to his definite settlement in Shirdi, he resided in Aurangabad.

G.S. Khaparde (1854–1938) – member of the central legislative assembly, who served as an aide to → Lokmanya Tilak – in an entry of his Shirdi diary dated Dec 30, 1911, reports,

He... told a small tale calculated to impress the virtue of patience. He said he went to Aurangabad in one of his wanderings and saw a Fakir sitting in a Musjid near which there was a very tall tamarind tree. The Fakir would not let him enter the Musjid first but ultimately consented to his putting up in it. The Fakir depended entirely on a piece of cake that an old woman used to supply him at midday. Sayin Maharaj volunteered to beg for him and kept him supplied amply with food for twelve years and then thought of leaving the place. The old Fakir shed tears at parting and had to be consoled with soft words. Sayin Maharaj visited him four years later and found him there doing well. The Fakir then came here a few years ago and lodged at the Chawadi [travelers’ resting-place]. Mother Baba Fakir looked after him. From what was said I gathered that Sayin Baba stayed twelve years to instruct the Aurangabad Fakir and set him up fully in the spiritual world. (Khaparde, n.d., 38)

Sai Baba would have finally returned to Shirdi with the wedding party of Chand Patil, a Muslim whom he had helped by clairvoyantly locating his lost mare. When he alighted near the local Khaṇḍobā Temple, Mhalsapati, the temple’s priest – to become one of his earliest devotees – greeted him with the words *Yā Sāi* (“Welcome, Sāi”), thus bestowing upon him the appellative by which he was to become known. Apparently, he would have wanted to reside in the Khaṇḍobā Temple, but Mhalsapati, having identified him as a *faqīr* from his attire, did not permit it and advised him to go and stay at the dilapidated mosque.

Before settling at the old *masjid*, young Sai lived in solitude in the woods in the outskirts of the village. For some time, he also took residence underneath a *nīm* tree in Shirdi, the same site that is revered as Sai Baba’s *gurusthān*. In the early days, he only interacted with other ascetics and the few locals who offered him food on his daily rounds of begging. Because of his lonely, even weird demeanor of alternating prolonged silence and ecstatic moods, many considered him to be crazy

(*pāgal*). Yet his erratic, unconventional behavior was part and parcel of his sainthood.

When villagers became ill, he sometimes acted as a doctor (*hakīm*); he collected herbs and inexpensive drugs from local shops and applied them to the sick. He is said to have cured snakebites, leprosy by using snake poison, and “rotting eyes” with *bibā* (washermen’s marking nut) as an alkaline aseptic. Later on, Sai Baba started administering the ash (*udī*) of the sacred fire (*dhūnī*), which he constantly kept burning inside the *masjid*. While giving the *udī* to the sick, he would bless them by saying *Allā acchā karegā* (“Allāh will cure”) or *Allā bhalā karegā* (“Allāh will do good”), thus referring all power and glory to god and not himself.

Sai Baba practiced the Sufi exercise of *dīkr* (“remembrance”), the constant recollection of the name of Allāh. Although he occasionally used to repeat other divine names (Islamic, such as Ḥaqq, as well as Hindu, such as Hari), the texts inform us that he resorted to the remembrance of Allāh Mālik (Allāh the Sovereign) – one of the 99 beautiful names of Allāh. He performed a mental, interiorized form of recollection, typically when seated in contemplation in front of the *dhūnī* as well as during his night vigils.

Dating it in 1886, the sources report the story of his apparent death, of his temporary “going to Allāh” for three full days. Though the *Śrī Sāi Saccarita* (44.64) argues that he went into a 72-hour *samādhi* (yogic absorption) to deal with an acute asthmatic attack, most interpreters view this episode as a turning point in his life. Be that as it may, in time his saintly behavior and special powers started attracting the attention of many people, even beyond the boundaries of Shirdi.

Although Sai Baba did not emphasize the miraculous, but mainly dispensed individual blessings (*āśīrvād*, *baraka*), his fame as a wonder worker possessing *siddhis* grew. From around 1890, people from the Bombay area and other parts of Maharashtra started coming to Shirdi, and his popularity increased more and more from 1900 onward. He himself acknowledged that he had vast powers and was not to be judged by his height (1.60 meter). The hagiographies present us with a wealth of prodigies (*camatkār*, *karāmāt*) operated by him; from turning water into oil – supposedly his first public miracle – to averting death, from warding off cholera and plague epidemics to commanding nature, and from dismembering his body at will to being ubiquitous. In particular,

the sources insist on Sai Baba’s clairvoyance and omniscience (*antarajñāna*). Among the plethora of miracles, reported in the literature is the vicarious taking upon himself of the suffering of particular individuals; the transfer of a disease such as bubonic plague from a devotee to himself proved a most spectacular feat.

Besides resorting to the saint as a healer, childless couples would turn to Sai Baba to ask for offspring. This kind of request was and still is one of the most common. He would typically dispense blessings and *udī*, coupled with a symbol of fertility such as a coconut, mango, or tamarind fruit.

Sai Baba’s whole persona, and his glances and gestures, conveyed an immediate experience of the sacred. As the old villagers of Shirdi told me when I interviewed them in October 1985, being in his presence gave them the awesome feeling of being in the presence of god. Though he insisted he was just a devotee of the almighty, a plain *faqīr*, on occasions he would utter “I am Allāh,” and he also identified himself with many gods of the Hindu pantheon.

His charisma and powers inevitably led the local people to want to worship him. The majority of his followers were Hindus and, despite his *faqīr* appearance and the fact that he dwelled in a mosque, they wished to honor him as a deity and offer him *pūjās*. Sai Baba’s Sufi character tended to be either downplayed or not recognized by his Hindu *bhaktas*, who claimed him as one of their fold. In the early years, he resisted such acts of worship. In time, however, he consented to the devotion of his followers and accommodated himself to Hindu rituals. At first he allowed a simple, individual form of worship. But from around 1908 on, it became a congregational one, with the ceremonies of morning, midday, and evening *āratīs* (the honoring of a deity with the circling of a flame); the offering of eatables (*naivedya*); and the chanting of devotional hymns (*bhajans*). Though he refused to be taken on a palanquin (*pālkhī*), he permitted his *bhaktas* to accompany him in procession with all ritual paraphernalia along the streets of the village. In 1913, when he allowed a Hindu to smear sandal paste over his face and hands, he told one Abdul Rangari,

Jaisā deś taisā veś [‘As the country, so the custom,’ equivalent of ‘While in Rome, do as the Romans do’]. Baba also said, ‘Instead of worshipping their own God, they are worshipping



Fig. 2: Shirdi Sai Baba on his evening round of begging.

me. Why should I object and displease them? I myself am a devotee of God.' (Narasimha Swami, vol. III, ³1980–1985, 179)

The Muslim minority was forced to accept the situation. Through his authority, Sai Baba succeeded in creating an atmosphere of communal harmony between Hindus and Muslims. The saint rejected the idea of conversion, advocated universality, and recommended interreligious brotherhood

true to his conviction that all religions are but particular paths leading to one ineffable goal. For this reason, he renamed the *masjid* Dvārkāmāi ("Many-gated Mother"), stressing the fact that people of all castes and creeds were welcome to come.

Among his Muslim followers, mention should be made of at least one noticeable individual: the *faqir* Abdul (1871–1954) – Sai Baba's faith-

ful servant – who first arrived in Shirdi in 1889, and whose tomb is located near his master's temple. Abdul lived with Sai Baba for a continuous period of 29 years and left behind a notebook, containing his notes of the saint's utterances taken while reading the *Qur'ān* at his presence in the *maṣjid*. The notebook was translated from Urdu into English and carefully analyzed by the late M. Warren (1999). Abdul's records show how Sai Baba was conversant with Islamic theology and had a comprehensive knowledge of Sufism, its brotherhoods, and hierarchies of saints.

Sai Baba would receive visitors and devotees inside the mosque. He usually held three sittings: two in the morning and one in the afternoon. He would never preach but rather interacted with the people present and offered personal advice. Especially in his late years, he told short stories, pithy riddles, and parables, not at all easy to understand, and which he did not necessarily care to explain. He never spoke much and sometimes would keep silent the whole day. His behavior was unpredictable; he could be most affectionate and loving but also wrathful, to the point of hurling stones at some undesired persons. The rules of → purity and pollution meant nothing to him, and he often deliberately broke them in order to impart a lesson to his more orthodox Hindu followers. A brethren of the poor, he enjoyed the company of downtrodden individuals such as untouchables and lepers and shared the begged food with them as well as with dogs and other stray animals.

A peculiar habit that he inaugurated in 1908 was that of requesting money as *dakṣiṇā* (sacrificial salary). Saying that it was Allāh's will, he asked for small amounts that in the evening he redistributed among the needy, thus keeping true to his vow of poverty. Unlike most renunciators, he never feared any contamination from the coins he gathered. He often wished to convey a spiritual teaching through the symbolism of the number of *ānās* (a former currency unit) or rupees he asked for; thus, when he requested two coins, he intended that his devotee should offer him the couplet of *niṣṭhā* and *saburī*, faith and patience. Sometimes his demand of *dakṣiṇā* was motivated by karmic reasons, namely, because of an unfulfilled vow or in order to repay a debt. In time, many people became eager to voluntarily offer money to him since the saint remarked that he would benefit the donor with a much higher reward, spiritually

as well as materially. He did not accept money from everybody, however, but only from selected persons.

From around 1915, Sai Baba's health started deteriorating. He had asthma and difficulty breathing and needed the help of his devotees to go out on his rounds of begging. Nonetheless, until the end, he never relaxed his *faqīr* lifestyle. In his last years, he complained that he could find no rest as people troubled him with requests for petty things. Few were interested in what he was really eager to offer: the precious treasure of divine love and god realization.

Shortly before his demise, he sent Kasim, the son of Bade Baba (d. 1925) – a *faqīr* whom he particularly favored – to go and see the Sufi saint Shamsuddin Miyan of Aurangabad so as to inform him of his imminent death. He gave Kasim 250 rupees, ordering him to hand them over to Shamsuddin Miyan so that the latter could make arrangements for *mawlūd* (refrains to be sung in honor of the prophet Muḥammad), *qawwālī* (devotional songs), and *nyās* (feeding of the poor). He also asked Kasim to go and see Banne Miyan (d. 1921), another Sufi of Aurangabad, with the message that Allāh was taking his life away. Evidently, he must have had contacts with these Aurangabad Sufis from his early years.

Sai Baba breathed his last breath on Oct 15, 1918. This day happened to be *daśaharā*, the festival celebrating → Rāma's victory over the demon Rāvaṇa. He remained lucid up to the very end, and his passing away, reclining on the lap of his old devotee Bayajibai, was a serene one.

The "Hinduization" of Sai Baba's cult became complete soon after his death. This process must be viewed in the broader context of the growing assertion of Brahmanical Hinduism in Maharashtra. From 1918 to 1922, the *faqīr* Abdul still acted in the role of custodian of Sai Baba's tomb. But in 1922, 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. Abdul lost his position and was persuaded to file a countersuit, declaring that he was the legal heir to Sai Baba, and that the public trust was illegal. He lost the case, however, and was deprived of all authority. The shrine became a Hindu temple, the Samādhi Mandir, and in 1954 a huge white marble *mūrti* of the saint was installed behind the tomb.

Sai Baba assured his devotees of his enduring presence even after his death. The *Śrī Sāi Saccarita* quotes these words of his:

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. (Dabholkar, 1999, 414)

Many followers believe that Sai Baba was connected to other Maharashtrian saints, either as their successor/*avatāra* or as part of a team, a holy network of sorts. Hindus think that as a manifestation of the *guru*-god Dattātreyā, he was linked to Akkalkot Maharaj (d. 1878) or Gajanan Maharaj (d. 1910) of Shergaon. The Parsi saint Meher Baba (1894–1969) declared that Sai Baba was one of the five *qutbs* (perfect masters) of his time, together with two Sufis – Tajuddin Baba (1861–1925) of Nagpur and the female saint Babajan (d. 1931) of Pune – and two Hindus, Narayana Maharaj (1885–1945) of Kedgaon and Upasni Baba (1870–1941) of Sakuri.

Beginning in the 1920s, Sai Baba's cult crossed the borders of Maharashtra and reached Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, and other southern states. By the end of the 1950s, his fame as a miracle worker had spread all over India. Especially from the 1970s on, we witness the building of innumerable shrines and temples dedicated to him and an ever-growing flux of pilgrims pouring into Shirdi. To date, his fame knows no decay and is expanding in the Hindu diaspora.

It should be noted that Sai Baba never nominated any successor; there was no *dīkṣā* and no *guruparamparā* (the establishment of a lineage of teachers). Although there were significant figures who were connected to him – such as Upasni Baba, a Brahman disciple who was to found his own *āśrama* in the nearby village of Sakuri, and Meher Baba, whom Sai Baba acknowledged as Parvardigar (“God-Almighty Sustainer”) – he did not appoint any heir. Indeed, he never indicated an intention of promoting any lineage or religious institution. He rather assured his followers that he would be with them always. To some, he confided

that he would be with them in future rebirths as he had done in the past.

Through the years, the idea that Sai Baba might reincarnate and “come back” has led to various claims. The most successful was the one made by the recently passed away god-man → Sathya Sai Baba (1926–2011) of Puttaparthi, Andhra Pradesh, whose followers in both India and the West are in the millions; born as Ratnakaram Satyanarayana Raju, he declared himself to be Sai Baba as early as 1940 or 1943. According to his prophecy, about eight years after his death, he will be reborn as Prema Sai Baba in the Mandya district of the state of Karnataka.

The Teachings

Through his charisma and exemplary life, Sai Baba communicated beyond words the oneness of god and the brotherhood of men, the mystical recognition of the unity of being, of reality as a unified whole (*waḥdat al-wujūd*, *advaita*). With few exceptions, he did not ask the people who came to him to become ascetics; rather, he advised them to lead a simple, orderly life. In order to achieve the supreme goal, he stressed the need of devotion toward god or the *guru*, to the point of surrendering one's body and mind to him.

He read no books and never wrote a single word, he preached no sermons and gave no public discourses. His instructions were brief and direct, attuned with one's receptivity. He was fond of telling short, symbolic stories to the people who assembled at the *masjid*. According to M.V. Kamath and V.B. Kher, Sai Baba “began to speak in parables and symbology from 1910 as the number of his visitors began to grow in volume” (Kamath & Kher, 1991, 9). In an entry of his diary dated Dec 12, 1910, G.S. Khaparde notes,

We all went to see Sayin Saheb later on. I was a bit late and missed a very interesting story told by him. He teaches in parables. It was about a man having a very beautiful horse, which, do what he could, would not go in pair. It was taken all round and given all the usual training, to no purpose. At last a *widwan* [*vidvān*, learned person] suggested its being taken to the place from which it was originally brought. This was done and then the horse went all right in the harness and became very useful. I heard the fragment of the parable. (Khaparde, n.d., 11)

Here the horse appears to be symbolic of the human being, of his or her unsettled mind and wavering senses. The person trying to discipline the horse is one who has realized the need of putting the mind and senses in check but cannot achieve this end. The *vidvān* is the *guru*, who solves the situation by offering the right advice; the horse must be taken to his original place, which is god. When taken back to the source, the creature becomes calm and useful, since in god alone can one find peace and fulfillment.

Sai Baba himself figures as protagonist in several stories. Here is an example:

A person rode on a camel. It passed excreta. I gathered all the excreta and ate them up. My belly was puffed up – swollen. I felt listless. Then the rider took pity upon me. He gave me four grains of Bengal gram (*caṇā*, [bot.] *Cicer arietinum*) and I ate them and drank water. Thus my vehement turbulence ceased. My swollen belly subsided. Now hereafter it will be cured. (Narasimha Swami, ⁴1942, 276)

I would interpret the camel as god's grace, and what he passes out is the manure of love. As a good disciple, Sai Baba gathers the manure and eats it avidly, to the point of indigestion; this intoxication of divine love leaves him stupefied. The rider of the camel is the *guru*. As a doctor, he cures the indigestion of his pupil by administering the right medicine. The four grains of Bengal gram symbolize the four elements that make up one's individuality, namely, the mind (*manas*), the intellect (*buddhi*), the reasoning faculty (*citta*), and the ego principle (*ahaṃkāra*). Once these have been brought to their normal state, the ecstatic languor ceases, and the pupil can be led to discover that his ordinary condition is itself pure and perfect. The meaning of the tale is that an intense love of god is the royal path to → liberation. In a similar story, the nine balls of stool passed out by a quadruped are said to represent *navavidhabhakti*, the nine forms of devotion (see Narasimha Swami, ⁴1942, 23).

Particularly when requesting *dakṣiṇā*, Sai Baba resorted to numerical symbolism: number one stood for Allāh, → *brahman*, or the individual soul (*jīva*); number two for the virtues of faith (*niṣṭhā*) and patience (*saburī*); number four for the ego complex (*manas*, *buddhi*, *citta*, and *ahaṃkāra*); number five symbolized the senses (*indriyas*); number six referred to the six internal enemies

(*ṣaḍripus*), namely, lust (*kāma*), anger (*krodha*), greed (*lobha*), delusion (*moha*), pride (*mada*), and jealousy (*matsara*); and the number nine stood for the nine steps of the *bhakti* path, namely, *śravaṇa* (listening to sacred texts), → *kīrtana* (the singing of god's names), *smaraṇa* (the remembrance of the divine name), *pādasevana* (the worship of the feet of god or the *guru*), *arcana* (ritual worship), *vandana* (prostrations to god or the *guru*), *dāśya* (being a servant of god or the *guru*), *sakhya* (being a friend of god or the *guru*), and *ātmanivedana*, the actual culmination of the path in which the *bhakta* surrenders to the beloved, shattering his/her ego.

Above all, Sai Baba emphasized the importance of loving one's *guru* or *pīr* as god, abandoning oneself totally to him. Concerning his own *guru* and his full absorption in him, B.V. Narasimha Swami reports that he 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 poured 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 *paramartha*, the Supreme Goal. This is the only truth the *guru* taught me. The four Sadhanas and six Sastras are not necessary. Trusting in the *guru* fully is enough. (Narasimha Swami, ⁴1942, 60–61)

From a Hindu perspective, the interiorization of the *guru* and the realization of his omnipresence is the acme of *bhakti*. From a Sufi perspective, absorption in the teacher leads to *tawakkul*, that is, to the perfection of faith in Allāh.

Sai Baba urged his followers to practice the remembrance of their master and chosen deity's (*iṣṭadevatā*) name, be it Viṭṭhala or Dattātreya, and even recommended the recollection of his

own name. Significantly, he refused the Hindu mode of instruction consisting of a formal initiation through a \rightarrow *mantra*. As his own *guru* did not teach this way, he never taught any particular kind of practice (*sādhana*) or ritual. In the *Śrī Sāī Saccarita*, G.R. Dabholkar remarks,

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. (Dabholkar, 1999, 158)

To Radhabai Deshmukin, a woman who wished to fast until death in order to persuade him to give her a *mantra*, he refused by saying, “I do not instruct through the ear. Our traditions are different” (Narasimha Swami, ⁴1942, 274). Sai Baba further told her that his *guru* just asked from him the “two coins” of faith in god (*niṣṭhā*) and enduring patience (*saburī*): “Mother, Saburi is courage, do not discard it. It ferries you across to the distant goal. It gives manliness to men, eradicates sin and dejection and overcomes all fear” (Narasimha Swami, ⁴1942, 43).

Although he was never seen reading a holy text, he encouraged his devotees to delve into their scriptures. To his Muslim followers, he recommended reading the *Qur’ān*, and by the same token, he prompted his Hindu *bhaktas* to read the \rightarrow *Bhagavadgītā*, *Pañcadaśī*, *Yogavasiṣṭha*, *Adhyātmārāmāyaṇa*, *Viṣṇusahasranāmastotra*, and classics of *advaitabhakti* Maharashtrian spirituality such as the *Jñāneśvarī*, *Eknāth Bhāgavata*, *Dāsabodha*, and *Gurucaritra*.

The sources inform us that Sai Baba helped his influential Brahman devotee Das Ganu (1868–1962) to interpret the first verse of the *Īśopaniṣad*, on which he was writing a commentary (ŚSS., ch. 20), and he even offered an exegesis of *Bhagavadgītā* 4.34 to Nanasaheb Chandorkar, another prominent *bhakta* of his (ŚSS., ch. 39). In this latter case, he put forward an ingenious reading of *jñāna* (knowledge) as *ajñāna* (ignorance), exhibiting a familiarity with \rightarrow Vedānta metaphysics that no one suspected he had. A. Osborne reports that “Sai Baba then told Nana to bring the Bhagavad Gita and read a chapter to him each day and Baba would expound it. He did so – but no record was kept” (Osborne, 1970, 13–14).

Conclusion

Sai Baba lived his whole life as a genuine *faqīr* practicing celibacy and detachment, stressing to his last day the lesson of loving god and one’s fellow people.

In Abdul’s notebook, M. Warren has noted references to the beliefs of the Nizārī Ismā’īlī sect, which in the 19th century was centered in the Bombay Presidency. Following her study, D.-S. 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 Nizari and Imamshahi genealogies reproduced in the *duas* [ritual texts]. This is certainly not a coincidence: Sai Baba’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. (Khan, 2005, 326n9)

Nizārī Ismā’īlīs borrowed extensively from Vaiṣṇava *bhakti*, both \rightarrow *nirguṇa* (without attributes) and *saguṇa* (with attributes), as well as from the yogic movement of the Nāths (\rightarrow Nāth Sampradāya). In particular, there are affinities with Kabīr and the *nirguṇa* \rightarrow Sant tradition. As D.S. Khan remarks,

Like them [i.e. the Nizārī *pīrs*], the Sants seem to have consciously associated a number of Sufi concepts and terminologies with elements drawn from the Nath heritage or from the indigenous idiom of *bhakti*, without identifying themselves with any of these traditions. (Khan, 2004, 49)

That Sai Baba may have been connected to Nizārī Ismā’īlism is a possibility that awaits further investigation. The socioreligious context of the Deccan favored an accommodation process, namely, the rapprochement between faiths and communities generating what may be called overlapping identities. These identities are not to be conceived as fixed but rather as flexible, adapting themselves over time. To unilaterally emphasize either Sai Baba’s Sufi or Hindu identity is therefore an error; so-called Hinduism and Islam have never

been monolithic and unchanging essences. As C.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. (Ernst, 2003, 188)

In this perspective, even M. 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" (Warren, 1999, 205), appears inadequate. In Sai Baba's training and experience, Sufism and *bhakti* were not two separate blocs. His personality is the result of a complex, nondual process of identity development, freely combining Sufi and Hindu elements.

In conclusion, to accentuate the Islamic nature of Sai Baba in order to restore the balance and counter the Hindu gloss is a merely quantitative way of addressing the inextricably interwoven fabric of Maharashtrian 19th-century popular religion; it presupposes a dualist model in which Sufism and Hinduism face each other as distinct, even antagonistic religious "objects." Sai Baba's teaching of universalism and oneness drew on an integrative culture that had been constitutive of the Deccan for centuries. As he himself pointed out, Kabir's legacy stands as the most authoritative paradigm for understanding his figure.

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