Yoga powers: extraordinary capacities attained through meditation and concentration / edited by Knut A. Jacobsen.


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SĀI BĀBĀ OF SIRDĪ 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 ādi.

(Das Guru, Shri Sainath Stavanmananjari, 100-101)

Om. to Him who grants yogic powers
and realization, prostration!
(34th in the series of Sāi Bābā’s 108 names)

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays Sāi Bābā of Sirdī (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 samadhi 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 jolaj rooms.

Although no historical evidence is available concerning the time and place of birth, the identity of his parents, and his religious affiliation and training, it has always been evident that Sai Baba was an unconventional faqir part and parcel of the Maharashtrian Sufi tradition of Sheikh 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 Kabir, the fifteenth-century Saint of Benares.

Even during his lifetime, Sai Baba's faqiri, 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. In an effort to 'restore 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: Shirali Sai Baba in the Light of Sufism. Herein, she has emphasized Sai Baba's Islamic traits, historically reconstructing his life and teachings in the context of Deccani Sufism, and showing the various ways in which the faqir tended to adjust or accommodate himself to Hindu rituals and beliefs.

The most precious contribution of Warren's book is the translation (from Urdu) and analysis of the notebook of Sai Baba's faqir servant Abdul (1871-1954), who first arrived in Shiridi in 1898 and whose tomb rests near his master's temple. This notebook contains Abdul's notes of Sai Baba's utterances, taken while reading the Quran with the saint at the Shiridi dilapidated mosque (masjidi).

Although Sai Baba maintained a most sober attitude, living all his life as a humble faqir depending on alms and mainly dispensing blessings to people, his fame as a wonder-worker possessing siddhis or buraq rapidly grew, especially from around 1900. If he didn't emphasize the miraculous, Sai Baba seems to have attributed special powers to the temple, the samadhi mandir, and in 1954 a huge white marble sanctum of the saint was installed behind the tomb. On H. S. Dinhurthi, also known as Kukasheb, see B. V. Narasimhanwasi, Life of Sai Baba (Madras: All India Sai Sang, 1980-1987 [1955-1956]), vol. 2, 215-211. Yaginder Siswand has rightly observed that the eclipse of Sai Baba's Sufi background "must be understood in the broader context of the growing assertion of Brahmanical Hinduism in Maharashtra from the late nineteenth century onwards" (see Y. Siswand, Sacred Spaces: Exploring Traditions of Shared Faith in India (New Delhi: Penguin, 2003), 128.

To please his bhaktas, Sai Baba himself, particularly towards the end of his life, allowed the Hindus to worship him as a dera, a god, and to perform various Hindu rituals at the mosque. It is reported that when on an occasion Sai Baba 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 Narasimhanwasi, op. cit., vol. 3, 179. The first author to counter the 'Hinduizing' tendency by presenting Sai Baba as a Sufi adept, possibly of the majpiyya variety, was Kevin Shepherd in his book Gurus Rediscovered: Biographies of Sai Baba of Shiridi and Upasni Mahant of Satara (Cambridge: Anthropological Publications, 1995). In a recent work, Investigating the Sai Baba Movement: A Clarification of Misrepresented Saints and Opportunity (Dissert, Citihans Initiative, 2000), K. Shepherd presents an updated study (as second installment) of the figures of Sai Baba of Shiridi, Upasni Mahant, and Meher Baba of Ahundeagar, plus three appendices on the controversial figure of Saiyra Sai Baba of Putjugurthi. It should be noted that in his presentation of Sai Baba (chap. 4, pp. 2-18) he strongly criticizes my 1993 book on a number of issues as well as Warren's study (albeit more limitedly).

One Abdul's figure, for whom Sai Baba 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. While giving the udī, which he extracted from the dhuni, the fire he always kept burning inside the masjid where he resided, he would bless by saying Allāh akhīr karega or Allāh bhula karega i.e. 'Allāh will do good/provide' 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 Sai Bābā's omni-science (antarajñāna), offering a variety of anecdotes and stories 'proving' his extraordinary capacities. 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." Perhaps the most stunning type of miracle (camatkār, karmānt) reported in the literature is the vicarious taking on of the suffering of a particular person, attracting the pain to his own body. The 'transfer' of a disease from a devotee to himself, for instance plague with its buboes, proved a most spectacular feat. Besides resorting to the saint as a healer, people would turn to Sai Bābā to ask the blessing/miracle of granting them offspring. This kind of request was and still is one of the most sought after, which devotees and pilgrims ask to Sai as well as Hindu holy men. Thus Sai 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.

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* See G. S. Khaparde, Shirdi Diary (Shirdi: Shri Sai Baba Sansthan, n. d.), 37 (entry dated December 9, 1911).
* Ibid., 121 (entry dated March 15, 1912).
* Ibid., 2.
* See Warren, Unraveling the Enigma, 69-70.
* See G. B. Debholkar (Bennard Pant), Shri Sai Satcharitra: 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. 100-101); Narasimhaswami, Life of Sai Baba, vol. 3, 51.
* See Narasimhaswami, Life of Sai Baba, vol. 3, 51. See also Warren, Unraveling the Enigma, 97.
* See Debholkar, Shri Sai Satcharitra, 412-413 (chap. 25, vv. 87-100), where thanks to the saint's blessing—Sai Bābā's gift of eight mango fruits—eight children were born to the young wife of one Damsa Anna, four sons and four daughters.
* On his figure, see Narasimhaswami, Life of Sai Baba, vol. 2, 298-335. See also Khaparde, Shirdi Diary, 106-125 (Appendix I, 'More about Shirdi Diary of Dadasaheb Khaparde,' by V. B. Kher).
* Ibid., 3-4. See also Narasimhaswami, Charters and Sayings, 16.
* Khaparde, Shirdi Diary, 62 (entry dated January 21, 1912).
* Ibid., 104.
* It seems that this was told to him by Sai Bābā in 1917; Narasimhaswami, Life of Sai Baba, vol. 3, 138-139.

Apparantly, Sai Bābā himself acknowledged that he had vast powers. For example, on December 7, 1910, the Brahman devotee Ganesh Shriramrao Khaparde (1854-1938), 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 Sai 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." Moreover: "Sayin Bābā also said that his order was supreme (Bala)." 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.'" Another bhakta, Rao Saheb Yeshwant Janardan Galvankar, 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.'" Abdul Ghani Munsiff, a follower of Meher Bābā, reports that during the war years [World War I], Sai Bābā 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 Kebhri—Perfect Mastery—and my wealth lies in the blessings I alone can give." The Brahman devotee G. G. Narke, a geology professor in Pune who first came to Shirdi in 1913, observed that Sai Bābā appeared to be living and operating in other worlds, and that he was working in an
invisible body.\(^{22}\) Though seated in his own place at the masjid, Sai Baba 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.\(^{23}\)

Though he underlined the fact of being but a poor faqir, on occasions he would plainly say "I am Allâh," and not infrequently he identified himself with brahman and the various gods of the Hindu pantheon.\(^{24}\)

Sai Baba'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,\(^{25}\) as well as at space, directing his look towards the cardinal points.\(^{26}\) 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 Antaryamin [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.\(^{27}\)

G. G. Narke, who also recognized Sai Baba as the antaryamin, recalled: "I still have the indelible impression of Baba sitting in the Chawadi 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."\(^{28}\) Moreover, on January 17, 1912, he noted: "Sayin Baba showed his face and smiled most benignly. It is

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\(^{23}\) Ibid., 117.
\(^{24}\) See Narasimhaswami, *Charters and Sayings*, 9-11.
\(^{25}\) Ibid., 96.
\(^{26}\) See Khaparde, *Shirdi Diary*, 84 (entry dated February 14, 1912).
\(^{27}\) Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba*, vol. 3, 56.
\(^{28}\) A local hostel where Sai Baba, 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 chawdi.
\(^{29}\) Khaparde, *Shirdi Diary*, 4.

worth while spending years here to see it even once. I was overjoyed and stood gazing like mad.\(^{20}\)

Sai Baba used to look at people very intensely, which for a Hindu is reminiscent of drishti 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 Baba Saheb Bhate visited Baba in 1909 ... the very look of Baba pierced and transferred 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.\(^{31}\)

On December 11, 1910 Khaparde wrote: "...Sayin Maharaj looked at me with an eye that blazed wonderfully and sparked with anger."\(^{32}\)

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."\(^{33}\) 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."\(^{34}\)

Even Meher Baba (1894-1969), who first met Sai Baba in Shirdi in December 1915, emphasized the lustre of the faqir's eyes. As A. G. Munshi reported:

Avatar Meher Baba used to say that Sai Baba had luminous 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-
ten. After seeing his face and eyes, people could only bow to him in worship as their Lord.8

Sāi Bābā's touch was also believed to be mighty and healing, and he would often bless people by placing his palm upon their head.9

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.10

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."11 Our faujī 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 dhūnī (or fire) and wave his arms and fingers about making gestures (which conveyed no meaning to the onlookers) and saying 'Haq', which means God."12

The combination of glance and touch were of course reputed to be most powerful. Again Narasimhaswami mentions the following instances: "Suddenly Baba turned back and fixed him with a glance and touched his left wrist. At once the Rolihālā13 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."14

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

1985, being in the presence of Sāi Bābā gave them the awesome feeling of being in the presence of God.15

Our faujī 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 wealth.16

Also to Abdullah Jan, a faujī 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."17 Indeed, the tomb of 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."18

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 (pothi) by all Hindu bhakts, who read/recite its chapters as part of their daily worship. The Shri Sai Satcharita was composed in Marathi by Govind Raghunath Dahbolkar (1859-1929), who conceived it while Sāi Bābā

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8 Munro, Sai Baba: The Perfect Master, 38-39. See also ibid., 45.
9 Narasimhaswami, Life of Sai Baba, vol. 2, 178.32.
10 Ibid., 130. See also ibid., vol. 4, 25.
11 Ibid., vol. 3, 138. The person who had such experience was Rao Sahib Yeshwant Pandurang Gokhale; see also Narasimhaswami, Charters and Sayings, 199.
12 Narasimhaswami, Life of Sai Baba, vol. 3, 66. See also Khaparde, Shirdi Diary, 80 (entry dated February 9, 1912), 101 (entry dated March 9, 1912).
13 The term refers to a Muslim of Afghan descent.
14 Narasimhaswami, Life of Sai Baba, vol. 3, 82.
was still alive having obtained the saint’s permission and blessings. Sāi Bābā, placing his hand on Dabhollkar’s head and handing him the sūf, 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.” 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).

Dabhollkar, whom Sāi Bābā nicknamed Hemadpant (the famous thirteenth-century prime minister and court-poet of the Yadavas), was a Goad 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 fagir’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 oṣv verse form, comprising more than 9,300 verses.46 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),47 under the evocative spell of celebrated works of the advaitabhadra tradition of the saint-poets of Maharashtra, such as the Ekāđiti Bhūgavatī. Indeed, Dabhollkar conceived his work in the trail of the Maharashtrian Vārkari 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/Viṭṭhabā (as well as with various other Hindu deities).

The actual model of the Shri Sai Satcharita appears to be the Marathi Gurnavaret ("Life of the Master"), the Gospel for all devotees of the god Datta/Dattātreya, written by Sarasvatī Gangadhar around the middle of the sixteenth century.48 Divided into 51 chapters containing more than seven thousand ośvā, this hagiography presents the miraculous lives of Shripad Shrivallabha (c. 1233-53) and Nyanśha Sarasvatī (c. 1378-1458), the two seminal figures venerated as the first ‘historical’ avatāras of Dattātreya. To be sure, Dabhollkar as well as most Hindus viewed and still view Sāi Bābā to be a manifestation of Dattātreya,49 an integrative deity revered as highest yogin (paramahāṃsa or avadhītā), supreme guru, and eternal avatāra, even accommodating Islamic tenets. Dattātreya is a most important figure in the pan-Indian sect of the Nāthās, a saiva yogic tradition which became popular especially from the twelfth century onwards. Dattātreya had and still has an important place in the Western, Deccani pantheon of the ‘nine Nāthās’ (navnātha), being revered as an immortal yogin and one of the originators of the movement along with Gorakhnāth and Mātyendranāth. In the tradition of the Vārkarīs, the saint-poets Ekāditi (1533-99)—advocate, via his guru Janardan, of a synthetic mysticism, open to all—and the encyclopaedic Dāsopant (1551-1615) are especially linked to Dattātreya. The hagiographer Mahipati offers accounts of the dānāras which Dattātreya, as a Muslim soldier and as a Muslim faqir, would have granted to Ekāditi (Bhaktavaiyave 45.82-85, 45.105 ff.; Bhaktattamant 13.164-205). Mahipati also narrates stories of the meetings between Ekāditi and Dāsopant, in which

46 Dabhollkar, Shri Sai Satcharita, 22-23.
47 The oṣv, 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.
49 Originally the Shri Sai Satcharita consisted of 44 chapters, the text ending with the narrative of Sāi Bābā’s ‘nirvāna’ or passing away. However, precisely in order to conform itself to the model of the Gurnavaret, seven more chapters were later added, plus an epilogue and an epitome. For the text of the Gurnavaret, see R. K. Kanit, ed., Gauravarat (Mumbai: Sundar Deep Press, 1990 [1937]).
Dattatreya appears to the latter as the guardian of Ekath’s house (Bhaktiśāntāra 22.79–101; see also 22.46–65). After Ekath and Dāśopant, in the development of the devotional and ascetic movement linked to Dattatreya we find significant puraparamparās of both vaisnavī and śaiva masters (many of Nāth inspiration) comprising also pirs i.e. saintly figures of Sufi background, integrating Islamic mysticism with non-dual Vedanta. Besides Śai Bābā, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries important gurus revered as incarnations of Dattatreya were Mānjishrībhū (1817–1865), Akkalākh Māhārāj (d. 1878), Vāsudevānanda Sarasvatī (1854–1914), Māhārāj Bīkṛēndrīkār (1855–1905), Nūrī Māhārāj (1869–1923), Purohit Svāmin (1882–1941), Nīsurīgadattā Māhārāj (1897–1951), and Ruṣīya Avadhūtā (1898–1968). All these, often exhibiting a bizarre, antinomian personality following Dattatreya’s pattern, are honored both as great jāhānis and miracle-workers, givers of liberation, mukti, as well as mundane enjoyments, bhūkkti.

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.22 This translation is important, since Gunaji’s adaptation proved to be not always reliable. As noted by Warren, whereas Dabhoolkar, albeit from his Hindu perspective, was honest enough not to silence the Sufi aspect of Śai 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 Śai 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 faqir.23 Regarding every word and action of Śai Bābā as sacred, Dabhoolkar felt a moral obligation to be most accurate in his account. Thus, whenever

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22 For the original Marathi, see G. R. Dabhoolkar, Śri Śai Saccarita (Shirdi: Śri Śai Bābā Samsthān, 1982) [1929].
23 Warren, Unravelling the Enigma, 150.
24 Warren, Unravelling the Enigma, 150.
25 An important protagonist of Śai Bābā’s fame during the saint’s lifetime was the Cinnawari Brahman Gawalī Dattatreya Saharubhāde, better known as Dās Gānū (1660–1682), especially through his song-sessions (khāans). A presentation of this staunch Hindu nationalist and Maharashtra charvatwin in relation to Śai Bābā is afforded by Narasinhawanshi, Life of Sai Bābā, 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 Sai Baba’s renown throughout India, as he himself noted.\(^{37}\) His emphasis on the miraculous (in vol. 4 of his *Life* he devotes the final three chaps. to Sai Baba’s *siddhis* and *tilas*)\(^{38}\) 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 Sai Baba had become popular. They were written by urban, high-caste Brahmans, mainly coming from the Bombay area, who interpreted Sai Baba through their own Hindu perspective and thus reinforced the Hindu gloss over the saint.\(^{39}\) I shall selectively utilize these contributions and the work of other more recent authors who have studied the complex figure of our faqir when analyzing the passages quoted below, which can be reduced to five main narratives.

1. The Seat of Sai Baba’s Guru (Chap. 4, vv. 121-138)

... He [Sai Baba] 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.\(^{40}\) 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.

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\(^{37}\) See ibid., vol. 3, 187.

\(^{38}\) See chap. 10 ("Baba’s Siddhis, Their Origin and Their Use"), chap. 11 ("Baba’s Recent Liłas in the South and Their Purpose"), and chap. 12 ("Baba’s Teachings as to Siddhis"), 129-192.


\(^{40}\) Popular pastoral god, typically identified with Śiva, whose home is the temple at Jejuri in Pune District.
2. Sai Baba's Peculiar Way of Practicing Dhaati and His Feast of Separating His Limbs at Will (khandayoga) (Chap. 7, vv. 53-69)

Baba knew ‘dhauti-poti’ (a hathayoga 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 Khandayoga, 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, pale and heartless. He began to wonder whether this was a dream.

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

3. Sai Baba's 'Temporary Death' (Vchap. 44, vv. 62-89)

It was the full moon in the brighter half of the month of Margasirsha (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 Shaha-mandap 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 Mhalaspati, 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. Mhalaspati 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, Mhalaspati, who was always alert in his mind, kept guard over Baba, day and night, sitting up wide awake, all the time.

48 A poricco in front of a temple, where people assemble.
Although it was a command from Sai's own mouth, to dig his sama-
dhi, 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, 44 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 conscious-
ness.

The body would not gain consciousness. Two days passed in this way.

Mulla, Masulavi, 45 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.

44 The term identifies Mhasapati. It is popularly attributed to one who is pos-
sessed by a deity—in Mhasapati's case it would have to be Khajodoba—and acts as
an intermediary between the god or goddess and the community of the faithful.
45 These terms identify teachers of Islamic law.
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. 16). So now, listen to its significance.
Once, as Bābā was earnestly describing the importance of this plank, listen to the thought that arose in the mind of Kākasaheb Dikshit.
And he said to Bābā: "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."
Bābā 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 Bābā’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 Bābā 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 Bābā’s, on which he rested his head, while sitting in yogasan.
Every night, taking support of that brick, Bābā used to sit in the mosque, in solitude, very peacefully, in a yogic sanāt."
...
It was this same brick, resting his elbow on which, Bābā 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, Bābā 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 nirvāna and rebirth?
Empowered with the ability of death-at-will that Sai Samarth28 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 nīlī or azagora tree, practicing austereities and contemplative exercises. He appears to have kept aloof from the local villagers, living in solitude and wander-

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28 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 jāhāl, 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 Siva), such behaviour is by no means exclusive of yoga adepts, and 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 Sāi Bābā's first advent in Shirdi he was seen sitting in the manner of a wandering darūkha or sahī 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 faqīr .... It has already been noted that Sāi Bābā's contemporaries, Haazarat Babajan and Tutsudin Baba both made their home under trees. According to an old-devotee, Sāi Bābā lived first under a banyan 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.79

In his early years at Shirdi, Sāi Bābā's ascetic disposition tallies with his dressing as an athlete and his involvement in wrestling,78 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 his sick. He is said to have cured snake bite, leprosy by using snake poison, and 'rottling eyes' with bijā (washer-men's marking-nut) as an alkaline astringent.... Such medical knowledge, acquired with his mastery of yogic practices, already suggest the connotation of a knower of the secrets of human physiology and of a thaumaturge.79

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

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78 Warren, Unravelling the Enigma, 223. See also Rigopoulos, The Life and Teachings of Sai Baba of Shirdi, 48-49.
79 Ibid., 66-67.
80 Ibid., 65. Narasimhaswami writes that Sāi Bābā told his devotee H. S. Bihāri that he went on seeing Hari, Hari, and Hari appeared before him. Thereafter he stopped giving medicine and went on giving sādhu early. Therefore Hari and Allah were the same to Sāi Bābā (Life of Sai Baba, vol. 3, 150). In fact, Sāi Bābā's habit of preparing medicines is not restricted to his early years. On December 10, 1911, G. S. Kashiram noted in his diary that "Sayin Maharaj this afternoon prepared some medicine which he [one Kalashadk Bhat] took." Kashiram, Shirdi Diary, 19. See also Narasimhaswami, Life of Sai Baba, vol. 3, 60.
81 Ibid., 101-102.
82 Narasimhaswami, Charities and Sayings, 62. See also ibid., 54.
83 See Narasimhaswami, Life of Sai Baba, vol. 1, 21.
84 See Warren, Unravelling the Enigma, 52-53.
immortal, absorbed in an eternal samādhi) is testified in the legend of Ḫānādev appearing in a dream to Ekaśitha, asking him to open his tomb in Alandi so as to push aside the roots of an ajur tree that were hurting him, hindering his contemplation.39 From Dabollair’s viewpoint, the statement that young Sāl Bābā undertook penance near a nīla 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 Sāl Bābā’s guru and his full absorption in him, Narasimhaswami reports that our ācārya 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 ajamānī (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 pondered upon his face with an ardour of love that satisfied 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 paramarthika, the Supreme Goal. This is the only truth the guru taught me. The four Sudhācaraś and six Sītācaraś are not necessary. Trusting in the guru fully is enough.40

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

"The way is difficult. There are tigers and wolves in the jungles on the way." I (Kakasebe) 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 the way. If there be no guide, there is the danger of your being lost in the jungles or falling into ditches."41

The fundamental practice advocated by Sāl 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."42 As Narasimhaswami puts it: "The Guru is the only nādasūla of the pupil in Baba’s school, and the Guru’s knowledge and power sink into the sīkṣāya by the intensity of faith and love of the sīkṣāya.43 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 Sufis. 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..."44 From a Sufi perspective, absorption in the teacher leads to towakwil, 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 Gurugati), is the essence 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 Sāl Bābā acquired his powers: "Sāl Baba had by the grace of his Guru and by his prolonging and continuous bhajana, dharana and samadhi on God-Guru-God, attained laya.45 In Him and all the powers flowing from God are found in such a devotee who had got jñāna laya46 in God."47

40 These are the four paths (mārga) of action (karma), devotion (bhakti), discipline (yoga), and knowledge (jñāna).
41 Also known as darśanā, that is, the six orthodox systems of Hindu philosophy Nyaya, Vaiśeṣika, Sāṁkhya, Yoga, Mīmāṃsā, and Vaiṣṇava.
42 Narasimhaswami, Charters and Sayings, 60-61.
43 For a Sufi perspective, absorbtion.
45 For contemplative absorption.
46 Narasimhaswami, Life of Sāl 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.66

One episode in a long story reported by Dabhulkar appears to be biographical and betrays a Sufi character, which Warren has pointed out. In Shri Sai Satcharitra, chap. 32 vv. 57 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 jītārṇa. 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. Gūrūraya67 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. Gūrūraya 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 lovely creature like me describe it?” Gūrūraya 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 surged in my heart. The Guru then took me to his school, showing for me the same loving concern as the mother-bird who chases 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 on the form of the Guru, the workings of the intellect cease. Therefore, ultimately, only make an obedience to him, observing speechless silence.68

Warren aptly comments:

A variation of ... normal chillalah69 is the chillal-i-ma'kusa in which the aspirant is suspended in an inverted position while performing secluding prayers and meditation. The idea of an ‘inverted chillalah’ 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 salik70 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 chillal-i-ma'kusa is most associated is the thirteenth-century Chishti Sheikh Fariduddin Ganj-shakar of Pakpattan, more familiarly known as Baba Farid. ... Sāi Bābā is describing a conversion experience which is well-defined as tawbāt 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 madrassa, 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 tawbāt in the Sufi tarīqat.71

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 Dattātreya appears most fitting, given the fact that devotion to the guru as God is a paramount feature of the Dattāsamgānāvāna, in which Dattātreya is revered as the supreme guru deva. Significantly, most editions of the Marathi Gursastra have incorporated the Sanskrit Gursastra.72

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66 Dabhulkar, Shri Sai Satcharitra, 521-522.
67 A forty day retreat in Sufi training.
68 Adept along the spiritual path, disciple.
69 Warren, Unraveling the Enigma, 213–215. The tarīq or tarīqas (plural tarīqāt) 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 symbolic.
70 On the Gurugīti within the Gursastra, see my study Guru: Il fondamento della civiltà dell’India. Con la prima traduzione italiana del “Canto sul Maestro” (Roma: Carocci, 2009); 225-299.
71 The guru exalted as supreme king.
Sāi Bābā refused the traditional Hindu mode of instruction (upadesa) consisting in a formal initiation through a mantra. 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 upadesa to anyone. Apparently, he gave only ātmavid, that is, blessings, and that’s all. As his own guru did not teach this way, Sāi Bābā never taught any kind of specific practice (śādhanā) or ritual. In the Shri Sai Satcharitra, 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.” To a Hindu woman, Radhabai Deshmukh, 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.” The jagrit further told her that his guru just asked from him the ‘two coins’ of faith in God (mitra) and courage patience (saburi): “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.”

Sāi Bābā’s Peculiar Way of Practicing Dhauti and his Feat of Separating his Limbs at Will (Khandayoga)

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 Hathayogapradipikā 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 hatha-yoga on Baba’s part, reposing the hypothesis of a training in which Nātha influences might have played a role.” The terrifying sādhanā of khandayoga is believed to be resorted to by extraordinary Nātha and Aghori ascetics, though these are by no means the only ones. In nineteenth-century Maharashtra, that a Sufi might have practiced hathayoga 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. As I noted in my 1993 book, citing Annemarie Schimmel, the performance of khandayoga 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.”

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88 There is, however, one noticeable exception reported in Shri Sai Satcharitra, chap. 27, vv. 166-167, where Sāi Bābā advises Mis. Khaparde to practice the repetition (japa) of the mantra Rejran. See also Narasimhaswami, Charters and Sayings, 6, 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, 343, where Sāi Bābā is said to have revived the interest of one Rau Radhabai for his book on a mantra which the latter had received from his guru but had long neglected.
89 Dabholkar, Shri Sai Satcharitra, 158.
90 Narasimhaswami, Charters and Sayings, 274. Narayan Govind Chandockar, 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: Akhand Shrimanta Sai Kshetra Shrimahal, 1989) [Madras: All India Sai Samiti, 1942?]), 230, On N. G. Chandoker’s figure, see Narasimhaswami, Life of Sai Baba, vol. 2, 43-122. See also Narasimhaswami, ibid, 231, where the saint disregarded his pupil Kashinath (i.e. Utsert Mhalte) (1870-1941) from practicing mantras; he rather advised him to keep quiet and do nothing; that is, to simply await the guru’s liberating grace. According to G. G. Niazi, who thought that khadijimarg 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.
91 Narasimhaswami, Charters and Sayings, 43.
92 Rigopoulou, The Life and Teachings of Sai Baba of Shirdi, 47.
Sai Baba was believed to have been detached from his body, his guru having freed him from this "erroneous" identification. Once he is reported saying: "My Moursbad (Guru) has taken me away from this body. You can put the whole of this body on fire and I will enjoy the ganarth (fun)."

These peculiar feats of our saint, which Dabhokkhar states were witnessed by various Shirdi villagers, are narrated by other sources besides the Shri Sai Satcharita. One Shrimanva Thayen, a woman devotee, also claims to have witnessed Sai Baba performing both dhaunt and khandayoga (the severing of his limbs she would have witnessed around 1915). On the other hand, Narasimhaswami,

though typically emphasizing the miraculous in Sai Baba's life, in this case refuses to give factual credit to such reports. 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'. 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 muntly 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 later teach you this Khand Togha shortly." Sri Sai Shrimanva Thayen, My Life with Shri Sai Shirdi Sai Baba (Thrilling Memories of Shrimanva Thayen, 102 Years Old Lady, the Only Surviving Direct Devotee of Sri Shirdi Sai Baba). Interview and Presentation by Dr. Satya Pal Bubela (New Delhi: Pranaksha, 1992), S. Narasimha, Shrimanva Thayen 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 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 shiyya (disciple). Baba sat at some distance near the wall waiting for the intestines to dry up. On one occasion, I saw a huge eagle circling around in order to pick up Baba's intestines which I was guarding. I 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 five minutes Baba swallowed them back." ibid., 10.

"Coming to dhaunt ... It is said that he performed khandayoga, 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 dhaunt or khandayoga is a case of mass hypnosis or individual hypnosis 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 as to form one organic whole, and hence the probabilities are very much in favour of this sahit being the same as or similar to the obstruction to seeing—antarahkha—following which, Panjali says, a similar antarabhama 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 khandayoga and what exactly it represented, are matters about which definitive information is not available. Again it is said that Baba performed other yogic feats, that is, that he took off his entire entrails and placed them on a tree for drying up. These confused our notions of physiology and serve no useful purpose. We shall not discuss these further." Narasimhaswami, Life of Sai Baba, vol. 4, 189-190.

"For a discussion of powers in relation to the guru's supreme authority, see my Gura. Il fondamento della civiltà indiana, chap. 3, 161-168."
come in touch with a saintly figure. Leaving aside all speculations, what is of interest is that dhauti as well as kundalayoga—interpreted in a Sufi perspective as ghusiyat by Munshi—could well have been incorporated by a Sufi adept who was not strictus sensus a yogin. Indeed, that Sai Baba might have been exposed to yoga and Nâtha practices in his religious training is highly probable and not at all unreasonable, although it is impossible to estimate the actual weight of such hypothetic influence. For instance, he never prescribed pranayama, although breath-control is of paramount significance in Nâtha ideology and practice. Our faqr 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."

Sai Baba's 'Temporary Death'

Sai Baba'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 Sori Sai Satcharita, strangely enough, presents the story in a plain form, with no miraculous overtones, saying that Sai Baba went into a 72 hours samâdhi 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. Even Warrens takes this episode to be of utmost significance, marking Sai Baba's crucial experience of fanâ '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. This would have been the apex of Sai Baba's spiritual achievement, the attainment of the condition of a 'perfected man' (al-insan 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 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 antarâjâna (and called fires 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 sustenities to the extent that he was often categorized as a madman or pâgul in the local language. After 1886... he became one of the awdâris. 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 Sai precepts to those who became his disciples... Moreover:

Four phases can be identified in the spiritual evolution of Sai Baba. 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 Marathwada, 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 marjid. The fourth was from 1886 onwards as a perfectly realized soul, a level which he apparently attained after his three-day ordeal.

Dabholkar interprets the saint’s feat as a yogic exploit, stating that he would have entered into a condition of nirvikalpa samâdhi. Sai Baba himself is reported using the term samâdhi in instructing his devotees not to rouse his inert body for three days. The technical term nirvikalpa samâdhi ('concentration without distinction') is used in Vedanta as synonymous of asamprajñânatam samâdhi or 'unconscious samâdhi' of classical yoga. It is understood as that perfect, objectless concentration in which only karmic impulses/residues are left (samskaras), which is achieved after having eliminated all mental functions (citta-vritti).

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

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111 Osborne, *The Incredible Sai Baba*, 106.
112 See Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba*, vol. 1, 176-186.
114 *Friends of God*, i.e. nûrís.
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."

If the reference to Sāī Bābā’s entering a state of nirvikalpa-samādhi is an input of Dābhollkar’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/pir, 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 Sāī Bābā neither practiced nor taught prāṇāyāma or breath-control techniques, which as mentioned is a prominent feature especially among Nāṭha adepts. He even reprimanded a man who, by prāṇāyāma, claimed to have developed the siddhi of clairvoyance, saying “I can never exhibit tricks.” Narasimhaswami thinks that Sāī Bābā’s yogic capacities were not the result of any formal yoga practice—he advocated no particular mārga, such as the yoga mārga—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.” The woman devotee Tara Bai Sadasiva Yathaktad 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 Sāī Bābā, 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)

117 Rigopoulos, The Life and Teachings of Sai Baba of Shirdi, 94.
119 A. E. B. B.edwell reports that in 1910 Upamā Mahārāj had contracted breath-holding trouble during the practice of yoga. Having reached Pind, Sāī Bābā told him to reside at the local temple of Khānda, where his brother Balchandra later found him cured of his illness. B.edwell, Sāī Baba the Mahārāj, 21-22.
121 Narasimhaswami, Charitraa and Sayings, 143. See also Narasimhaswami, Life of Sai Baba, vol. 4, 186-187.
122 Ibid., vol. 3, 66, 125.
123 Ibid., vol. 4, 190.
124 Sāī Bābā of Shirdi and Yoga Powers 415

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.

Sāī Bābā’s Wooden Plank and its Significance

This story is to be referred to about 1898 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 Sāī 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, Dābhollkar portrays Sāī Bābā as an ideal yogin and renouncer (sannyāsin), having all the eight traditional siddhis starting with ājnāna 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 crushing under his weight. A parallel to this story is found in an anecdote concerning Nityānanda (161), the siddha of Kanhangad and future preceptor of Śvāmin Muktānanda (1908-1982), who is reported sleeping upon a suspended string. Sāī 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. 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

125 For instance, Narasimhaswami, Life of Sai Baba, vol. 2, 205.
who can sleep 'with his eyes open' can effect that."127 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.128 All his life Sai Baba 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 faqir used to practice the remembrance of Allah Malik ('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 dhwani inside the masjid,129 as well as during his night vigils,130 always keeping earthen lamps near him. Sai Baba's remembrance of Allah's name and incorruptible kingdom can be related to a mysticism of light. In Sufism, light (nir) is viewed as the distinctive sign of Allah'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 Sai Baba as saying 'I lie down making mental namasanarana',131 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 namasanarana stage of trance differs from the heart beat of natural sleep."132 Even some devotees of Sai Baba 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

127 Narasimhaswami, Devotees' Experiences, 57, 234.
128 Dhikr is recommended in the Qur'ain; see 3.190-191. On Sai Baba's practice of dhikr, see my The Life and Teachings of Sai Baba of Shirdi, 292-297.
129 It appears that Sai Baba never issued against the wolf but set a few inches away from it; see Bhawadwaj, Sai Baba the Master, 65. This might be an indication that he usually sat keeping a straight posture, as required by all yoga schools.
130 His avoidance of sleep was also meant for the protection of his devotees, Sai Baba being thought to keep constant watch over them; see Narasimhaswami, Life of Sai Baba, vol. 3, 22-25, 79.
131 Narasimhaswami, Charters and Sayings, 116. Namasanarana is the Hindu recollection of the divine name.
132 Ibid.

experienced. With every outpouring and indraving breath of Madhavrao Deshpande comes the clear sound of 'Sayin Nath Mahara, Sayin Nath Bapa. This sound is as clear as can be and when Madhavrao snores the words can be heard at a distance. This is really wonderful."133

The highest form of dhikr, even beyond that of the heart, is the one called 'intimate' or 'mystery' dhikr (siri), 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 hathayoga schools. Yet, although heart dhikr is akin to a silent form of nama-muran (and our faqir himself apparently called it namasanarana) and has even been interpreted as a parallel to yogic contemplation i.e. dhyan, Sai Baba's remembrance of Allah, despite similarities, need not and should not be interpreted as a yoga practice.

The Breaking of Sai Baba's Brick. References to Sai Baba's Death on October 15, 1918

Significantly, when referring to Sai Baba'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 Phalse 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 Sai Baba's passing away. According to Narasimhaswami's Charters and Sayings, at the breaking of the brick the saint, in grief, would have exclaimed: "My father'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 (prabuddha) it is that has snapped. I cannot survive the breaking of the brick."134

133 Khaparde, Shirdi Diary, 119-120. The Shirdi village Madhavrao Deshpande, also known as Shyama, was a Brahman teacher and an important figure, often acting as a precious intercessor mediating between Sai Baba and the devotees.
134 Narasimhaswami, Charters and Sayings, 61. Karmanprabuddha is the karmic accumulated in previous births. See also Narasimhaswami, Life of Sai Baba, vol. 3, 20.
For Sāi Bābā the brick represented a āryantarākṣai of sorts, a concrete testimony of spiritual transmission or power transfer, also symbolic of his guru's presence and a token of his grace. This 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 Shiridi, 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 yogasana. 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 dhūlī. In hathayoga, yogasana is typically identified with the yogic posture par excellence, that is, padmāsana, the lotus posture (see Gherandasamhitā 2.44–45). In fact, various contemporaries of our faqr among whom Balaji Pālājī Gurav, an old Shiridi 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 āhārī. If Dabholkar's statement that Sāi Bābā sat in yogasana 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," tapas\(^{128}\) and Jnana be achieved,\(^{129}\) he actually never taught any yogadraja and he definitely cannot be classified as a yogin.\(^{130}\) Even if our faqr may have employed Sanskrit terms such as nāmašūlaya, dhyāna, samādhi, etc. one must take into account his integrative saintliness, plus the omnipresent cultural influence of 'Hinduism' and of the Hindumajority with whom he interacted.

If Sāi Bābā was not strict in sensu a yogin, he certainly lived his whole life as a genuine faqr practicing renunciation and poverty, detachment and celibacy, stressing to his last day the importance of feeding the poor and of almsgiving.\(^{131}\) According to Munsif, "in his personal habits he was ascetic to the last."\(^{132}\) Nonetheless, our saint always recommended moderation.\(^{133}\) 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.\(^{134}\) Sāi Bābā was also against unnecessary fasting and even broke traditional dietary rules.\(^{135}\) To his dear servant Abdul, himself a faqr, our saint gave advice on how to live a 'faqrī' life. Narasimhaswami reports that Sāi Bābā told him: "Eat very little. Do not go in for a variety of eats.

\(^{127}\) Narasimhaswami, Charters and Sayings, 113.
\(^{128}\) An oblique link of Sāi Bābā to yoga comes through the figure of Dattērā. Thus we read that the Brahman Kusa Bhrā ṇā had as his guru one Datta Mahārāj, who trained him in yoga and the raising of the energy of kundalini. At a certain point, he was told by his teacher to go to Sāi Bābā, whom he referred to as his elder brother. Kusa Bhrā ṇā reached Shiridi in 1908 and became an ardent follower of the faqr, also purportedly obtaining from him the power to materialize the self-stripped by holding forth his hands and remembering the saint's name. Sāi Bābā, however, never gave him any yajñā or mantra, though Kusa Bhrā ṇā felt the loss of mantric exercise keenly. Later on, the Shiridi saint would have left Kusa Bhrā ṇā under the care of one Datta Baba e Palū (Faqrī) Shah, who would have told him that he and Sāi Bābā were interrelated as persons belonging to the same order; see Narasimhaswami, Life of Sāi Bābā, vol. 3, 152–157.
\(^{129}\) See ibid., 184, 195.
\(^{130}\) Munsif, Sāi Bābā: The Perfect Master, 45. In an entry of Rhaũpade's diary dated February 15, 1912, we read: 'He was in a pleased mood and said that he had left the village very hard, had gone without food for months, fed on leaves of 'Kala Taka' plants and other trees. He said God was very good to him, for life never became extinct though all food had been wasted and bones appeared to be in danger of crumbling away' (Shiridi Diaries, 84–85). Most probably, however, Sāi Bābā was here referring to one of his 'former lives'; see Narasimhaswami, Charters and Sayings, 210.
\(^{131}\) See Narasimhaswami, Life of Sāi Bābā, vol. 3, 67.
\(^{132}\) See Narasimhaswami, Charters and Sayings, 109.
\(^{133}\) The sources report instances of Sāi Bābā eating onions, desconsecrating his Hindu devotions and especially a yoga adept. Onion is thought to be tāmasc 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 dhyana on what is read, and think 'Who I am'."

Through his authority and charisma, Sai Baba succeeded in creating an atmosphere of harmony between Hindus and Muslims. As Shepherd notes, our Sufi faqir "was very socially solicit in maintaining a balance between two rival religious contingents in his following." He disapproved conversion to a new religion and advised people to keep to their own faith. Indeed, if Sai Baba advocated universality over sectarianism as supreme value, devotees were invited to preserve their religious-affiliations. Even Christians he considered his brothers and he once sent away his devotee H. S. Dikshit who had been speaking ill of Christ and Christianity. 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, Sai Baba at some point renamed the maulid by the Hindu name of Dwarkamai, 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 be allow the Rukkia to interfere with the Hindu's religious practice. Baba disowned intolence in every class and in every person. To Baba, Virthal and Allah were one and all saints were the same." According to Rao Bahadur Dhumal, a Brahman pleader who first came to Shirdi in 1907, Sai Baba himself was above Hindusim and Islam i.e. transcended them. As the saint is reported saying: "All Gods are one. There is no difference between a Hindu and a Mohammedan. Mosque and temple are the same. Yet I will respect your (people's) susceptibilities, and not enter the temple (as you object to the entry). Look at Cokhanma's life." Our faqir was perceived as an outcaste by orthodox Hindus and his plea to consider Cokhanma's life is significant, the latter being a celebrated fourteenth-century untouchable saint-poet.

Sai Baba 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, Sai Baba is reported answering that his 'creed or religion' was 'Kabir'. As other integrative mystics, he viewed Kabir as his spiritual model and more than once identified himself with him, even saying that Kabir was his teacher. Khasaparde, in a diary entry dated December 9, 1910, wrote: "He said he was Kabir before and used to spin yarn." And Narasimhaswami notes: "Kabir according to Baba was his former Avatar ... Kabir's songs were sung by Baba especially in his earlier days at the takiya. Baba included Kabir amongst his inspiring agencies, and once said: 'Kabir was my Guru','

Shepherd has recently reiterated his idea that Sai Baba may be linked to the maqai tradition of the Deccan, an unorthodox Sufi movement of very varied manifestations, and very much in the qalandar mould of eccentricity. 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. Following Warren's study, in 2005 Domínguez-Sila Khan has pointed out other similarities. She writes:

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

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83 Narasimhaswami, Life of Sai Baba, vol. 3, 174. Warren, Unraveling the Enigma, 203, states how Sai Baba "instructed the faqir Abdul on the Qu'ran and guided him along the ascetic renunciante Sufi path." It should be noted that Abdul, later in his life, married and had a family.
84 Shepherd, Investigating the Sai Baba Movement, 18.
85 Sai Baba once stopped a Hindu convert to Islam who had been taken to him by Bade Baba, also known as Faqir Baba, saying: "Ah! You have changed your father!"
86 Narasimhaswami, Charters and Sayings, 263.
87 See Warren, Unraveling the Enigma, 89.
88 See Narasimhaswami, Life of Sai Baba, vol. 3, 205.
89 See Narasimhaswami, Charters and Sayings, 262.
90 Narasimhaswami, Life of Sai Baba, vol. 3, 82-83.
Nizari and Imamshahi genealogies reproduced in the dual. 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 Sayyidikhan 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.

To be sure, Nizari Ismailism borrowed extensively from indigenous sources such as vaisnav bhakti, both ‘without attributes’ (nirguna) and ‘with attributes’ (saguna), and the Nāth movement. In particular, there are striking affinities with the nirguna Sant tradition and the composite figure of Kabir. As D. S. Khan remarks: “Like them [i.e. the Nizari piris], 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.” The liminality of Nizari Ismailism, where holy men simultaneously embody the personality of a faqir and the character of a Hindu śādhu or renouncer, is certainly akin to Kabir’s model 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 that, as in past centuries, even in Sāi Bābā’s times Sufi-Hindu liminality favored an accommodation process, that is, the approachment 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-culturalization it is necessary to take seriously the hermeneutical structures and categories that guided the efforts of those interpreters." 183

183 Ritual texts.
186 See ibid., 62.

Sāi Bābā of Śreṇi and Yoga Powers

In this perspective, even Warren’s ‘essentialisation’ of Hinduism and Islam, as when she argues that “śā ibā emerged from the dual Maharashtrian Bhakti and Sufi traditions whose goal was to directly experience God,” 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.

Sāi Bābā’s strong, reiterated belief in rebirth and prenatal karmic ties (mūrtyavimāna) is part and parcel of his ‘synthetic’ identity. He would say to have been in Śrīdī ‘thousands of years ago,’ and would tell many cryptic, symbolic stories (gītās) about former lives of himself and/or of his devotees and acquaintances. Our faqīr even told Ḍharpade that in a former birth he was with him for two or three years and that he, Ḍharpade, went into royal service though there was enough at home to live in comfort. Sāi Bābā would also claim to

184 Warren, Unraveling the Enigma, 205.
185 In the words of Nirmalini Rosier: “The essence of both Sufism and bhakti ... is development by love to reach the goal, which is perfect satiṣṭātmananda [Being, Consciousness, and Bliss] or love. Hence, in his own case ... the fusion had become perfect, and Sāi Bābā often referring to God or Guru could use with equal fidelity the word Allah or Pak or Bābā” Life of Sāi Bābā, vol. 3, 155. On the historical and social dynamics of Hindu-Muslim interaction in the bordering State of Karnation, determining analogous hybrid identities, see the fine monograph of J. Ayyang. Au confluent de deux hérités Musulmans et hindous dans le Sud de l’Inde (Paris: Presses de l’École Française d’Extrême-Orient, 1996).
186 Shepherd notes that this topic “was in currency amongst dissenters Muslims over the centuries,” Investigating the Sāi Bābā Movement, 53.
187 Ḍharpade, Śrīdī Diary, 3 (entry dated December 7, 1910).
188 For one episode concerning Ḍharpade’s wife Lakshminā, see Śrī Sāi Sattrarita chaps. 27, verses 159-169. With reference to Ḍharpade’s diary, see Śrīdī 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 Narasimhasastry, Charters and Sayings, 198-212. Warren, Unraveling the Enigma, 108-109, regards his storytelling as a method of Sufi teaching, and mentions the collection of short Sufi stories collected by Idris Shāh. According to M. V. Kamath and V. R. Khur, Sāi Bābā "began to speak in parables and symbolology from 1910 as the number of his visitors began to grow in volume,” M. V. Kamath—V. R. Khur, Sāi Bābā of Śrīdī: A Unique Saint (Bombay: Jaico, 1992). 9. For an ethnographic account of storytelling in Maharashatra, see K. Narayan, Storytellers, Saints, and Sources: Folk Narrative in Hindu Religious Teaching (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999).
189 See Ḍharpade, Śrīdī Diary, 98-99 (entry dated March 5, 1912).
CHAPTER FIFTEEN

YOGIC POWERS AND THE RĀMĀNANDA SAMPRADĀY

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 Mahabharata, 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, sāvāmi, sampradāyi, 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, others have transformed into new orders, while some more closely maintain their ancient roots. Among the largest existing ascetic orders is the Rāmānanda Sampradāya. 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 Rāmānandis. It will then focus

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

2 When discussing Sanskrit literary sources, I will use a standard form of transliteration. However, because the Rāmānandis 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.