

SHIRDI SAI BABA: FROM INSIGNIFICANCE TO WORLD ATTENTION

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M. A HISTORY

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INTRODUCTION

Robin Rinehart offers a helpful analogy for the special character of hagiography in a familiar South Asian idiom: “ the hagiographer’s goal goes beyond the mere telling of a story. If the subject is to become a part of the reader’s spiritual life, the reader has to be convinced that the subject is worthy.”¹

In my work, I trace the journey of Shirdi Sai Baba from a simple Fakir as he used to call himself, to an incarnation or a deity for his devotees by pondering on questions of what leads to discipleship and devotion to *Guru* in general and how and why Sai Baba of Shirdi continued to be a center-figure in Shirdi even after his ‘*Maha Samadhi*’. The aspects which I am dealing with revolve around the saint while also drawing in some similarities between other contemporary Maharashtrian saints of his time and Sai baba, in their view of the world and their own lives.

While bringing the Saint as a historical figure into our circle of questions, we must first ponder on the political, social and cultural activities ongoing during his stay in Shirdi and also how society reacted to such changes.

Sai Baba’s arrival in Shirdi dates back to the 19th century, the exact year is still a debated topic among the hagiographers while the year of him leaving his mortal coil is 1918. At the time of his arrival, Shirdi was a remote village with a low pilgrim population and the inhabitants depended solely on agriculture. Gradually as the importance of Sai Baba grew, Shirdi developed into a town, welcoming visitors from all over the world. During the period from 19th to 20th century, Bombay went through various phases of transition with a series of life threatening famines and starvation in late 19th century followed by a series of epidemics like cholera and plague in the Deccan region, greeted the entry of the saint in Shirdi, Maharashtra which was then a part of South Eastern part of Bombay Presidency. This added to the already escalating tensions and conflicts between the dominant religious communities as well as among the social and hierarchical stratas in the Hindu society itself. The rise of the Hindu revivalist movements in the region of Bombay and Madras, were followed by anti-brahmin struggles there. The rage of communalism was also strong leading to riots among the two major religious communities- Hindu and Muslim. Thus, Sai baba provided a healing touch to the victims of such changes and also cured his ailing patients in Shirdi, physically.

We would see, on the one hand, sects and traditions that try to assimilate Sai Baba into their groups, while on the other hand, there is a tendency among some sects to disown the saint on the allegation of him belonging to the rival community. I also explore the reasons for the hinduization of the Fakir from the mid-20th century onwards. The main concern of this paper would be to explore a satisfactory answer for the question- what factors have contributed to be essential for the pilgrims’ attraction to the saint of Shirdi. Was it just development undertaken by the Shirdi trust and the Government of Maharashtra- like construction of the airport, hotels for stay at minimum prices owned by the trust itself and the Prasadalya providing free food to the visitors; or it was also the saint’s

¹ Robin Rinehart, 1999. *One Lifetime, Many Lives: The Experience of Modern Hindu Hagiography*. Atlanta: Scholars Press; 126.

way of pulling people to Shirdi. The oral testimonies collected by B.V. Narsimha Iyer in the year 1936, supported the latter, serving as an important factor.

SHORT BIOGRAPHY OF SHIRDI SAIBABA

Sai Baba, today has become a universal figure whose name has spread across India and even beyond. It is this 'Fakir' who has played the central role in making a small, remote village of Shirdi to be known to the rest of the world. The Shirdi Sai movement starting from the obscure wretchedly poor Hamlet of Shirdi in a nook of the Kopergaon Taluka(Kopergaon means corner village) and also with the dynamo of the movement being Sri Sai, an unknown" and supposedly crazy fakir as he was taken to be at first.²

Since the *Sai Satcharitra* comprises the primary source, which started being written in 1916 by Gobind Raghunath Dabholkar, therefore, most of the historical accounts in the life of the 'fakir' are taken up mostly from this source. "He didn't go to anybody's door and always sat near the *neem* tree. ...One day it so happened that God Khandoba possessed the body of a devotee and people asked him, 'Deva(God), please tell us whose son this boy is and where he came from?' God Khandoba asked them to bring a spade and dig in a particular place. When it was dug, bricks were found underneath a flat stone. When the stone was removed, a corridor led to a cell where cow- mouth shaped structures, wooden boards and necklaces were seen. Khandoba said- 'This lad practiced penance here for 12 years.' When the people began to question the lad about this. He put them off the scent by telling them that it was his *Guru's* place, His Holy *Watan* and requested them to guard it well. The people then closed the corridors as before."³ Here, the writer tries to transpose a guru's characteristics into Sai Baba (whose origin remains unknown) even though the saint is rejecting such idea so as to not come into the limelight and be the focal point for others. This is done, in order for the people to consider him to be someone 'holy' who has already achieved enlightenment. Thus, such a character must be looked up to, for seeking guidance along the spiritual path.

It is said that after spending few months in Shirdi, he left the place and returned at the age of 20 in the year 1858 with a marriage procession of a Mohammedan Chand Patil of Dhupkheda village, who had met the saint in a forest nearby and claimed that the saint had directed him towards the location of his horse which was lost for months. As the Khandoba temple was in the exterior of the village therefore, the Saint was welcomed by the temple priest Mahlsapati By the term "Ya Sai" (welcome Sai) which the 'Fakir' used for the rest of his life.⁴The aspect which needs to be highlighted here is that the purpose of inclusion of such an account in the book might be for the Muslims to accept Sai Baba as a miracle worker who not only helps in spiritual accomplishments but also in material aspects of the world. The writer's purpose it seems here would be to gain both Hindu(through the account of the Gurusthan) and Muslim(through the account of Chand Patil) readership.

In his young days, Sai Baba grew long hair; never had his hair shaved and dressed like an athlete(he was into wrestling).⁵ There was a wrestling match between a village wrestler Mohdin Tamboli and the saint(it seems this happened when he returned to the village) as they had a disagreement on some items. In this match, Sai was defeated. Thereafter, He changed his dress and mode of living. He donned 'kafni'(a long garment reaching below the knee), wore a 'langot'(loin cloth) and covered his head with a piece of cloth. Sai Baba did not mix or speak with the people. He only gave answers when he was questioned.Now, this incident actually clashes with the earlier accounts mentioned above where we find that Sai Baba's first appearance in Shirdi was in the form of a wandering

² H.H B.V Narasimha Swami, "Life of Saibaba", Vol II- Part II,Chapter-1(All India Sai Samaj1956), 1.

³Govind Dabholkar,*Sai Satcharitra*(1929); translated by N.V. Gunaji, *The Wonderful Life and Teachings of Shirdi Sai Baba*(1944); (Dadar, Mumbai:Shri Sai baba Sansthan, Shirdi,2016);21.

⁴ Op cit. Dabholkar; Gunaji, 23-24.

⁵ Op cit. Dabholkar; Gunaji, 24.

renouncer. The writer is not able to make his idea about the Sai Baba's first appearance (whether he was an ascetic when arrived in Shirdi or a simple Worldly being) clear. This is generally a fault of the witnesses who give testimonies based on their memory of the event. Thus, the same incident can be prone to differences. Finding the exact event in history is a difficult task for a historian or a researcher.

He made the dilapidated mosque in the village his home and named it 'Dwarkamai' (mother Dwarka). During his initial stay, he played major role in healing ailments, curing snake bites by the use of Herbs gathered from the nearby forest which he called 'Lendi Baug'; Begging alms and doing petty tasks like watering the plants and cleaning his abode. After some time of occupying the mosque, he lit the fire called the 'dhuni' and distributed the sacred ash obtained from it which is called the 'Udi' as a medicine for curing all types of ailments instead of the natural herbs. Lighting the *diyas* with water instead of oil, being present in different places at the same time, knowing peoples' thoughts without them saying, distributing self-cooked food on a large scale to the masses, receiving visitors from all walks of life and religion especially Hindus and Muslims as these two communities formed the majority of the population in the village- were some activities which attracted people in the village and from surrounding areas towards him. Another significant incident which led people to consider him as a person with spiritual or magical powers was his resurrection after 3 days (72 hours) of leaving his body in the year 1886 and his intimation to Mahalsapati that he would return after few days thus was asked to safeguard his body till then.⁶ There were instances when the *fakir* shouted at the visitors, broke things that came in front of him and even beat some of the visitors. However, nobody is seen to have taken any action against such attitude of his, due to their love and reverence for him.

He recommended reading Holy scriptures like- *Gyaneshwari*, *Guru Charitra*, *Bhagwat*, to the Hindu and the *Quran* to the Muslim. He preached- "God is one"; surrendering to God/Guru fully; remembrance of God's name etc. He allowed the practice of both Hindu and Muslim rituals in the mosque, when he came into prominence, like- allowing '*bhajans*' and '*Qawwali*' to be sung in the mosque, dancing with the singers, asking the visitors to read scriptures in his presence and the '*Fatwa*' on the offerings made to him. As found in various sources- He often expressed himself in Mystic utterances, parables and used gestures with hand.

Around the year 1910 with his permission the daily '*aartis*' had begun- the afternoon aarti was held in the mosque while the morning and night aarti was held in the '*Chavadi*' (public building) in the village. Though, he always confronted those who took him as their Gods and put him in their pedestal; he is said to have given glimpses ('*darshan*') in the form of different Gods and *Gurus* whom the visitors were said to have revered. The construction of the two '*wadas*' or rest houses- the Sathé wada of Hari Vinayak Sathé (a visitor) and Dikshit Wada of Hari Sitaram Dixit (another visitor), might have been a reason peoples flocked in the village to have the *fakir's darshan* and for solving their problems, especially after 1910, as now they had a place to stay (especially when their stays were for a longer duration) during their visits. During the same time many other rituals are said to have begin like- celebrating *Ram navami*, a Hindu festival and '*Urs*', a Muslim festival, on the same day together and the '*Chavadi Processions*'. The Saint is said to have ordered the repair of many dilapidated structures in the village- the *Maruti Mandir* and the *Dwarkamai* mosque (though he was unwilling to get the mosque repaired but later he had agreed). Gradually, we find Sai Baba to be the ultimate authority in the village whose permission was needed for each and every task done by the inhabitants and visitors, like without his permission if a person leaves the boundaries of the village, he was sure to face an obstacle on his way to his destination (as mentioned in Chapter 9 of *Sai Satchritra*).

He begged for alms and is said to have distributed large sums of money to many of the visitors which meant solving their financial crisis in life and also gave regular funds upto rupees 50, to Tatyá Patil (a villager and a close devotee

⁶ Op cit. Dabholkar, Gunaji, 228.

of the saint) so that the ceremonies and festivals could be held properly. He stopped this begging for alms, 3 to 4 days before his 'Samadhi' when he is said to have been severely ill. He said to have foretold his death before actually taking *Maha Samadhi* and also asked the devotees to keep his body in the *Buti Wada* of Bapu Sahib Buti, of which he is said to have ordered the construction through a vision given to the owner itself, few days before leaving his mortal coil and which now stands as the *Samadhi Mandir* in Shirdi. He also added that this Samadhi would speak and contact the devotees after his death. Finally, on the day of *Vijay Dashmi*- 15 October, 1918 at 2:30 p.m., he breathed his last, after offering 9 coins to Lakshmi Bai Shinde, one of his close devotees. He had 16 rupees as his only possession which was used for his last rites.

These incidents were collected by Dabholkar like many other hagiographers, in order to gather public following around such a saintly figure whose activities could not be scientifically explained by them, like- a procedure taken up by Sai Baba for treatment of his patients, which could actually escalate the disease further in the field of Modern Science. These hagiographies proclaim the saint to be an extraordinary supernatural being who could control both worldly and supernatural aspects. Thus, the ultimate path which the hagiographers take is to take to writing down individual and collective accounts to make the figure, in Rinehart's words "worthy" of the readers' attention and praise.

SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC BACKGROUND OF LATE 19TH-EARLY 20TH CENTURY, SHIRDI

In the mid 19th century, when Sai Baba arrived in Shirdi as a wandering renouncer, it was a rural farming village.

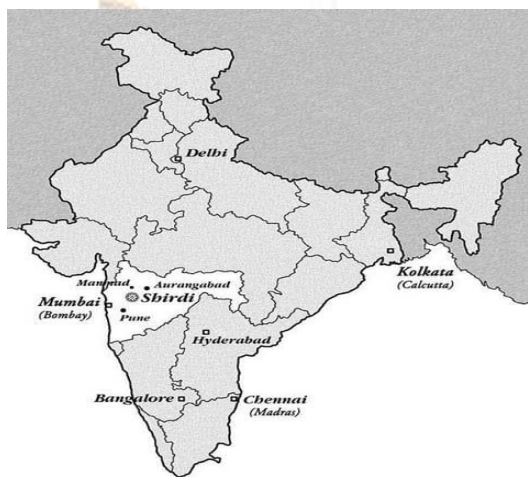


Fig1. Map 1: Location Of Shirdi on the Map of India

We don't have much information about Sai Baba's early life in Shirdi when according to the Dabholkar, his first visit to Shirdi, was *Gurusthan*, today in the Samadhi Temple Complex that either he or his master (Guru) did penance for 12 years under the Margosa (*neem*) tree. During his second visit to Shirdi with the marriage procession of Chand Patil and his permanently making the city Mosque his abode, is from where we can trace his activities that might have pulled his several worshipers towards him. Until the late 19th century he had countable followers. however we see an increase in the number of his worshipers from the early 20th century.

REGIONAL ECONOMY

Bombay and Madras- British Indian presidencies were the hottest and driest regions in the Deccan. The 1876-77 famine, worst affected the areas in Deccan Plateau.⁷ Shirdi lies in the remotest of the areas where government relief works could not have reached. This famine was followed by a failure of monsoon throughout the year of 1895 in the Deccan, leading to famine in 1896 in Southern India In general and the 1899 famine in Deccan Plateau in particular.⁸ These were the phases when the impacts of the continuous famine was felt on a large scale and inhabitants of the village of Shirdi were mostly dependent on the produce of the lands which were destroyed. During the first incidence of famine in the region of Bombay and Madras in 1876- 77, according to the newspaper reports collected by the stationed officers: Wells and tanks dried up; cotton crops failed; peasants and laborers were ready to be employed as indentured laborers overseas; cattle were dead or dying and transport of grains into interior parts was considered dangerous; livestock were sold to extreme quantities mostly by tenants; meat prices crashed; loans tried up for poor peasants; credit market suspended in famine times; rise in food crisis to the extent that people were willing to work at lower wages.⁹ And same would have been the case in subsequent famines hitting the region as well. After the famine ended, there was, as would be expected, scarcity of food and contaminated water sources, due to which undernourishment spread and the least resistance to bacteria leading to three main epidemics: Cholera, plague and malaria.¹⁰ Ahmednagar district was known as famine belt throughout the 19th Century the region was frequently drought-stricken which led to famine and outbreak of epidemics like Cholera and other disease.¹¹

Part of Sai Baba's growing appeal to Shirdi villagers was his ability to provide material relief and comfort in such times. With people dying out of hunger, starvation and epidemic in Shirdi, they needed someone to relieve them from this menace. There were incidents mentioned in the *Satcharitra*, which prove him to have served as a believing force. "In the year 1910 he is said to have used a grinding wheel to grind wheat in the mosque and asked the inhabitants to spread it all over the boundaries of the village which signified putting a check on the entrance of Cholera epidemic into the village and affecting the people will in its boundaries, after which the occurrence of Cholera came to an end within the boundaries of the village."¹²

One of his main principles was food donation serving every single person who would come at the door of *Dwarkamai*- everyone was invited for the same, not just the poor but even the animals in the village as mentioned in Chapter 38 of the *Satcharitra*. The Saint ate very little which would be obtained from just to houses while begging. However, whenever he fed the people all arrangements were done by him single handedly: he went to the market to buy all the ingredients needed. Then he grinded what all was necessary followed by making a fireplace in the courtyard of the mass and used to separate big vessels- one for 100 people and another for 500 people. After the food was ready he called upon the *Maulvi* to read the '*fatiha*' (a Muslim prayer) then after keeping a part of the cooked food separately for Mhalsapati and Taty Patil (villagers) fed the rest to the people. The ones who were fond of meat were served from a separate vessel. He never forced a vegetarian to eat meat ever. Thus, in such times of scarcity, free food was what mostly the poor and lower caste including untouchables needed and they were served by the Saint, with the same respect as he would serve the rich and the upper castes. He never differentiated among them.¹³

Famine continued in 1911-12. In Bombay, "no relief work was opened as laborers were required by the irrigation department for canal works in the northern part of the district. Total number of deaths during the year was calculated to be 38,512 persons and no record is thus mentioned of construction of canals, channels or drainage and irrigation

⁷ Tirthankar Roy, *Oxford India Short Introductions:Natural Disasters and Indian History*; Oxford University Press(2012); 49.

⁸ Ibid. Roy(2012); 53.

⁹ Ibid. Roy(2012);51-54.

¹⁰ Op cit. Roy(2012); 56.

¹¹ Antonio Rigopoulos, *The Life And Teachings Of Sai Baba Of Shirdi*;State University Of New York Press(1993).

¹² Govind Dabholkar,*Sai Satcharitra*(1929);*Hindi translation* (2020); *ch-1*; Dadar, Mumbai:Shri Sai baba Sansthan, Shirdi(2016).

¹³ Ibid.Dabholkar; *Sai Satcharitra*(1929);*Hindi translation* (2020); *ch-38*.

tanks.”¹⁴ This task of food cooking and donation went on till 1910 and then came to an end, as from then, he was served the food which the devotees brought along with them called ‘*Naivedya*’ which became accumulated in huge quantities so much so that even after feeding the fakirs and poor, the food did not exhaust. Some of the food was sent to the people waiting outside the mosque and the rest was served to the devotees sitting in the courtyard of the mosque, in a line. He had given Madhavrao Deshpande and Nana Sahib Nimonkar the responsibility to look after every single need of the people while they would be having the food. This was the time when he had gained much reverence and the people visited him from different Southern States around Shirdi due to the spread of his name far and wide via Dasganu (Ganpat sahasrabudhe’s songs and *bhajans*).¹⁵

SAIBABA AS A HEALER

Now, coming to the next aspect, since the village was occupied by agricultural communities and being one of the remotest areas in Ahmednagar district of Bombay, snake bites were a common cause of fear among the villagers. The Saint treated the poison of the snake in His own way. In one incident he had saved Madhavrao Deshpande (Shyama) from poison to spread after a snake bite.

When he ran to the Dwarkamai he was greeted with words "You ungrateful Brahman! Don't come up! You dare not do it!", then in a loud voice said "go away! get down!". To this, Shyama sat there upset at his only possible life-saver. When Sai Baba regained his composure after a moment, he said to him in polite words "don't be scared and don't worry. The all-giver 'Fakir' will always protect you. Go home and don't come out. Have faith in me and give up worrying". These words according to the writer of *Satcharitra* were clearly meant for the snake poison in his body as he got well after the incident.¹⁶

Thus, people took him possessing miraculous powers to cure ailments in most unimaginable way. The village population was more focused on their own lives as much of the population were subsistence agriculturists and dependent on rain for crop production. The rise of the Hindu revivalist movement in Maharashtra in the early 20th century with the Shivaji and *Ganpati* festivals initiated by Bal Gangadhar Tilak, was followed by anti-Brahmin struggle by the lower castes like the Mahars. These activities would not have affected the inhabitants of Shirdi in the sense, to have influenced their thoughts to a great extent, as a population was already very less with even less variation in occupations. At the saint’s arrival in Shirdi for the second time, it had a cluster of houses surrounded by agricultural fields. The majority of the population were Hindu peasant and Muslims who comprised about 10% of the population, working mainly as artisans or agriculture laborers. Sources calculate that it had about 200 houses with a Village population of not more than 1000 persons.¹⁷ Shirdi had a few shops managed by Gujarati, Marwadi and Kutchi merchants. In keeping with accounts of western Maharashtra at this point of time, one may categorize most of the villagers as belonging to the peasant or cultivating strata with few Maratha or Elite families if any.¹⁸

SOCIAL ASPECT:

However, it was also time which so the rigidification of various identities through forces like the European social theories that informed colonial policies, the decennial censuses and their quantification of community, aggressive nationalism rooted in religion and discourse of communalism that Hindus and Muslims are predisposed to conflict because of primordial hatreds. These matters went side by side during Sai Baba’s stay in Shirdi, yet the fakir’s principle of syncretism visible in his popular quotation “*Sabka malik ek*”, is what had widened his circle of

¹⁴ Gazetteers of the Bombay Presidency, Ahmednagar Dist.,(1884)(see, section on Agriculture and Irrigation); e-Book Edition, Nirmal Software Services Pvt. Ltd.(2006).

¹⁵ Op cit.Dabholkar; *Sai Satcharitra*(1929);Hindi translation (2020); ch-38.

¹⁶ Op cit.Dabholkar; *Sai Satcharitra*(1929);Hindi translation (2020); ch-7.

¹⁷ Op cit. Rigopoulos;1993.

¹⁸ Srinivas;*Sai Baba:Double Utilization of Written and Oral Traditions in a Modern South Asian Religious Movement*; Sage Journals, Vol 47, Issue 187, 1999, 8.

influence and is a very significant characteristic of the 'Fakir'. There are a number of incidents where the orthodox Hindu Brahmins who found him to be a Muslim Fakir living in the Mosque, refused to meet him initially, however they were given glimpses of his worshiped God (*Ishtdev*) and Masters (Guru) in place of the Saint sitting in *Dwarkamai*. He welcomed both Muslim and Hindu equally who came to meet him and followed both Hindu and Muslim rituals and practices- fireplace, ringing the bell, conch shell blowing, 'arghya'(offering holy water) while worshipping- in *Dwarkamai*, while also making maulvi read the 'Fatwa' on offering made to him, saying "Allah Malik" at almost every instance etc. The syncretic practice is also visible in him giving permission to celebrate 'RamNavami' and 'Urs' festival together in Shirdi as has been mentioned before.

As Tukaram Raghujiv Borawke(Appa Saheb Borwke), Who was one of the Trustees of Shirdi Sai Sansthan in the year 1985, said in his testimony that "there was a time when a Brahmin priest used to do Pooja of Sai Baba on one side and simultaneously a Muslim devotee of Baba by the name Abdul Baba used to perform Pooja on the other side."¹⁹ As Rigopoulos has argued that Sai Baba was a truly syncretic figure whose lessons arise from both Hindu Vedanta and Muslim Sufi tradition. Also, Mclain suggests in her work that the Hindu devotees turn to Sai Baba for two reasons- One, seek 'spiritual succor'. Second, to seek freedom from aspects of traditional Hinduism that they found undesirable.²⁰

In 1918, till the death of the saint, Ahmednagar district had transformed from famine belt to sugar belt through government construction of Godavari and Pravara irrigation channels and active promotion of sugar cultivation. By this time Sai Baba's following increased from Maratha kunbi farming villagers of Shirdi and surrounding villages to elite devotees- Civil Servants in the Colonial government.²¹

SAI BABA AS DATTA INCARNATION

Charles White takes on three arguments to place Sai Baba in either of the categories- firstly, relating him with Kabir or describing him to be a kabirpanthi 'is counted among the most thorough-going of the reforming ascetics in Hinduism and one who made major contribution in creating links between Muslims and Hindus...'²² His reputed love for animals point towards the character close to Sai Baba. Also the word attached by the Maharashtrian Saint- 'fakir' for the Godhead coincides with the term used by Kabir for the god (*fakir*) that dwelt in his heart. Therefore, it is argued that Sai Baba was a Kabirpanthi.

Secondly, he traces his origin to the Nathpanthis attached to Gorakhnath. principle focus of community and religious life in Nathpanthi house is the hearth or 'Dhuni' whereon a fire is kept perpetually burning, similar to the 'Dhuni' lit by the saint in the Dwarkamai and obtained the sacred ash from it to distribute it to his visitors.

The third category coincides with the Datta sampradaya as an incarnation of Lord Dattatreya who has much influence in Southern India and Maharashtra. I would stress on this perspective by looking into it more deeply. Taking extracts from the biography of Sripad Sreevallabha who is considered to be the first incarnation of Dattatreya between 1320-1350, there is mention of Sai Baba of 'Shiladhi', Maharashtra in this book itself written by Shankar Bhatt when the saint was supposed to be alive. As decreed by Sripada, the work written during his lifetime was kept secret. "It would come to light during the 33rd generation of his maternal grandfather." it came into light in 2001. It was published in Telugu and has been translated into several languages.²³ There are instances where Sripada is said to have foretold and incarnation in *Shiladi*- Sai Baba- who he says to be the incarnation of Hanuman as a Muslim Fakir and prescribes his duties in that life:

¹⁹ Rigopoulos; *Oral Testimonies on Saibaba(As Gathered During A Field Research in Shirdi and Other Locales)*; 1985, 48-49.

²⁰ Op cit.Mclain (2016); 6.

²¹ Op cit.Mclain (2016); 36.

²² Charles White; *The Sai Baba Movement: Approaches to the study of India saints*; Journal of Asian Studies, Aug., 1972, Vol.31, No.4; 867.

²³ Shankar Bhatt; *Sripada Sreevallabha Charitamrutam(Biography of a Dattatreya Avatara)*; Edition 3(2023); Dhanishta Foundation, Visakhapatnam, India; Cover page.

“...He went to Nepal from there. There, he granted Darshan to Hanuman, who was on a mountain, and in deep meditation of the name Rama, as Sita, Rama, Lakshmana, Bharata, Shatrughna...Even during the grand infinite Maha Sunya Kala, You chanted the seed sound “Ram”, millions and millions of time. Therefore you transcended time... you have to incarnate once in this Kaliyuga. Since you were capable of pacifying the tendencies of senses, you will become famous with the name of “Sai”.

‘Hanumana asked him “kindly tell in which form I should incarnate.” ‘Sripada smiled and said, “even though you were born out of the divine origin of *Shiva*, you have become a devotee of Rama. In the Arabic language, ‘Al’ means Shakti, ‘Aha’ means shaktha, i.e, One who holds Shakti. Therefore, “Allah” means the combined form of Shiva and Shakti... Henceforth, you will at all me as Shiva Shakti by uttering the name of “Allah” which is acceptable to Mlechhas.’ My dear Hanuma! may the body that you assume be Bond in the bhardwaja lineage.’ Hanuman: Allah Malik, that means, Allah is the Lord!”

Here, we find the assimilation of the Urdu word “Allah Malik” into the Hindu strata relating it to the Hindu Gods Shiva and Shakti, in a combined form. Further it is stated here that Sripada too accepts that “I will remain Incognito in the body of Narasimha Saraswati in *Kadali Vana* for 200 years in yoga *samadhi*. then I will become famous as Swami Samarth in Prajnapura. When the time comes for leaving my mortal body, I will incarnate into you who are in the form of Sai. I will announce univocally that my incarnation is within you.” This is where we find that there has been an over emphasis on the point to prove Sai Baba to be an ‘*avatara*’ of Dattatreya belonging to the Datta Sampradaya as well as of ‘Hanumana’- a Hindu deity, who is one of the most revered and accepted in Northern and Southern India, equally.

Since, the female saint Anusuya, wife of Saint Atreya is said to have given birth To Dattatreya therefore, she was someone to the place and Hanuman was placed in her womb when Sripada said- “I am granting him a state of oneness with me. In a way I am taking birth from your womb again through my own Maya.” ‘ The labor pains increased after some time. Mother Anusuya give birth to a charming form of Datta with three heads... After some time this scene faded out. the form of Hanuman became visible’.

Sripada as mentioned in the biography had also solved the problem of Hanuman's master in the form of Sai Baba. Hanuman states, “ my lord! I will try to coordinate the good things in the *Mlechha* religion and the good things from the *Sanatana Dharma*. There should be a *Mlechha Guru* also.” He was granted this wish by Sripada who prescribed his Guru to be a great wise man named ‘Mahabub Subhani’ Who he claimed to be a part of Sripada. He further said, “ I will have him incarnated as Varish Ali Shah. He will be your Guru and will teach you the secrets of yoga. Shyama Charan will teach you kriya yoga.”²⁴ So, the source makes it clear that Sai Baba was under the guidance of *Mlechha* (Muslim) And Hindu Masters, with himself being a Datta Avatara. This part might also have been added due to the writer’s inability to explain the saint’s tilt towards Islam, while giving him a Hindu identity. Since, this is said to have been written while Shripada was in his bodily form the third argument of white is given more importance than his previous two categorizations.

Chapter 18 of the book also mentions the story of two foreigners who were told by Sripada since the 2 *Mlechhas* disguised themselves as brahmins, to meet Sripada. However, He recognises them and accuses them of committing the ‘crime’ of killing cows. Thus, they would become famous by the names- Bade Baba and Abdul Baba(Two of the staunch followers of Sai Baba) and be lifted by the complete Sadguru incarnation. “There is a village called Siladhi in Maharashtra. it will become ‘*Siddha Kshetra*’(a renowned place) in the course of time. you will receive the blessings of Sai baba there.”

²⁴ Op cit.Bhatt; Chapter 45; 513.

Now, this part gives authenticity to the point that could not be missed out here is that Shirdi or *Siladhi* village did exist in the years when the biography of shripada was being written by Shankar Bhatt, and only came into light in 2001 by the 33rd maternal generation of Sripada Srivallabha as it is said to have been prophesied by him in the 14th century.

Much of the practices relating to the followers of Sai Baba are similar to the Datta tradition. Thursday, in both cases, is considered to be a sacred day and an ideal day to visit the temple of the *Guru* or begin any other essential work. the ritual of mass reading (*Mahaparayan*) of the holy book for each of them- *Guru Charitra* for the Datta worshipers and the *Sai Satcharitra* for Sai baba devotees- On this sacred day each week or the weekly reading (*Saptah parayan*) followed by feeding people as donations on the 7th day. The *Palki* procession taken out from the temple of both these Masters taken back to the temple with the *Paduka* and photo symbolizing the procession with the devotees comment in the presence of Sai Baba- term – the *Chavadi* procession, continue till date- is something very similar to the processions take a note at the holy sites of the Datta sampradaya. The iconography attached to both the figures are similar to a great extent- Audumbar tree for Dattatreya and Neem Tree for Sai Baba- Under which both of them are said to have done penance. Dogs are considered sacred for Datta tradition as four dogs follow Dattatreya symbolizing the 4 Vedas while with Sai Baba, The dogs were said to have followed him everywhere while he went collecting alms, indicating the since love for them and other animals.

SAI BABA: A COMPOSITE FIGURE TO A HINDU DIETY

The Saint Sai Baba is argued to have been influenced by both the major religious communities in the region- Hinduism and Islam. If we categorized him to be a Hindu then the group which assimilated him into that tradition giving him a long in a history and then approval of being an incarnation of Dattatreya was the Datta sampradaya's first Datta incarnation by the Guru himself, Was Sripada Srivallabha. If we take into account the Islamic aspect of his teachings and practices- Sai Baba had a vast knowledge of the Islamic world and its saints and masters which is evident through the diary of Abdul Baba who lived with Sai Baba in Shirdi for a continuous period of 29 years, before Sai Baba's death in 1918. Then remained in Shirdi for a further 36 years, thereafter, tending to Sai Baba's Shrine/ 'dargah', until his own death in 1954. Sai Baba was responsible for Abdul's spiritual development only, and not providing for his meals and stay; guiding him along the stations and states of Sufi path, which Abdul had commenced under the guidance of Amiruddin, the Nanded Fakir. He along with Mhalsapati were strictly kept on the path of poverty, even when Sai Baba distributed sums of money to other visitors.²⁵ There seems to have been the practice of the Sufi to recite the Quran in Arabic after memorizing it and there are testimony with support the point that Sai Baba used to recite in Arabic, Although the Hindus could recognize what Babu Rao Chandorkar reported that all *mantras* that Sai Baba spoke or recited are Arabic or Persian etc and not Sanskrit.²⁶

However, as argued by Warren, the Sai Baba Manuscript(Abdul Urdu diary) reveals that Sai Baba was familiar with great Sufi Masters and genealogy of many of the orders such as Chishtiya, Suhrawardiyya and Qadiriya, As well as smaller sects, There is no evidence that he formally belonged to any of them.²⁷ This is same as the fact that he even mentions the genealogy of Hindu Kings of the past and mythological characters Hindu '*Mantras*' and gods including the incarnations of Vishnu, however, he doesn't seem to be a total follower of the Hindu pantheon.

There has been a transformation in the image of the Sai Baba greatly after 1918, is increasingly being seen as a Hindu figure and is losing his Muslim character whereby the Muslim community is being sidelined and alienated by the Saibaba Sansthan Trust, Shirdi, as one of the main agencies in propagating such an image, overshadowing the composite nature of the saint. This aspect has been highlighted by various researchers like Warren who blamed B.V. Narsimha Swami. His real name was B.V. Narasimha Iyer of Coimbatore Madras Presidency and he belonged

²⁵ Warren; *Unravelling the Enigma: Shirdi Sai Baba in the Light of Sufism*; Bird Publisher(2009);141.

²⁶ Ibid. Warren(2009); 39.

²⁷ Ibid. Warren(2009); 39.

to an orthodox Hindu family and was politically active in local and national politics in the first decades of 20th century. She critiques Narsimha Swami of being an orthodox and thus including Hindu informants majorly-Brahmins from Bombay for his research and that he left out or made least efforts to investigate the Sufi community, when he was compiling Sai Baba's teachings. Also she adds, after 1910, there was a large influx of Hindus attracted to Shirdi through the auspices of an influential devotee, Nana Chandorkar and also through the *kirtans* of Dasganu(Ganpat Rao Sahasrabuddhe).²⁸ However major role in the 'hinduization' of the composite figure is played by the Trust itself which is the main body responsible for the temple activity in Shirdi as well as for the development of Shirdi.

It is argued that, with the burying of his body in the Buti wada of Bapu Sahib Buti, Sai Baba's 'hinduization' was complete.²⁹ However, the point which is given less importance here is that Sai Baba himself chose to be buried in the *Buti wada* after his *Maha Samadhi*:

“Shriman Bapu Saheb Buti, the famous multi millionaire of Nagpur lived in Shirdi with his family. Once an Idea arose in his mind that he should have a building of his own there. sometimes after this while he was sleeping there in Dixit's Wada, he got a vision. Baba appeared in his dream and ordered him to build a Wada of his own with a temple. Shama, who was sleeping there, also had a similar vision. When Bapu Sahib was awakened, he saw Shama crying and asked him why he was doing so. The latter replied that in his vision Baba came close to him and ordered distinctly- the wada with the temple.

... The latter(Shama) asked Baba about this(placing the image of Muralidhar at the center of an open room) When he was just passing by the Wada. Hearing Shyama, Baba gave his consent saying, “ after the temple is complete I will come there to stay” and staring at the Wada, he added- “ after the Wada is complete, we shall use it ourselves, we shall live, move and play there, embrace each other and be happy.”

... but the words “ place or keep me in the Wada” which came out of Baba's mouth just before his passing, consoled not only Bapu Saheb, but one and all.”-(Satcharitra Chapter 39)

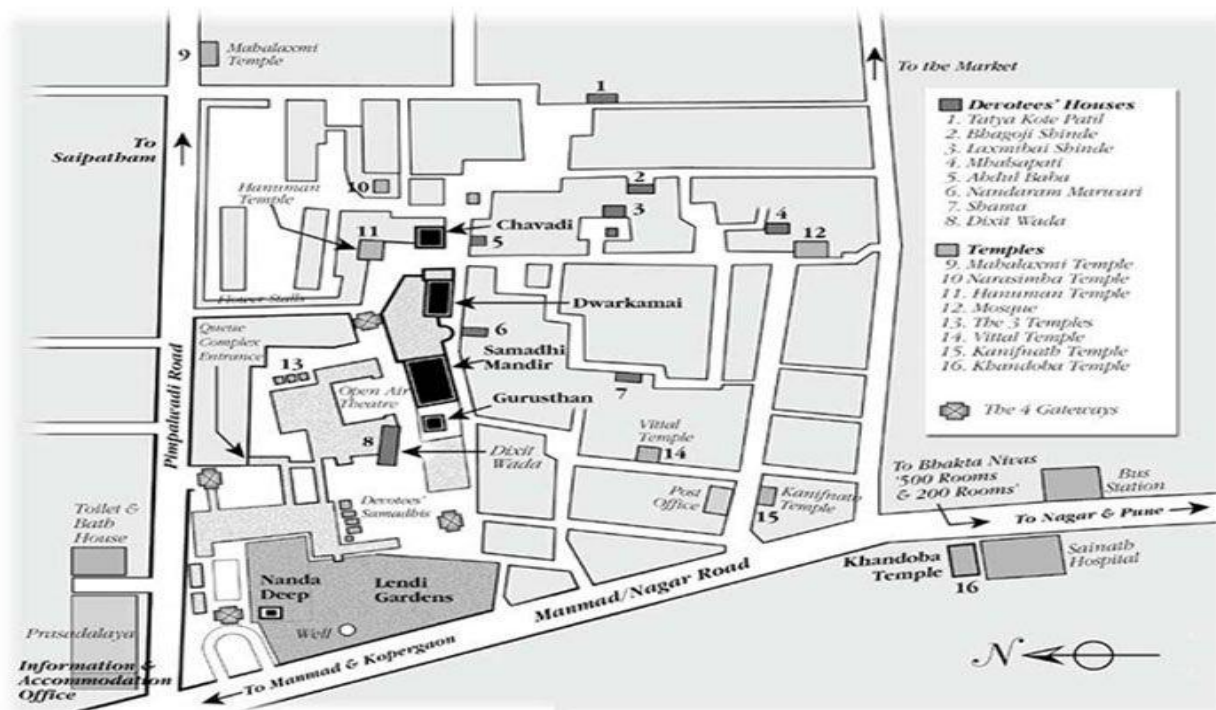


Fig2. Map 2: Town Map Of Shirdi, Maharashtra

²⁸ Op cit. Warren(2009); 18.

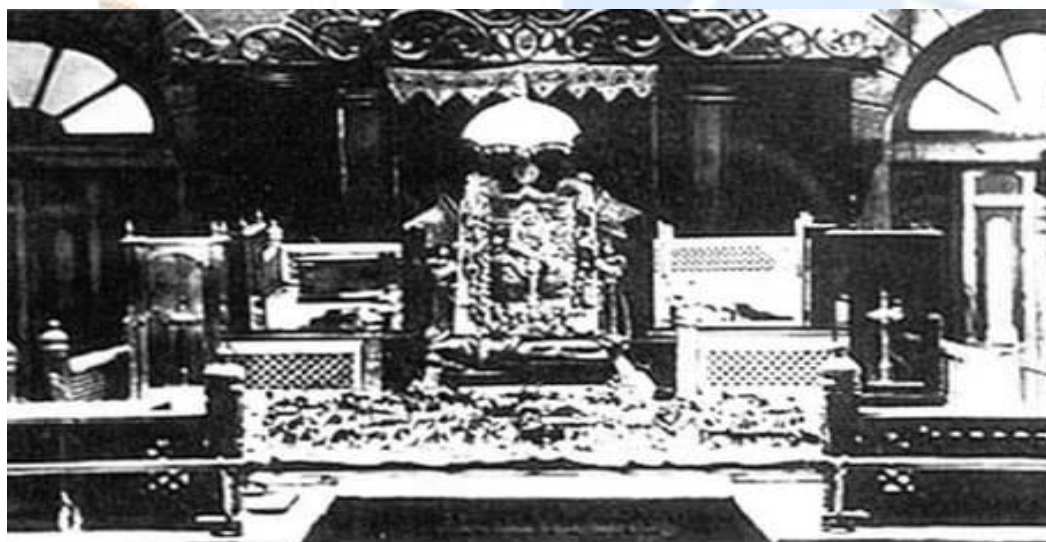
²⁹ Op cit. Rigopoulos(1993).

Here, it is important to note that he never mentioned what religious practices or rituals are to be done in the temple or who would be eligible for the performance of such rituals. Abdul Baba served as the caretaker of the tomb from 1918-22. In 1922, Hari Sitaram Dixit (Kakasaheb Dixit) decided on a Public Trust through the Ahmednagar District Court for the administration of the shrine. Ramalingamswamy³⁰ reports that this provoked a legal countersuit by Abdul Baba- when some well-wishers of him induced him that he was the legal heir to Baba and formation of the Trust was against justice. He lost his case and was forbidden from the devotees' offerings. After some time, these restrictions were relaxed and Abdul served as the caretaker to the shrine till his death in 1954. However, Warren writes "the overall result was that starting in 1922, any Muslim claim to Sai Baba's shrine was effectively silenced by the Hindus." Mclain argues that, till the first part of 1954, a large print photograph was installed behind the shrine. On 7 Oct, 1954, Sri Sai Sansthan Trust ritually installed a life-size statue of Sai Baba. The sculptor Balaji Vasantrao Talim of Bombay carved it from white Italian Marble, using as a guide the photo of Saibaba seated on a rock, also through a vision used as a guidance given by the saint, to the sculptor.

"My father(Harish Talim) told me that my grandfather simply couldn't start making the idol, because there was only one photograph available and it was not a side profile. A side profile is important to get the details of the face right," says Rajiv Talim (grandson of Vasantrao Talim), who runs the Talims' studio along with his son Gaurang.

"But finally, after three months, Baba paid grandfather a 'visit' at his studio. It was a fleeting moment, but he told my father that he actually saw him standing there." Inspired by the encounter, Balaji set to work with renewed vigor, and the statue got made in two weeks.

-(Chaitanya Marpakwar;Article in Mumbai Mirror.Indiatimes.com;Oct 7, 2018)



Samadhi Mandir (1919)

Fig3. Samadhi Mandir With Photograph Of SaiBaba(in the center)-1919

Murti was formally installed by Swami Sai Sharan Anand, Hindu renouncer who first met Shirdi Sai Baba in 1911 and who maintained Sai Baba to be a Brahmin by birth. Marianne Warren(2004, 269-70) reports that the installation of this statue in 1954 cost some controversy among Sai Baba Muslim followers, some of whom chose to stop visiting the Samadhi Mandir at that time. Today, the procedure for worship in the temple is done by keeping orthodox brahmanical Hindu ritual tradition in mind. According to an interview with Kishore More in 2010 (Executive Officer of Sai Sansthan Trust), the priests employed in the samadhi temple are all trained in vedic school, learned holy books and know all the chants.³¹

³⁰ Ramlinga Swamy; *Ambrosia In Shirdi*(1984); 176.

³¹ Op cit. Mclain(2016); 39.

The cloth that the Statue of Sai Baba wears at the samadhi temple is always orange in color as has been observed, even if he wears a different coloured dress each day. A symbol that Sai Baba is taken to be a Hindu renouncer. *Sri Sai Satcharitra* -chapter 38, emphasizes that Sai Baba prepared both vegetarian and non vegetarian meals to serve as per demand of the visitor and before the feast would begin a Muslim prayer(*fatwa*) was read by a *Mulla*. However, the Prasadalay constructed in 2009 by the Sai Baba Sansthan Trust strictly serves vegetarian food, keeping the Hindu devotees in mind. This is an instance of variation in the activities- what the Saint used to perform and what the Sansthan does- damaging the composite figure's image after his death.

In 2004 legislation of Sai Baba Sansthan Trust by the Government of Maharashtra, one must be a devotee of Sai Baba to be a member, but one need not be a Hindu, and the type of rituals and festivals to be undertaken within the temple are to be done according to "customs and usages" but are not explicitly equated with Brahmanical Hinduism. However, it is rare in the history of the trust for a non Hindu to serve as a trustee, the rituals practiced within the Samadhi Mandir are performed by Brahmin priests who have been thoroughly trained in orthodox liturgy. This difference in written rules and actual following of the rules by the trust, McLain argues, shaped trust's response to the works by Abdul Baba and Dabholkar, strongly affecting the reception of these works among devotees of Sai Baba and in understanding who Sai Baba was and what he taught. In 1930, *Sai Satcharitra* was given a book form while Abdul Baba's diary, was on the other hand, respectfully wrapped in a silk cloth after his death in 1954 and preserved in the Archives of Shirdi by Sri Sai Sansthan Trust, Warren suggests that this diary was neglected by the trust because of its Islamic content.³²

But this however could not have been the reason for keeping the diary at the Archives safely and not making it available to the public and definitely this had not played its part in the hinduisation of the saint. Warren obtained a copy of Abdul's manuscript in January 1991. All the few of the pages as she herself mentions, same to be a little more than scribble and doodling. About 25 pages of the diary was written in *Modi* script. Finding a translator for such a script would have been difficult. She states that the manuscript pages were not good, clean originals and sometimes words and lines were just not decipherable and so are lost. The whole manuscript was similar to a student's notebook, with bits of scribble and half finished sentences inter first with pages of serious notations. The notebook consists of random thoughts and dictation written down. Consistency is missing in a substantial portion of the document.³³ The actual quality of the script in Urdu is poor for a major portion of the manuscript; the sentences are incomplete, verbs are often missing and meaning is unclear. There are also grammatical and spelling errors³⁴ while some points are prone to repetition(like the points- 11, 12, 17, 18, 19, 20 and 21- are same).

Judging from the condition of the notebook, Abdul's intention was just to take informal notations, mainly to preserve for his own personal use some of the mistake words of his teacher which he regarded as sacred.³⁵ His motive, unlike Dabholkar was not to spread his writings to the masses. Moreover, the diary did not have the consent of Sai Baba being the writer of his own life story, while the *Satcharitra* was written in a way which could be read by the masses with the approval of the saint, making it more legitimate. Also, the *Satcharitra* combines Incidents of both worldly and spiritual nature, accepted by the masses as most of devotees do not Try for spiritual upliftment only, many people concerned with the worldly miracles which Sai Baba used to perform relieving problems of the visitors, which makes the Dabholkar's work more appealing than Abdul Baba's diary.

Secondly, the population composition of Ahmednagar in the 19th and early 20th century also needs to be taken into account to examine the reason for 'hinduization' of the Fakir. If we look at the **census data of 1881**, when the village of Shirdi, Maharashtra was a part of the **Bombay Feudatory States**, the percentage of **Hindu** population was **79.62% in the region as a whole**, as Shirdi was still an insignificant remote area. While the percentage of

³² Op cit. Warren(2009); 142.

³³ Op cit. Warren(2009); 145.

³⁴ Op cit. Warren(2009); 145.

³⁵ Op cit. Warren(2009); 167.

Muslim population was **10.86%**. Here, we can trace a vast difference in the population composition of the two major religious communities of the region. Moving further, the reason that there was an increase in Muslim population in Bombay and Madras region was due to the influx of the Musalman traders from Kutch and other Gujarat states and partly due to the cultivators. In **1901 census**, the gap between the Hindu and Muslim population In the **Ahmednagar district** under which city was still a village(as there was no mention of Shirdi in the list of towns in the census report), was wide- **31,030** people were recorded as **Hindu's** and only **5,968** accounted for the **Muhammedans**. Now, this gap reduced to a large extent in the **1911 census**- **2,707** were Hindus while **1,328** were **Musalman** in the **Ahmednagar district**.

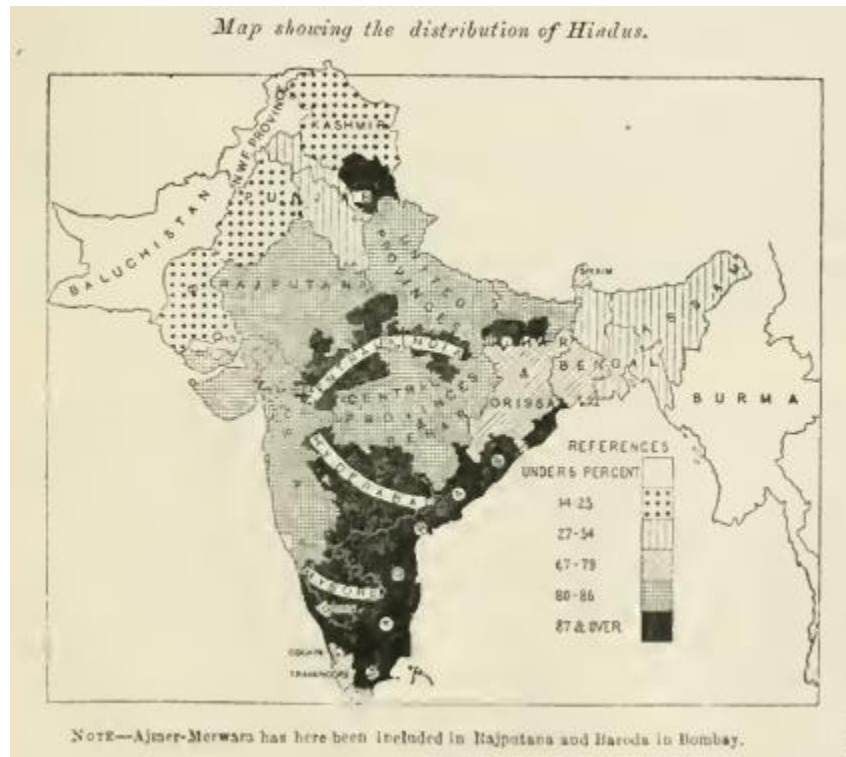


Fig4. Map 3: Map Showing Distribution Of Hindus(1911 census)

Note that the region where Shirdi lies and its surrounding areas have a very high Hindu population(80-86 percent in present-day Maharashtra region of Bombay and as high as 87 percent & over in surrounding southern India).

Both Hindu and Musalman population reduced during the past decades due to the continuous feminine and migrations of people to other parts of the country. This was also the period when Sai Baba's famous had spread far and wide in Bombay and nearby States. Lastly, again we find that the gap between the population of the two major religious communities was wide and in **Ahmednagar and Cantonment area** in the **1921 census**- **36,928(Hindus)** and **7,042(Muslim)**.

Thus, analyzing the above data mentioned in the majority of the cases we find the Muslim population to be very low as compared to the Hindus in Ahmednagar district of Bombay, with just one exception of the 1911 census data where this gap had reduced. It is commonly found that the community which has a larger population in a region dominates and their practices prevail over shadowing the practices or rituals of other communities. Thus, From the very beginning of Sai Baba's arrival in Shirdi The Hindu rituals had been a dominant factor except for the celebration of *Urs* (a Muslim festival) and *Ramnavami* (a Hindu festival) together.

When the Saint was alive, he promoted harmony among these communities which can be proved through the instance of the testimony of Abdhulliah Jan, a Muslim and Pathan from Tarbela near Peshawar:

“The late Baba saheb i.e. R.A. Tarkhad, Told me of an incident in his life. He was sleeping One Night At The Chavadi by the side of Baba. One Mir Jaman of Kandahar Was then with Baba as a recent visitor. Suddenly, one night, at about 3:00 a.m., he got up and told Baba that the Hindus were spoiling him and Mohammedan Faith, and asked Baba if he would permit him, i.e. Mir Jaman To take the sword and strike away at the throats of all the Hindus there and effect Baba's release. R. A. Tarkhad listened with fear and wondered if the wretch meant really to murder him in cold blood. Sai Baba, however, located Mir Jaman by saying that he(Baba) was ‘pagal’, i.e, mad And the Hindus worshipping him there, were mad that he was responsible for their worshipping him And not they for his mad state, and that it was his throat that should be cut by Mir Jaman, if he wanted to cut any throats and not theirs. Thereafter, Mir jaman kept quiet.”³⁶

However, after the Saints *Maha Samadhi* in 1918, Hindu dominance over the Shrine and the temples in Shirdi increased, substantially.

SHIRDI SAI BABA: PROPONENTS AND OPPONENTS

In recent times, there has been a growth of a rage among Shirdi Sai Baba’s devotees for either owning him or completely disowning him. For them identifying with their own religious community has taken a toll on their identification with the saint. They then try to either transform the saint’s composite character into follower of a particular Pantheon or rejecting him completely with the idea that he belongs to the rival community, thus, could never be a part of their own community.

Recent court case in Vadodara summoned Dwarka Shankaracharya Swami Swaroopanand Saraswati on August 26, 2014, In response to the complaint accusing the pontiff of insulting Sai Baba of Shirdi. Advocate Nalin Patel, president of the Baroda Bar Association, had filed a complaint against the seer for allegedly passing derogatory remarks against Sai Baba. Shankaracharya, reportedly a Congress supporter, recently stoked controversy after he described Sai Baba as a Muslim ascetic and he found no mention in the shastras and the Vedas. He said the Muslims did not revere the mystic as much as the Hindus did. Protests broke out over his remarks in Varanasi.³⁷ Shankaracharya's followers alleged that Sai Baba had no place in Hindu temples. A bench of Justices, T.S. Thakur, A.K. Goel and R. Bhanumathi dismissed the PIL, filed by Mumbai-based Sai Dham Charitable Trust. Justice Thakur told the Council for the petitioner, “if anyone takes law into his hands there are remedies in law and you can approach the Civil Court for taking action against that person.” The council submitted that following the Shankaracharya’s statement Sai Baba idols were removed in four temples. He said the followers of Shankaracharya were inciting violence and wanted the Court to restrain the Centre and Maharashtra government to ensure that the idols of Sri Sai Baba were not interfered with, obstructed or hindered from worshipping. ... After the observations of the bench, the petitioner withdrew his PIL.³⁸

These allegations have left a trace on the minds of the ‘*Sanatani Hindu*’ like Pandit Dharendra Krishna Shastri, *Mahant of Bageshwar Dham*, Who said that Sai Baba can be called a saint or Fakir, he cannot be called a Bhagwan. He had also said that no vulture can pretend to be a lion. **“... Shankaracharya ji of our Dharma has not given**

³⁶ B.V. Narsimhaswami; *Devotees Experiences of Sai Baba*; Part I,II And III; (Compiled- H.H. Narsimhaswami); All India Sai Samaj; 1989; 85.

³⁷ The Hindu, July 23, 2014; updated- November 16, 2021(Ahmedabad).

³⁸ The Hindu, October 13, 2014; updated- November 16, 2021(New Delhi).

Sai Baba the place of a deity. Shankaracharya is the Prime Minister of Hindu dharma. Therefore, obeying him is the duty of every sanatani...”³⁹

THE ‘SHIRDI SAI ASPECT’: ROLE OF THE SAINT IN HIS PROPAGATION

These factors have undoubtedly been very important in spreading the name of Sai Baba Shirdi to a huge extent. However, one must not miss out the role of dreams and visions of the Saint of Shirdi himself, who is believed to use ‘dreams’ as a means of communication with the people. These dreams contain warnings, solutions, curing from diseases, assurances and also calling him/her to Shirdi, either to meet the person or for eradicating his/her suffering and ailments. There are many such instances when he was in his bodily form and after his death, found in the testimonies of the visitors:

Chinna Kistna Raja Saheb Bahadur, Saraswath, age about 50, in the interior of India said: “ As I was in the lying posture on my bed, I felt a change. I was perceiving that the body lay separate and I was disengaged from it- Disconnected or unconnected. I was different from the body; and in front of me to a figure of Vishnu Narayana. This ended; and about an hour later, a second incident followed. Again my body lay there on the bed. I was outside it. Shri Vishnu Narayan was standing before me and by his side to another figure. Shri Vishnu addressed me and pointing to the other figure said “ This Sai Baba of Shirdi, is you man; you must resort to him.”

“The third incident or vision followed soon after- after about the same interval perhaps. I felt I was moving in some strange way. It was like levitation in the air. I came or was carried thus to a village. I found someone there and asked him what village that was. He said it was Shirdi, I asked him, “ is there any person named Sai Baba here?” “Yes” He answered, “ come and see”. I was taken to the mosque. There I saw Sai Baba. He was heated with legs outstretched. I went and reverently placed my head on his feet. He got up and said “Do you take my Darshan? I am your debtor, I must take your Darshan”, and he placed his head on my feet. Then we parted.”⁴⁰

This was an instance where the deity who was worshiped by the interviewee at his house directed him to Sai Baba.

Santaram Balwant Nachne, Dahanukar said: “ In 1922,... my parents were arranging for my second marriage. A choice had to be made between a girl that would bring some wealth or pecuniary contribution with her and a poor girl. The proposal of the first girl that would bring in Rs. 600 was being considered by my father. I did not favour it. Baba cae in my mother’s dream and said to her “Do not accept this girl in marriage for your son.” In the same dream my mother saw another girl. A little later the uncle and guardian of a poor girl offered her hand in marriage to me. I referred him to my mother. She saw the girl and found it was the very girl she had seen in the above- mentioned dream.”⁴¹

Here, the dream was believed to have been used by Sai Baba as a medium to guide the family towards the right life partner for their son. Notice that the year is 1922- four years after the saint had left his body.

³⁹ Organiser(*Voice of the Nation*); April 3,2023.

⁴⁰ Op cit. B.V. Narsimhaswami; (1989); 2.

⁴¹ Op cit. Narsimhaswami; (1989); 54.

Joseph Fouzdar, Retired Fouzdar, Christian, age-46, Turner Road Bandra said: “Once I had a very difficult criminal case to detect. I prayed for help. Sai Baba came to me in a dream and gave me directions on how I was to proceed. I acted on that and was successful in my detection.”⁴²

This is the direction given to the seeker by Sai Baba in his field of work, when he asked for it. Now, a case of sending an ailing patient to Shirdi to cure his illness is what we see in the following instance:

Appa Sutar, location- Shirdi, said: “In 1929, when I was an in-patient(as he had boils on his leg, weeping eczema) in Nasik Hospital, for 8 days, one night Baba came to me in my sleep. He said: ‘ Go to Shirdi to read Puran’. But I replied that on account of my suffering from eczema, I had come to Nasik. Baba replied: ‘Go on reading my puran and apply Udhi you will be cured’. I then returned to Shirdi. ... I undertook to do it (i.e.) to read Jnaneswari Eknath Bhagwata, Adhyatma Ramayan and Sai Satcharitra by A.D. Thenceforward, I read these before Sai Baba daily and applied his udhi(sacred ash from the fire at Dwarakamai). In seven days’ time, I was completely cured of my eczema.”⁴³

Following is the case of appearance of Sai Baba in the year 1995 long after he left his body. This proves the point of he being active and communicating with his devotees beyond his region of influence- Shirdi, extending it to London and other countries as well.

Sanjay M. Padiya, location-Kolkata, narrated an incident Which he had heard at the house of devotee- late Ramesh Mehta, who used to offer Aarti every Thursday at his home and the interviewee used to go there as well as that time. After which they use to always discuss Sai Baba’s playfulness and miracles. There was a gentleman called TC Agarwal who went to Shirdi in 1995. Therefore, he narrated an incident at the gathering- at a tea stall which use to stand in front of the Chavadi, Shirdi, he saw a lady Standing and weeping tea. So he went to her and asked the reason, to which she replied that she was a non-resident of India and lived in London.Her husband was recommended to go through a second bypass surgery. A British doctor from London had certified that if her husband goes through such bypass then the chances of Survival would be only 10%. The lady was adamant about making her husband go through the second bypass regardless of the circumstances and had to give the declaration Bond duly signed. So, while the operation took place for 3-4 hours, the lady was facing up and down the lobby in anticipation and called Sai Baba's name continuously. As soon as the surgery got over, the doctor came out and the lady ran towards the operation theater to know the outcome.Why she was running, Baba's locket which she was wearing around her neck pounced out of her attire. The British doctor was astonished and asked “who is this old man?” The lady kept asking repeatedly about the condition of her husband. The doctor was also admin and kept asking about the picture in the locket. The lady was forced to tell the doctor that it was Sai Baba, their spiritual master. She further mentioned that he had also taken ‘Samadhi’. The doctor asked questionably, “ what is that?” To which the lady replied “ it means leaving the body”. The doctor said in extreme shock that, then how was that old man present in the operation theater for the last 3-4 hours? He further said that he was shocked as to how he entered the OT and that he was guiding the doctors on what to do and what not to do. After the operation was over, he disappeared. When the hospital bill was about to be settled the doctors refused to take the bill saying that they had seen a pure soul. Other fees(beds, medicine) were separate and for a different Department. The surgeon asked to donate the operation fees to the devotees in Shirdi, from his side.⁴⁴

⁴² Op cit. Narsimhaswami; (1989); 88.

⁴³ Op cit. Narsimhaswami; (1989);272-73.

⁴⁴ https://youtu.be/TzZmF_b8t4M.

Thus, we find that as Sai Baba had declared that even after his death he would still be present, albeit in subtle form to help his devotees, and indeed there does exist a large and growing volume of testimonial literature authored by latter-day devotees, attesting to the truth of his statement.⁴⁵ This practice further shows his relation to the Datta tradition where the saints give visions to their worshippers in times of need as well as to Islam where the ‘*pirs*’ are said to appear in dreams to circulate their messages among the people of the community. In some instances, it is also found that Sai Baba accepted himself to be Datta/Dattatreya- in one of the dreams to his devotee.⁴⁶ Therefore, it would not be wrong to claim that Sai Baba carried the Datta tradition forward through his visions and appearances after his *Samadhi*. We find such instances widespread in the region of Maharashtra in case of other Maharashtrian saints of his times who were also regarded as being Datta incarnations- Swami Samarth and Gajanan Maharaj.

In the case of similarities in the saints in Maharashtra at the time of Shirdi Sai Baba – the short biographies of Gajanan Maharaj(of Shegaon), Swami Samarth(of Akkalkot), among other saints have given the idea that many aspects were common among these saints and Saibaba, some of them to be highlighted as :-

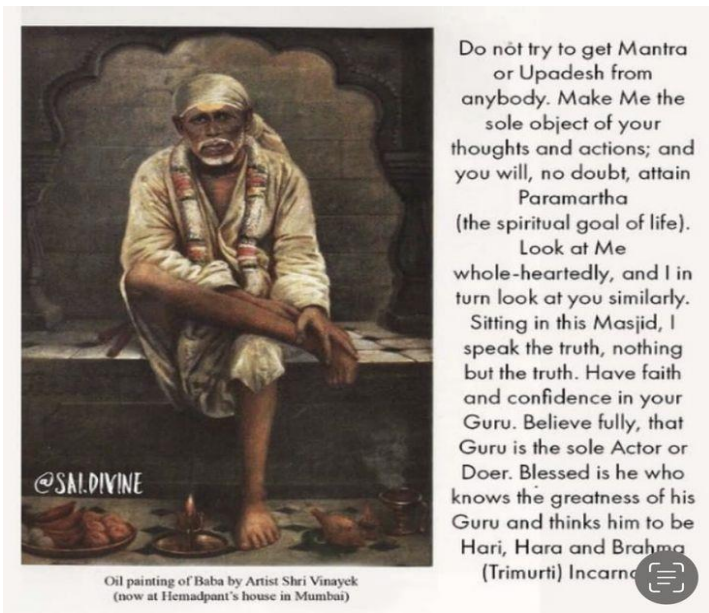
1. Their origin and parentage remain obscure nor the saints support their disciples search for their pasts. **“Nobody knew the Parents, date of birth or place of birth of Saibaba. Many inquiries were made regarding these matters, but no satisfactory answers have yet been obtained.”** He first manifested himself as a 16 year old boy under a Margosa(*Neem*) tree in Shirdi for the sake of his devotees. An old woman in Shirdi described him thus, **“A young lad, smart and very handsome, he was first seen under the *Neem* tree, seated on an ‘*Asan*’(mat).⁴⁷**
2. Same as our central figure of research, these saints appear in dreams of devotees as means of communication with them, guiding them, and giving them assurances and warning them of negative happenings they face in future.
3. These saints as Sai baba have developed as a mother figure for their devotees who refer to them with terms like ‘*Maa*’, ‘*Mauli*’ and utter words of assurances like ‘Do not fear, I am right behind you ... ‘if you look to to me, I look to you’, which stresses on their role as a protective mother for their children(devotees).
4. There is also a practice among the devotees of these saints to read the biography of the saint as a ritual which they call as *Parayan* and revere these biographies same as the holy scriptures.
5. They are said to give ‘Direct *Darshan*’ in human form to their devotees even after they have left their mortal coils. However in both cases that is when they were alive and after their *Samadhi* their behavior was quite unpredictable and could not be explained, even their utterances have meanings which the listeners could not and cannot comprehend.
6. What is interesting to note is while they were in bodily form, they showed connections among them with Sai Baba calling Gajanan Maharaj as his brother and so did Gajanan Maharaj.

While both these figures are said to have been linked with Swami Samarth in some way, the most prevalent view in this matter was that Sai baba and Gajanan Maharaj were disciples of Swami Samarth before they arrived at their respective abodes.

⁴⁵ Op cit. Warren(2009);13.

⁴⁶ Op cit.Narsimhaswami; (1989);100.

⁴⁷ Op cit. Dabholkar(1929); Gunaji(2016), 20.



Do not try to get Mantra or Upadesh from anybody. Make Me the sole object of your thoughts and actions; and you will, no doubt, attain Paramartha (the spiritual goal of life).
 Look at Me whole-heartedly, and I in turn look at you similarly. Sitting in this Masjid, I speak the truth, nothing but the truth. Have faith and confidence in your Guru. Believe fully, that Guru is the sole Actor or Doer. Blessed is he who knows the greatness of his Guru and thinks him to be Hari, Hara and Brahma (Trimurti) Incarnate.


Fig5. Circulation Of Sai Baba’s Daily Messages

ELECTRONIC MEDIUMS OF SHIRDI SAI PROPAGATION

Apart from the above mentioned medium, there are also electronic and web mediums which have kept the image of ‘the saint who speaks from his tomb’ alive. Here, we need to mention the websites like ‘Ask Sai Baba’ which is deemed to give solutions to the problems of the answer seeker, which it mentions specifically to have been given by the saint directly from his tomb. The messages which one can find circulating early in the morning on platforms like YouTube called the ‘Sai Sandesh’, by people running their channel, again an important medium of spreading Sai Baba’s message for the day. Now, if one of the messages coincides with the listener's situation then his/ her belief in these messages coming directly from the saint, gains strength. Lastly, the 11 Sayings of Sai Baba composed by Pandit Mohini Raj originally in Marathi, taking up words uttered by the saint from various sources like the *Sai Satcharitra* and the devotee’s experiences collected by B.V. Narsimha Swami in 1936 and translated into various languages- English Hindi Bengali etc. so that it can reach a wider public.

Faith
Perseverance

Your Shirdi SaiBaba



Trust in Me and your prayer shall be answered

Type your Number here

No. bet'n 1-720

Ask Saibaba

Translate if necessary

Select Language

Shirdi SaiBaba Answers...

Think of your problem...
 Ask Baba a No. bet'n 1 - 720...
 a Number comes to your mind...

How it Works..

Assume you are sitting in front of Sri SaiBaba & Baba is smiling at you

- Think of your Problem to be solved & Seek Baba's Help.
- Ask him to suggest you any one Number between 1 to 720 as Answer
- A Number will come up in your Mind
- Type that Number in the Answer box above and Press "Ask Baba" button
- That Number = Shirdi Sai Baba's Answer..
- The Number should be between 1 to 720 only...
- The Answer comes up in the next page... where Shirdi Baba gives Crisp & Clear answer.

Yes.. it works like a Miracle

Fig6. ‘Ask Sai Baba’- Image Of The Website

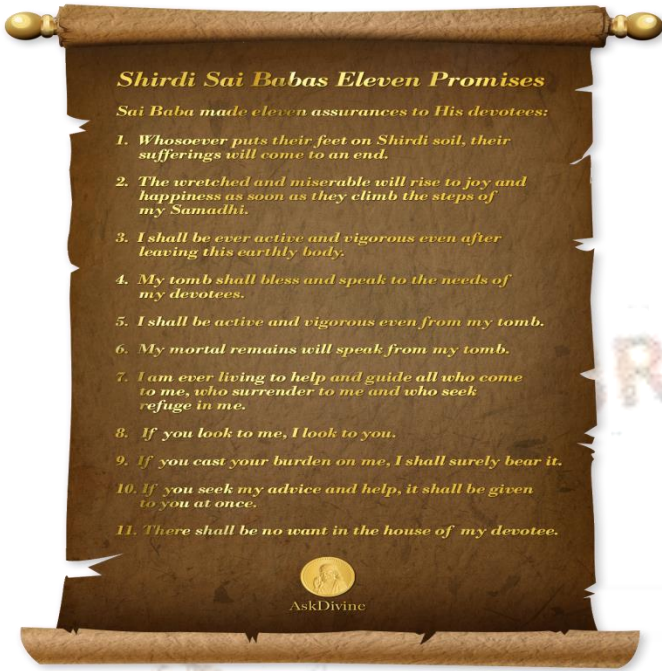


Fig7. The 11 Promises Of Shirdi Sai Baba

These 11 sayings attributed to Shirdi Sai Baba proclaim the power of his Afterlife presence, asserting that he remains active and vigorous from his Tomb in Shirdi. The language is inclusive, as McInain suggests, claiming that Sai Baba remains available to “ whoever puts their feet on the soil of Shirdi” and to “ all who come or look at him”. This historical figure is presented to be ever welcoming for his devotees for whom the doors of the *Dwarkamai* are always open in order to seek comfort in him. This image gives him the term- ‘ a living god’ and The wide circulation of the experiences of his followers through various media platforms attract a layman when he/she would be going through much suffering.

There has been a technological shift from printed books and photographs to websites, in making the saint available to the person who is unable to visit Shirdi to seek solutions from the saint at his grave instead communicating with the saint sitting at home. Though these mediums have become quite popular among the devotees, the visions and appearances of the saint in times of need is still prevalent and coexist with the electronic mediums.

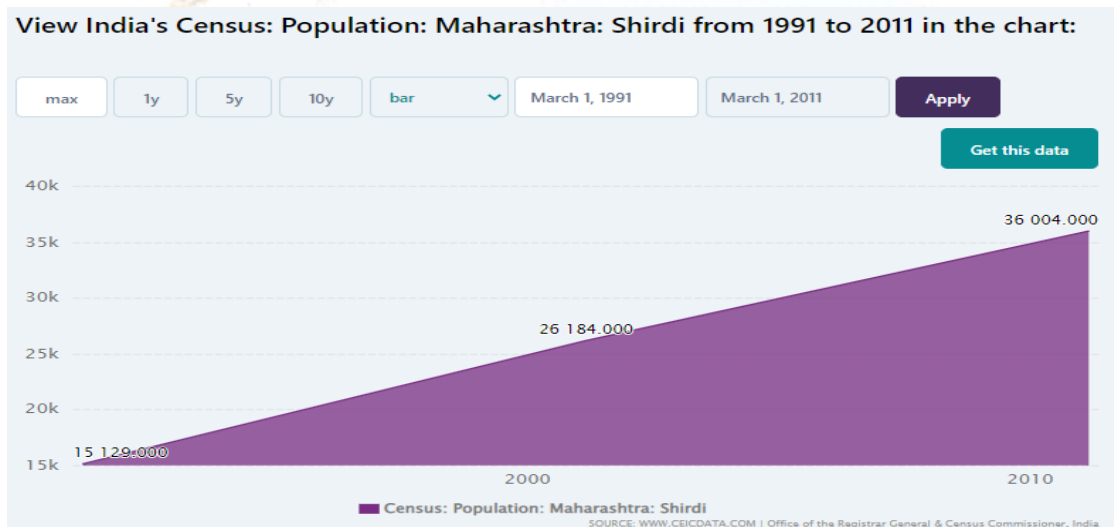


Fig8. Graph 1: Population Growth in Shirdi, Maharashtra(1991-2011); Census Data

Till 1991 decennial census, **Shirdi** had taken its due place for its population to be recorded in the official Census, which till the mid-20th century lay in the corner of the Ahmednagar district of Maharashtra. In the graph, we see a steep increase in its **population(15,129 in 1991 to 36,004 in 2011 censuses respectively)**. We see many of the pilgrims settle there permanently to experience the Shirdi saint's presence more closely.

Conclusion:

Any investigation into the life and teachings of Shirdi Sai Baba is complicated by the fact that Sai Baba wrote none of his teachings down and thus they only have been preserved in hagiographies composed by his devotees and other researchers. Non is there any strong evidence of the saint's origin, parentage and early life. Therefore, any figure like him is bound to be exposed to controversies and questions. In the middle of the 19th century, Shirdi was a typical remote village and at the folk level people relied on memory and information was transmitted orally.⁴⁸ It was only with the arrival in the early decades of 20th century, of an educated, mostly Brahmin Elite and professional people from Bombay, that day to day occurrences, teachings and miracles in the life of Sai Baba began to be systematically recorded. Warren suggests that there were a variety of factors for the transformation of Shirdi-

- 1) Experience of enumerable devotees that prayer to Sai Baba yields tangible worldly results- healing of diseases, employment, money and progeny for childless couple etc.
- 2) Proliferation of books, journals, films, videos and bhajan- audio cassettes, which was commenced by Narsimhaswami from the 1930s and carried forward by the Saibaba Sansthan Trust, Shirdi.
- 3) Warren stresses the role of Satya Sai Baba of Puttaparthi, Andhra Pradesh born in a lower middle class present family in 1926, who declared himself as the reincarnation of Shirdi Sai Baba many times first between 1940- 58- "I Belong to *Apastamba Sutra*(Literally, aphorism, a reference to the texts called the *Brahma sutras*); I am of the *Bhardwaja Gothra*(lineage); I am Sai Baba".⁴⁹ There were three interrelated aspects to his public role: first, the construction of his life path, second the production of a number of oral discourses in various parts of India and outside and written works like- *Sanathana Sarathi*, *Geetha Vahini*, *Bhagvata Vahini*; and third, the posthumous recasting of the memory of Shirdi Sai Baba. At the First World Conference of Satya Sai Seva Organizations in Bombay called *Dharmakshetra*, ' the field of righteousness', Baba announced that he was the avatar of Sai and he had come to establish *Dharma*. In June the same year he left for a tour of East Africa, his first and only foreign visit so far.⁵⁰

We find that in the contemporary period, there has been what we call ' hinduization' of the saint by some of the agencies dominant in the region, thus alienating other communities to consider him under the sphere of worship. We thus traced the historical factors which might have led to making the saint's character 'community centric' rather than a composite figure, who he is actually described as being In his hagiographies, when he was present in the bodily form. There has been a certain alteration of his image after him taking the *Maha Samadhi* in a sense that now he is seen as a ' liberal figure' who can be accepted in whatever way people want him- whether in the form of a *Guru* or in the form of their favorite deities. Hindus generally make him wear a saffron or red garment while for Muslims he wears a green coloured garment. This is what has Sai Baba been written up to- from a simple *Fakir* of Shirdi to an ' all inclusive loving mother or even an incarnation, who came for the people to end the sufferings and with the promise of never abandoning his devotees/ children, guiding them through dreams and in some cases approaching them directly in human form in their times of need, especially after his '*Maha Samadhi*'.

⁴⁸ Opp cit. Warren(2009); 14.

⁴⁹ Kasturi;Vol 1,1968;43; Srinivas(1999).

⁵⁰ Op cit. Srinivas(1999).

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