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“My Bones Shall Speak from beyond the Tomb:”  
The Life and Legacy of Shirdi Sai Baba in History and Hagiography

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M.A., University of Virginia, 2007

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An abstract of

A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies

of Emory University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

in the Graduate Division of Religion

West and South Asian Religions.

2016

## Abstract

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This dissertation builds the historiography of the hagiographic tradition attached to Shirdi Sai Baba (d. 1918) – a miracle-working, “neither Hindu nor Muslim” saint who lived in the village of Shirdi in what is today the state of Maharashtra, western India. In doing so, I chart the evolution of Sai Baba’s life story over a century’s worth of hagiographic works in Marathi, English and Hindi. Each chapter features close, critical analyses of various hagiographic sources, including G.R. Dabholkar’s voluminous Marathi hagiography *Srī Sāī Satcarita* (1929) alongside understudied texts such as Das Ganu Maharaj’s *Santakathāmṛt* (1903) and B.V. Narasimhaswami’s *Life of Sai Baba* (1955), as well as Hindi hagiographic films, or hagiopics, such as Ashok Bhushan’s *Shirdi ke Sai Baba* (1977) and Deepak Balraj Vij’s *Sri Sai Baba* (2001). I argue that an intensively historiographic approach to the Shirdi Sai Baba hagiographic tradition demonstrates how the memory of a saint is fluid, contextual, and occasionally contested.

By building the historiography of the Shirdi Sai Baba hagiographic tradition, this work is a theoretical intervention in the study of Sai Baba hagiography, one that eschews the quest for the “real” Sai Baba in lieu of highlighting the multiple Sai Babas that have been imagined and constructed in text, film, and online. Concurrently, this dissertation examines how sainthood can function as an adaptive response to modernity, capturing the hagiographical transformations of Shirdi Sai Baba’s life and legacy as the saint has been (re)shaped for new audiences and agendas across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

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## Acknowledgements

Outlining, proposing, researching, writing, and rewriting this dissertation has been a long process. My first debt of gratitude is to the four members of my dissertation committee. From the beginning, I have invoked the steady hand and sharp sight (and wit) of my advisor Paul Courtright on seminar papers, conference presentations, and each chapter of this dissertation. Whether over email, by phone, or in person, Paul never failed to leave me with new and fruitful directions for my research – and he also provided reassurance when the road got rocky. Vincent Cornell encouraged me to situate my work in different professional contexts: religious studies, sainthood studies, and the study of Sai Baba. His thorough readings of my drafts also helped me to think more broadly and intensively about history, hagiography, and sainthood in and beyond South Asia. Arun Jones and Christian Novetzke generously offered their time to provide feedback on specific chapters, as well as this project's main ideas. I have benefited from their areas of scholarly expertise, especially when it raised critical social and political considerations in the study of a saint who lived in colonial India.

My second debt of gratitude is to the Emory faculty and colleagues who have challenged me intellectually, encouraged me personally, and inspired me professionally during my graduate career. In addition to Paul, Vincent, and Arun, I am grateful for conversations over the years with Joyce Flueckiger, Velchuru Narayana Rao, Tara Doyle, Laurie Patton, Marko Geslani, Scott Kugle, and Elliott McCarter. I am also thankful for the camaraderie among graduate students in the Graduate Division of Religion's West and South Asian Religions course of studies – with particular thanks to Anandi Salinas, a

colleague and friend who commented on more of my drivel and drafts than can be paid back through coffee and samosas at Dr. Bombay's.

My third debt of gratitude is as large as the subcontinent. My proficiency in Marathi stems from the patient pedagogy of Sujata Mahajan and Shantanu Kher with the American Institute of India Studies Marathi Language Program. The AIIS also funded my research on Shirdi Sai Baba from January to October 2013 and secured my researcher's affiliation with the University of Pune's Department of Anthropology. I must also mention the Head of the Department Anjali Kurane and my research advisor John Gaikwad, both for their hospitality and their invitation for me to present my work to the university's faculty and students. The staff of the Deccan College Library and the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute in Pune, the Shri Sai Baba Sansthan and Trust in Shirdi, and the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library in Delhi kindly and professionally helped me find books, articles, and other works when difficulties arose. In my travels in India, I have met some of the smartest individuals in the next generation of scholars of South Asia. Among many others, James Madaio is the colleague and friend to whom I most often turned when I needed another pair of eyes on my writing, or when I needed help fleshing out my ideas. His debt will be repaid either through Tuborgs at Fernandes on Palolem Beach or Americanos at our friend Ravi's Café 1730 in Koregaon Park.

I am inexpressibly appreciative of the support and understanding that my parents have maintained throughout my graduate career, including the many times it has taken me far from home. Without their steady foundation, this project would have collapsed. I owe everything to them and their embodiment of selfless love.

This “final” draft – which, actually, is far from being the last, final, definite engagement with the study of Sai Baba and hagiography – emerged through my realization that the perfect is the enemy of the good. I assume all responsibility for any errors that may remain in this work.



## Note on Translation, Transliteration, and Abbreviation

### *Translation*

Unless otherwise indicated, all translations of Marathi and Hindi are my own.

### *Transliteration*

When Marathi and Hindi words, phrases, and sentences appear in this dissertation, I use italics and follow the conventional rules of transliteration. Exceptions include place names (e.g., Shirdi, Delhi, Maharashtra) and proper nouns that should be familiar to English-reading audiences of scholarship on South Asia (e.g., Sai Baba, Brahmin, guru). With regard to words common to Marathi and Hindi, I transliterate according to the Marathi spelling and transliteration, for example, with *bhakta* and *samādhī* instead of *bhakt* and *samādhi*.

For Marathi words with a final *anusvār*, I use *m̄*. This is very common throughout older Marathi works like G.R. Dabholkar's *Śrī Sāī Satcarita*, but it is virtually absent in contemporary literature.

For the names of Sai Baba devotees, I rely on the standard rendering of people's names in Sai Baba hagiographic works rather than the conventions of scholarly transliteration. For example, I retain the spelling of surnames like "Dixit" and "Mooley" rather than "Dikshit/Dikṣit" and "Mule/Muḷe," respectively.

### *Abbreviation*

After the first citation of a Marathi hagiographic text, I abbreviate its title in footnotes. For reference before reading, I have listed the texts and their abbreviations below:

<i>Bhaktalīlāmṛt</i>	<i>BLA</i>
<i>Bhaktisārāmṛt</i>	<i>BSA</i>
<i>Santakathāmṛt</i>	<i>SKA</i>
<i>Śrī Sāī Satcarita</i>	<i>ŚSSC</i>
<i>Śrī Sāīnāth Stavanamañjarī</i>	<i>ŚSSM</i>

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## Introduction

### **The Sai Baba of Shirdi**

The subject of this dissertation is Shirdi Sai Baba (d. 1918), a “saint”<sup>1</sup> who lived during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in the small village of Shirdi in what is today the state of Maharashtra, western India. The name “Sai Baba” is indicative of his saintliness (the title, *sāī*) and fatherly sense of love and care for others (the informal term of address, *bābā*).<sup>2</sup> In the century following his death – or rather, his full and final absorption into God (*mahāsamādhī*), as devotees would say – Sai Baba has emerged as one of the most popular religious figures in India and the Indian diaspora. One way to measure his popularity is by the numbers. Some seven thousand people reportedly came to Shirdi when Sai Baba died in 1918.<sup>3</sup> About one hundred years later, it is estimated that between twenty-five and thirty thousand people visit Shirdi on any given weekday, and this number surges beyond one hundred thousand on weekends and major festivals like Ram Navami, Guru Purnima, and Dusserah, the latter of which celebrates the saint’s

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<sup>1</sup> I refer to Sai Baba as a “saint” throughout this dissertation. Hagiographers writing in English frequently use this term to describe Sai Baba (e.g., Kamath and Kher’s *Sai Baba of Shirdi: A Unique Saint*), while others writing in Indian languages interchangeably use *guru*, *sadguru*, *avatār*, and *santa*, among others. According to speech attributed to Sai Baba in early hagiographic sources, he thought of himself as a fakīr, or a Muslim mendicant.

<sup>2</sup> *Bābā* is common to many Indian languages, and Arabic and Persian, as a term for a father/father figure. Various personalities in South Asia – Hindus, Muslims, and others – have been known as *bābās* (e.g., Baba Farid, Baba Ramdev, Meher Baba). On one hand, Western scholars (e.g., Kevin Shepherd, Antonio Rigopoulos, Marianne Warren) argue that *sāī* comes from *sā’ih*, an Arabic and Persian term for a “wanderer,” who was often a Muslim ascetic. On the other hand, some hagiographic/devotional authors (e.g., B.K. Chaturvedi, S.P. Ruhela, Bela Sharma) explain *sāī* as related to the Sanskrit *svāmin*, or gloss it as a contraction of “*sākṣāt īśvar*,” i.e., God made manifest. See Kevin Shepherd, *Gurus Rediscovered: Biographies of Sai Baba of Shirdi and Upasni Maharaj of Sakori* (Cambridge: Anthropographia Publications, 1986), 26; Antonio Rigopoulos, *The Life and Teachings of Sai Baba of Shirdi* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 3; Marianne Warren, *Unraveling the Enigma: Shirdi in the Light of Sufism* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 2004 [1999]), 35-36; B.K. Chaturvedi and S.P. Ruhela, *Sai Baba of Shirdi* (New Delhi: Diamond Pocket Books, 2000), 38; Bela Sharma, *Sāī Bābā: Ek avatār* (Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 2012), 1.

<sup>3</sup> For a report from a devotee in Shirdi when Sai Baba died, see Rigopoulos, *The Life and Teachings*, 242.

*mahāsamādhi* anniversary.<sup>4</sup> Another marker of Sai Baba’s popularization – in addition to the proliferation of texts and films lionizing the saint’s egalitarian approach to religion and the efficacy of praying to him when in times of trouble – is the tremendous wealth that flows into the saint’s tomb in Shirdi. An estimate published in the *Times of India* in 2009 holds Shirdi as one of the wealthiest temples in India with an approximate annual intake of Rs. 210 crores (USD 35 million).<sup>5</sup>

Who is this saint who has pulled in so many people (and so much money) over the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries? Although the Sai Baba who lived, died, and was buried in Shirdi wrote nothing himself, several hagiographers emerged in the early devotional community and wrote accounts of his enigmatic life, teachings, and miraculous deeds. These hagiographic texts, including G.R. Dabholkar’s voluminous *Śrī Sāī Satcarita*, the central scripture of the Sai Baba phenomenon, tell us that when the saint first arrived to the village as a teenaged youth in the late 1850s, no one knew where he came from, who his parents were, or what caste and religion he belonged to.<sup>6</sup> These texts also tell us that he lived in the village’s dilapidated mosque where he kept a sacred fire (*dhunī*) into which he made sacrificial offerings.<sup>7</sup> His daily routine consisted of

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<sup>4</sup> V. Chavan and M. Sonawane, “Sāīkr̥pecā gaḍad chāyā,” in *Devacyā Nāvāne*, ed. Suhas Kulkarni (Mumbai: Unique Features, 2012), 27-28. Chavan and Sonawane estimate that 25,000 devotees visit Shirdi daily and that between 100,000 and 200,000 attend major festivals, which totals between seven and nine million people annually. See also Kiran A. Shinde and Andrea Marion Pinkney, “Shirdi in Transition: Guru Devotion, Urbanisation and Regional Pluralism in India,” *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 36:4 (2013): 563.

<sup>5</sup> “Money-spinning Mandirs,” *Times of India*, October 10, 2009, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/business/india-business/Money-spinning-mandirs/articleshow/5108844.cms>, accessed December 26, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> G.R. Dabholkar, *Śrī Sāī Satcarita* (hereafter: *ŚSSC*), 27<sup>th</sup> ed. (Shirdi: Shri Sai Baba Sansthan and Trust, 2008), 4:113 and 5:24. The latter verse reads: “This Sai is indestructible and very ancient. Neither Hindu nor Muslim (*nāhīm hindū nā yavana*), without caste, descent, family, and lineage, know that his real form is self-realization.” The term *yavana* commonly appears in premodern religious texts to indicate foreign peoples who came into South Asia from the west. In most cases, *yavanas* are Muslims. In this work, all translations of Marathi and Hindi in this dissertation are my own unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>7</sup> Dabholkar, *ŚSSC*, 7:14-15.

sitting in meditation in front of the fire, wandering through the village and begging for alms, and meeting people – Hindus, Muslims, and others – in the mosque. He referenced Hindu metaphysical concepts like *brahmajñāna* and *māyā* in his teachings, while the name of God that was always on his lips was “Allah.”<sup>8</sup> He either read or had someone else read the opening chapter (*al-fātihā*) of the *Qur’ān* regularly, and one well-known story recalls how he demonstrated his knowledge of Sanskrit grammar by explaining a verse of the *Bhagavad Gita* to a Hindu devotee.<sup>9</sup> Although he wore the garb of a Muslim (i.e., a long white robe and headscarf typical of a peripatetic Muslim mendicant, or *faqīr* [English: fakir], in the Deccan region), he had pierced ears and was circumcised, a combination of Hindu and Muslim physical features that led to the conclusion – according to Dabholkar’s *Satcarita* – that the saint was “neither Hindu nor Muslim” (*nā hindū nā yavana*).<sup>10</sup> This model of religious synthesis, which combines Hindu and Islamic vocabulary and practices, has become one of Sai Baba’s trademark characteristics, one that distinguishes him from the many other *santas* and *sādhus*, *pīrs* and *fakīrs*, and other saintly personages who appeared in colonial (and continue to appear in postcolonial) India. Today, the dictum that is closely associated with Shirdi Sai Baba

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<sup>8</sup> See Chapter 57 of Das Ganu’s *Santakathāmṛt* (1903) for one of the few instances in hagiography where Sai Baba speaks at length on Hindu metaphysical subjects. This text is the focus of Chapter 2. See Dabholkar, *ŚSSC*, 4:50, 4:82, 7:30, 10:31, and 23:8 for Sai Baba’s habit of saying “Allah” and “Allah *mālik*.”

<sup>9</sup> In the *Śrī Sāināth Stavanamañjarī*, Das Ganu Maharaj states that it seems fitting to think of Sai Baba as a Muslim/*yavana* because he reads the *fātihā* (the first *surā* of the *Qur’ān*), viz. *fātyācyā tarhā pāhūn / yavana mhaṇaṇe bhāg tumhām*. See G.D. Sahasrabuddhe (alias Das Ganu Maharaj), *Śrī Sāināth Stavanamañjarī* (hereafter *ŚSSM*), 31st ed. (Shirdi: Shri Sai Baba Sansthan and Trust, 2012 [1918]), 67. One of Sai Baba’s closest devotees, a Muslim man named Abdul, reports that he (i.e., Abdul) read the *Qur’ān* alongside Sai Baba in the mosque and that the saint “occasionally quoted passages from the Koran.” See B.V. Narasimhaswami, *Devotees’ Experiences of Sri Sai Baba: Parts I, II, and III*, 2<sup>nd</sup> composite edition (Madras: All India Sai Samaj, 2008 [1940]), 152. For Sai Baba’s interpretation of *Bhagavad Gītā* 4:34, see *Satcarita* Chapter 39 and verses 54-56 in particular.

<sup>10</sup> Dabholkar, *ŚSSC*, 7:13.



and accompanies his image on calendars in shops and stickers on taxi windshields proclaims that “the Lord of all is one” (*sab kā mālik ek*).<sup>11</sup>

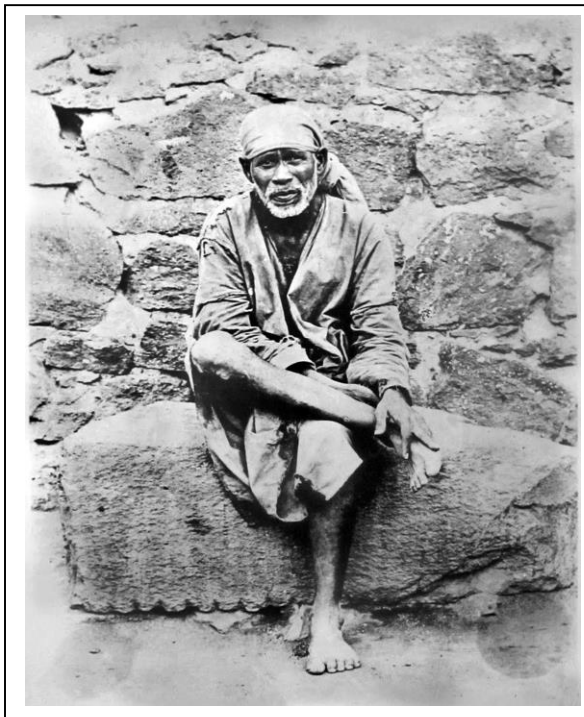


Fig. 0.1 Shirdi Sai Baba (d. 1918) in his cross-legged posture that appears frequently in his iconography. Source: Wikipedia Commons.



Fig. 0.2 A sticker depicting Sai Baba as a Hindu saint in front of a Hindu temple with saffron colored dress, *damaru* drum and bells, and “Om Sai Ram” invocation written above. Source: Author’s collection.

<sup>11</sup> One point that has not been made in existing scholarship on Shirdi Sai Baba is that the saint’s trademark dictum – “The Lord of all is one” (*sab kā mālik ek*) – does not appear in the earliest hagiographic accounts in Marathi in the early twentieth century. Similar language is found in early twentieth-century sources like, for example, Das Ganu’s *Bhaktisārāmṛt* 52:67 where Sai Baba is talking with a devotee: “And Baba said, ‘The creator of both groups [lit. *jātīs*, which refers to Hindus and Muslims] is the same (*āṇi mhaṇāle nirmāṅkartā / dohoṃ jātīncā ekaci*).” See G.D. Sahasrabuddhe (alias Das Ganu Maharaj), *Bhaktisārāmṛt* (hereafter: *BSA*), 7<sup>th</sup> ed. (Gorha: Shri Das Ganu Maharaj Pratishthan, 2003 [1925]). However, the exact phrase, “*sab kā mālik ek*,” does not appear in this text, the other works of Das Ganu, or Dabholkar’s *Satcarīta*. It also does not appear in the first major English rendering of the saint’s life, B.V. Narasimhaswami’s *Life of Sai Baba*, first published in 1955. Nowhere in the Hindi biopic *Shirdi ke Sai Baba* (1977) does the eponymous saint utter these words. All of these sources report that Sai Baba’s phrase of choice was “Allah *mālik*,” meaning “God is King.” Notably, over the last quarter of the twentieth century, Sai Baba’s popularity spread throughout India, a process paralleling the production and circulation of the saint’s image throughout public spaces beyond the base of the saint’s popularity in Maharashtra and the southern states. Thus, one of the effects of the saint’s popularization on the national level has been the replacement of the Islam-inflected “Allah *mālik*” with the more universalistic “*sab kā mālik ek*,” especially with regard to the saint’s iconography.



Fig. 0.3 The location of Shirdi in Ahmednagar District in the state of Maharashtra, western India. Source: Google Maps.

Another major characteristic of Shirdi Sai Baba is his reputation as a powerful and benevolent miracle-worker. Hagiographers and devotees refer to Sai Baba's "miracles" interchangeably as *camatkār* (lit. "that which surprises or astonishes") and *līlā*, a Hindu theological term that denotes a deified figure's playful manipulation of physical reality. One well-known *līlā* is an episode that hagiographers traditionally date to 1886, a time when Sai Baba suffered a severe asthma attack and told a few devotees that he was going to enter a state of spiritual concentration (*samādhi*) for three days. When his breathing stopped and the color left his body, many in the village believed that he was dead. As they began to prepare for the funerary rites, the saint miraculously returned to life, just as he said he would.<sup>12</sup> But perhaps Sai Baba's most beloved miracle

<sup>12</sup> Dabholkar, *ŚSSC*, 44:78-90.

is the time in 1892 when the village shopkeepers refused to give him oil for the small lamps kept in his mosque. In lieu of oil, he lit the lamps with water instead.<sup>13</sup> (See Chapter 5 for the different iterations of the lamp lighting miracle in hagiographic texts and films). Reports of such miracles that demonstrate supernatural power are relatively less common in Shirdi Sai Baba hagiography. The more enduring aspect of the saint's legacy as a miracle-worker is that prayers to him purportedly produce tangible results. Hagiographic texts record numerous instances where his words, physical presence, and/or the ash from the *dhunī* have cured diseases, averted danger, guaranteed jobs, resurrected the dead, and instigated profound moral transformations in an individual's heart. In South Asia (and elsewhere), saints and their indefatigable store of blessings remain immanently accessible beyond the grave. Shirdi Sai Baba is no exception, for he purportedly told devotees who worried about his advancing age: "My bones will give you assurance from the tomb," and "You will hear my bones speaking to you of matters of your personal interest."<sup>14</sup> That his bones will speak – and that they will speak to individuals and not a particular group, community, or sect – is Sai Baba's promise to remain posthumously active and vigorous in devotees' lives.

In this dissertation, I use hagiography (i.e., the genre of literary works that tell us about the life and/or acts of a divine or sacred personage) to explore how these characteristics of Shirdi Sai Baba's life and legacy have been imagined, constructed, and transformed by different people, at different times, and in different contexts over the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. My objective is to build the historiography of the

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<sup>13</sup> Dabholkar, *SSSC*, 5:101-115. See Chapter 5 for the many versions of the lamp lighting miracle in Sai Baba hagiography.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 25:105 *mājhīm hāḍem turvatīmadhūn / detīl aśvāsan*; 25:107 *mājhīm hāḍem aikāl bolatām / hitaguj karitām tumhānsavem*.

Shirdi Sai Baba hagiographic tradition – or, in other words, to tell the story of the saint’s story as it has evolved in more than a century’s worth of texts and films. In doing so, I examine hagiographic sources on Sai Baba in Marathi religious poetry like G.R. Dabholkar’s *Srī Sāī Satcarita* (1929), the various works of Das Ganu Maharaj, B.V. Narasimhaswami’s four-volume *Life of Sai Baba* (1955) in English, more recent publications in English by Sai Baba devotees such as V.B. Kher, M. Kamath, and S.P. Ruhela, and contemporary Hindi texts like Sunit Nigam’s *Sāī Bābā ke camatkār* (2013). I also employ an expansive definition of hagiography to consider how the stories recorded in hagiographic literature are portrayed in Hindi films like Ashok Bhushan’s *Shirdi ke Sai Baba* (1977), Om Sai Prakash’s *Bhagwan Sri Sai Baba* (1993; originally in Kannada and dubbed into Hindi as *Naam Ek, Roop Anek*), and Deepak Balraj Vij’s Hindi film *Shirdi Saibaba* (2001). While it is said that the actual bones of the saint entombed in Shirdi speak to devotees in perpetuity, these hagiographic texts and films are the metaphorical “bones” that have (re)shaped the life and legacy of Shirdi Sai Baba beyond the grave. The study of these “bones” illuminates the malleability of sainthood as hagiographers remake Sai Baba for different audiences and repurpose him to respond to some of the pressing issues of modernity in India, such as national integration and the epistemological conflict between faith in miracles and scientific rationality.

The study of hagiography and saintly figures in South Asian religious traditions has grown steadily over the last three or so decades. Some of the groundbreaking works in the field include W.H. McLeod’s work on the *janam-sākhī* literature on the life of Guru Nanak, Phyllis Granoff’s publications on Jain religious biographies, David Lorenzen’s study of the Kabir legends, and the many contributions in W. Callewaert and

R.S. Snell's edited volume on the lives of saints, poets, gurus, and others. By now, the notion that a holy person's story changes over time – or rather, that each saint's sainthood “has a history”<sup>15</sup> – is nothing new to the study of religion, sainthood, or South Asia. Recent studies on Baba Bullhe Shah (Rinehart 1999), Swami Rama Tirtha (Rinehart 1999), Hariram Vyas (Pauwels 2002), Advaita Acharya (Manring 2005; 2011) and Namdev (Novetzke 2008), as well as Kabir, Surdas, and Mirabai (Hawley 2005), are testaments to the existence of the diverse meanings, authorities, and sensibilities ascribed to a particular saint at different times and in different media of expression. Through this project, I wish to add Shirdi Sai Baba to the lineup of saints under the academic spotlight.

To develop a dissertation on the life and legacy of Shirdi Sai Baba in the historiography of the hagiographic tradition is both a return to and a departure from the first academic attempts to understand the saint. Earlier scholarship on Shirdi Sai Baba and hagiography (Shepherd 1986; Rigopoulos 1993; Warren 2004 [1999]) tried to unravel his mysterious provenance in the mid-nineteenth century and determine whether he was Hindu or Muslim in a categorical sense. In my project, I avoid this search for the “real” or the “historical”<sup>16</sup> Sai Baba by adopting a forward-moving trajectory that looks at how the saint's story has been (re)told from the early twentieth to the early twenty-first centuries. In this way, I distinguish my work on the hagiographic tradition from the “first wave” of hagiography-oriented scholarship, and I also see my work as complementing other projects in the burgeoning academic study of Shirdi Sai Baba. While recent

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<sup>15</sup> John S. Hawley and Mark Juergensmeyer, *Songs of the Saints of India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), xii.

<sup>16</sup> The stylistic decision to put quotes around “historical” reflects my methodological stance that hagiography and history are interpretive, for which there is no ultimately objective standard for or “right” approach to the task of interpretation. In doing so, I seek to distance this project from the claims made by positivist historians, as well as positivist hagiographers, who imbue their works with such authority.

scholarship (S. Srinivas 1999; McLain 2011 and 2012; and Alison 2014) has prominently featured ethnographic studies of Sai Baba temples and devotees to explore issues like visual culture and cultural compositeness in modern India, I envision my project as contributing the study of the hagiographical transformations of the immensely popular saint into the figure we have today. In the broader landscape of “sainthood studies” rooted in South Asian religious traditions, I seek to place this study in conversation with other scholars who have illuminated the lives and legacies of saints and saintly figures like the mad *yogin* Milarepa in Tibet (Quintman 2014), the Varkari saint Namdev in Maharashtra (Novetzke 2008), and the Vedanta teacher-philosopher Swami Rama Tirtha in colonial and postcolonial north India (Rinehart 1999). Similarly, this dissertation approaches hagiography as something created and something that creates. On one hand, hagiography is created by its circumstances (e.g., the life of the saint, the voice and experiences of the hagiographer recording that life, the historical context in which these interactions take place), and on the other, it is a dynamic, historical process of storytelling that involves additions and omissions, new characters and conflicts, and elucidations on the parts of Sai Baba’s life (like his earliest years) that the first hagiographers had little to say about.

While there is much to say in this dissertation regarding the way that the Shirdi Sai Baba hagiographic tradition has been created by different hagiographers (e.g. Dabholkar and Narasimhaswami), in different languages (Marathi and English) and literary genres (poetry and prose), and at different times (colonial and postcolonial India), we should also remember that the function of hagiography is ultimately pragmatic. It should convince new audiences, while simultaneously deepening the conviction of those

within the tradition, that its subject is worthy of veneration and truly extraordinary. In her study of the fifteenth-century Gaudiya Vaishnava saint Advaita Acharya and the appearance of a newly-reconstructed hagiographic tradition in late nineteenth-century Bengal, Rebecca Manring reminds us of Jonathan Z. Smith's admonition for scholars to recognize the efforts and "hard work of cultural creation" that goes into mythmaking; as Manring adds, this applies to our study of hagiographic works, too.<sup>17</sup>

The above paragraphs have provided an overview of my subject (Shirdi Sai Baba), my data set (hagiographic texts and films about him), and this study's place within scholarship on sainthood in South Asia. In the following pages, I want to further specify the methodological flow of this dissertation by doing several other things: reviewing the academic literature on Shirdi Sai Baba; clarifying how I understand several key concepts (hagiography, history, and the historiography of a hagiographic tradition); and providing synopses of the dissertation's chapters.

### **Review of Academic Literature on Shirdi Sai Baba**

Let us begin with an overview of Western and Indian academic literature on Shirdi Sai Baba over the last forty years and how scholars have approached the "cultural creation" (per Jonathan Z. Smith's terminology) in the saint's hagiographic tradition. I divide the history of this literature into two phases: a "first-wave," which encompasses scholarship from the early 1970s to late 1990s, and a "second-wave," which continues up to the present. In addition to marking this difference in historical time, I also argue that there is a thematic difference between first- and second-wave scholars in the former's use of

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<sup>17</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 109. Cited in Rebecca Manring, *The Fading Light of Advaita Ācārya: Three Hagiographies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 8.

hagiography to construct the “historical” Sai Baba and the latter’s shift in focus toward issues relating to the place of Sai Baba and his devotees in modern India.

**a. *The First Wave (1972-1999)***

In comparison to hagiographic/devotional literature, the history of academic/critical scholarship on Shirdi Sai Baba is not very long. Some might begin a review of academic literature with what was, for decades, the only account in English available to Western audiences, Arthur Osborne’s *The Incredible Sai Baba* (1957). However, Osborne relies heavily on the English works of B.V. Narasimhaswami, thereby engendering criticism from others that his text reiterates Sai Baba hagiography without much in the way of critical analysis.<sup>18</sup>

At the vanguard of the first wave of scholarship is Charles White’s “The Sai Baba Movement: Approaches to the Study of Indian Saints” (1972). White makes three important contributions in this article. First, he posits the existence of a “Sai Baba movement,” comprising a group of twentieth-century saints in the cultural region between Pune and Bangalore: Sai Baba in Shirdi, Upasani Maharaj and his wife/successor Godavari Mata in Sakori (near Shirdi), and Sathya Sai Baba in Puttaparthi (in Andhra Pradesh), the god-man who claimed to be the reincarnation of the saint of Shirdi. Second, White explores the connection between Shirdi Sai Baba and three predecessors with similar mixtures of Hindu-Islamic traditions: the Nath community of ascetics, the god Dattatreya, and the medieval poet-saint Kabir. These similarities had been previously noted in earlier hagiographic sources, too.<sup>19</sup> Third, White brings attention

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<sup>18</sup> Warren, *Unraveling the Enigma*, 13.

<sup>19</sup> For example, A.Y. Dhond’s *Sāī Bābā: Avatār va Kārya* (1955) argues that Sai Baba was an incarnation of Dattatreya while earlier sources like Das Ganu’s *Stavanamañjarī* (1918) and Dabholkar’s *Satcarita*



to the dichotomy of scholarly voices in the study of the lives of Indian saints. On the one hand, White argues, there are scholars who merge their voices uncritically into the devotional community, and on the other, some scholars antagonistically cast aspersions on the saint or devotional community in their work. White concludes his article with a clarion call to academics “to evolve criteria that will make it possible to describe our understanding of these individuals in language other than that of the adoring devotee or the hostile sceptic.”<sup>20</sup>

As the next two academic treatments on Sai Baba, the works of Kevin Shepherd and Antonio Rigopoulos aptly demonstrate the dichotomy of approaches to the study of saints’ lives mentioned by White. The main argument of Kevin Shepherd’s *Gurus Rediscovered: Biographies of Sai Baba of Shirdi and Upasni Maharaj of Sakori* (1986) is that the legacy of Shirdi Sai Baba has undergone significant Hinduization at the hands of his Hindu hagiographers. In particular, Shepherd identifies B.V. Narasimhaswami as one of the principal perpetrators, claiming that this hagiographer unduly privileged Hindu devotees’ testimonies to emphasize Sai Baba’s characterization as a deified Hindu guru. As a corollary to this theory of hagiographic Hinduization, Shepherd argues – and he is the first to do so – that Sai Baba was originally and essentially a Muslim holy man. He holds up as evidence a couple of brief accounts of Sai Baba in hagiographies of the Parsi mystic Meher Baba (d. 1969) – accounts that refer to Sai Baba as a “Mohammeden”<sup>21</sup>

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(1929) equate Sai Baba with Dattatreya, the Naths, and many other deities and saints. Notably, Narasimhaswami’s *Charters and Sayings* reports that Sai Baba once said, “Kabir was my guru,” and at another time, “I was Kabir and used to spin yarn.” See B.V. Narasimhaswami, *Sri Sai Baba’s Charters and Sayings* (Madras: All India Sai Samaj, 1939), 207.

<sup>20</sup> Charles S. J. White, “The Sai Baba Movement: Approaches to the Study of Indian Saints,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 31, no. 4 (1972): 878.

<sup>21</sup> A.G. Munsiff, “Hazrat Sai Baba of Shirdi,” *Meher Baba Journal* 1, 5 (1939): 47.

and a “Muslim by birth”<sup>22</sup> – over the Hindu hagiographers like Narasimhaswami. Shepherd further suggests that Sai Baba might have been a *majzūb*, a Muslim holy fool who is “attracted to God.”<sup>23</sup> Less helpful, however, are the places where Shepherd slips into polemical statements about sainthood and authenticity, viz. “Hazrat Sai Baba of Shirdi is certainly not too be confused with those *gurus* who announce themselves as speedily returning reincarnations of him, and who even appropriate his name.”<sup>24</sup> This antagonism against Sathya Sai Baba is more prominent in the revised and extended edition of Shepherd’s 1986 monograph, which was published as *Investigating the Sai Baba Movement: A Clarification of Misrepresented Saints and Opportunism* (2005). This new edition also attacks Marianne Warren, a “Satya partisan” who expressed disagreement with the theory that Sai Baba could have been a *majzūb*.<sup>25</sup>

Whereas Shepherd has an undeniably hostile approach to certain hagiographic sources, Rigopoulos has been taken to task for taking sources at face value in his *The Life and Teachings of Sai Baba of Shirdi* (1993). The first half of *Life and Teachings* presents

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<sup>22</sup> Charles Purdom, *The Perfect Master: The Life of Shri Meher Baba* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1937), 26.

<sup>23</sup> Shepherd, *Gurus Rediscovered*, 19. See also Richard Eaton, *The Sufis of Bijapur, 1300-1700: The Social Roles of Sufis in Medieval India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 250-287. Eaton notes that *majzūbs* did not write their own life stories but became the subject of hagiographies in which they were called *bi-shar*, “unorthodox.” They disregarded obligatory Islamic rituals like *namāz* and Sufi practices like *zikr*; imbibed intoxicating substances like *bhang*; wandered about naked; and hurled invectives against orthodox Muslims and more “worldly” Sufis. Similarly, Shirdi Sai Baba spent much of his time in front of a fire kept inside his dilapidated mosque; smoked a chillum (with tobacco); once ripped off his clothes and stood naked in a fit of rage in front of devotees in Shirdi; and often hurled verbal abuse – and occasionally objects – when angry. That is to say, there are structural similarities between Sai Baba and the *majzūbs* of Bijapur (approx. 400 km south of Shirdi), but the similarity between two types of sainthood, as recorded in hagiography, makes for a tenuous argument that Shirdi Sai Baba was “really” a *majzūb*.

<sup>24</sup> Shepherd, *Gurus Rediscovered*, 73.

<sup>25</sup> In reference to his disagreement with Marianne Warren, Shepherd writes: “As the recipient of such a misconstruction, I do not feel obliged to accept all aspects of a Ph.D. thesis which exhibits serious lapses in accuracy of citation and due context.” See Kevin Shepherd, *Investigating the Sai Baba Movement: A Clarification of Misrepresented Saints and Opportunism* (Dorchester: Citizen Initiative, 2005), 49. Whether one sides with Shepherd on the issue of Sai Baba as an essentially Muslim saint, it is clear that his tact for giving criticism is less than constructive.

a coherent chronology of Sai Baba's life by merging a variety of hagiographic sources into a single narrative. Rigopoulos's main weakness is a lack of critical engagement with hagiography. For instance, he notes that the worship of Sai Baba was been influenced by his devotees, the vast majority of whom were (and still are) Hindus, and he identifies Sai Baba's burial in the Samadhi Mandir – instead of a *dargāh* like a Sufi – as the moment that “brought to completion the process of Hinduization of the saint.”<sup>26</sup> But further exploration of the process of Hinduization is circumvented because “the Hindu element is so strong and articulate that one must consider it fundamental for the comprehension of Baba's persona.”<sup>27</sup> The second half of the book is a study of the saint's teachings, including a detailed comparison between Shirdi Sai Baba and the medieval poet-saint Kabir, a figure similarly known for critiquing humanity's division into religious categories and speaking mystically about the way to worship God. The layout of this comparison, however, has earned Rigopoulos criticism for employing Hindu categories to analyze the saint's teachings in chapters such as “The Path of Love” (*bhakti yoga*), “The Path of Knowledge” (*jñāna yoga*), and “The Path of Action” (*karma yoga*).<sup>28</sup>

Perhaps the most critically acclaimed work in the first wave of scholarship is Marianne Warren's *Unraveling the Enigma Shirdi Sai Baba in the Light of Sufism* (2004 [1999]).<sup>29</sup> This monograph is the author's “detective story” that seeks “to redress the Sufi-Bhakti imbalance and re-emphasize certain universal elements shared in Indian

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<sup>26</sup> Rigopoulos, *The Life and Teachings*, 241.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 32, n. 42.

<sup>28</sup> Warren, *Unravelling the Enigma*, 18. Rigopoulos's chapter headings in *The Life and Teachings of Sai Baba of Shirdi* directly refer to the three paths, or yogas, taught by Krishna in the *Bhagavad Gītā*. Warren also criticizes Rigopoulos for relying on N.V. Gunaji's English adaptation of the *Satcarita*, a version of Sai Baba's life story in which more than a few details that connect the saint to Islam/Sufism are omitted.

<sup>29</sup> The first edition of Warren's *Unravelling the Enigma* came out in 1999, while the revised edition, which is what I use, came out in 2004.

Sufism, particularly Deccani Sufism, and the Bhakti movement in Maharashtra, which the life of Sai Baba epitomized.”<sup>30</sup> In other words, Warren sets out to uncover the real, or historical, Sai Baba, who, she argues, was actually a Sufi saint. Warren offers the most thorough accounting of hagiographical Hinduization undertaken by Narasimhaswami and N.V. Gunaji, whose English adaptation (1944) of the *Śrī Sāī Satcarita* omits, suppresses, and glosses over many connections between Sai Baba and Islam.

What she calls the “icing on the cake” for her argument is her translation of a notebook written in Urdu by Abdul (d. 1954), one of Sai Baba’s closest disciples and servants.<sup>31</sup> She obtained Abdul’s notebook through V.B. Kher, a trustee of the Sansthan in Shirdi in the 1980s, where the original notebook had been archived since Abdul’s death. This heretofore unavailable account of the saint’s words and teachings, Warren argues, is evidence that “Sai Baba was conversant with the *Qur’an*, the *Hadith*, the life of the Prophet Mohammad and his Companions, the early formation of Islam, and the lives of early Sufi saints.”<sup>32</sup> Abdul’s notebook attributes a variety of verbal expressions to Sai Baba that make him into a Muslim holy man, including mention of his frequent repetitions of the *shahādah*, his benedictions to Islamic religious figures (e.g., the Prophet, Sufis of various orders), his recitations of lineages of Sufi saints whom he equates with certain Hindu deities, and his broader theological equivalences such as “Vishnu is equal to the *Bismillah ar-Rahim*, *Allah* the Merciful the Pardoner. Ali is equal to Brahma. Mahadev is equal to Mohammed and *Malik al-maut*, the angel of death.”<sup>33</sup> Whether one accepts Abdul’s notebook as evidence that Sai Baba had a “profound

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<sup>30</sup> Warren, *Unravelling the Enigma*, 3 and 377.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 383.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 331.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 308.

awareness and knowledge of Islamic tradition and mystic Sufism,” as Warren claims, depends on the authority assigned to this unpublished, uncirculated source against the bulk of the hagiographic tradition.<sup>34</sup> Alternatively, one might suggest that Abdul’s notebook does not so much “prove” that Sai Baba was a Muslim saint as it demonstrates the possibility for him to be constructed as a Muslim in Abdul’s imaginative worldview.

**b. *The Second Wave (1999-present)***

Whereas White’s article and the monographs of Shepherd, Rigopoulos, and Warren made an initial foray into the academic study of Shirdi Sai Baba by focusing on hagiography, more recent scholarship from the last fifteen or so years has brought a diverse set of questions and methodologies to bear on the saint and his devotees.

Smriti Srinivas provides a fresh perspective on the saint’s contemporary significance in her article, “The Brahmin and the Fakir: Suburban Religiosity in the Cult of Shirdi Sai Baba” (1999).” Srinivas shows that there is a paradigm shift when the mendicant/saint (*fakīr/santa*), who is traditionally associated with non-urban spaces, becomes installed in temples in cities as a spiritual guide (*guru*) and more recently, as a divine incarnation (*avatār*). Her ethnography also demonstrates the appeal of Sai Baba in a cosmopolitan city like Bangalore where “all these differentials and domains – of language, sect, occupation, residential area, regional origin, etc. – that cannot be collapsed spatially or culturally within the city achieve magical resolution in the figure of the guru.”<sup>35</sup> Srinivas’s monograph on Sathya Sai Baba, which was published as *In the Presence of Sai Baba: Body, City, and Memory in a Global Religious Movement* (2008),

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<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 379.

<sup>35</sup> Smriti Srinivas, “The Brahmin and the Fakir: Suburban Religiosity in the Cult of Shirdi Sai Baba,” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 14, no. 2 (1999): 254.

reflects her ethnographic fieldwork on sites evidencing the “sacrality of urban sprawl” in Bangalore.<sup>36</sup> For example, on the city’s outskirts, the home of Shivamma Thayee, a Shirdi Sai Baba devotee who acquired a modest following as a saint herself, contains an unusual image, or *mūrtī*, of the saint – one with a black stone body and large eyes painted white that resembles the appearance of a village deity. The Sai Baba temple in Someshwarapura, a multi-linguistic Bangalore neighborhood with people from different parts of India, further evidences the emerging “bourgeois incarnation of Baba,” who appeals to middle-class Hindus aspiring to lead successful lives in a thriving metropolis.<sup>37</sup>

Antonio Rigopoulos offers his analysis of Sai Baba’s *siddhīs* in Knut Jacobsen’s edited volume *Yoga Powers: Extraordinary Capacities Attained through Meditation and Concentration* (2011). Rigopoulos looks at five instances of supernatural deeds in the *Satcarita*, including Sai Baba’s practice of *khaṇḍa-yoga* and his revivification after a three-day period of *samādhī*. Much of the chapter is descriptive and comparative with regard to the antecedents of Sai Baba’s powers in the lives of various Sufi saints. Another noteworthy feature of this work is that Rigopoulos concludes by critiquing Warren’s “essentialization” of Hindu and Islamic traditions in *Unravelling the Enigma*. He suggests that Sai Baba’s crossover appeal among Hindus and Muslims reflects the socio-religious milieu of rural life in the Deccan in the late-nineteenth century, a time when Sufi and *bhakti* traditions overlapped with much more fluidity than there is in South Asia after Partition.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Smriti Srinivas, *In the Presence of Sai Baba: Body, City, and Memory in a Global Religious Movement* (Boston: Brill, 2008), 251.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, *In the Presence of Sai Baba*, 239.

<sup>38</sup> Antonio Rigopoulos, “Sāī Bābā of Śīrḍī and Yoga Powers” in *Yoga Powers: Extraordinary Capacities Attained through Meditation and Concentration*, ed. Knut Jacobsen (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 423-424.

The idea that Sai Baba represents a Hindu-Muslim shared tradition, as Rigopoulos suggests, has gained significant traction both outside and inside academic scholarship. In *Sacred Spaces: Exploring Traditions of Shared Faith in India* (2003), Yoginder Sikand writes from a place of conviction, namely, that “if religious terror and fascism are to be countered, we must seek to uncover positive, humanistic, and liberal understandings of religion, in order to challenge the merchants of theological terror.”<sup>39</sup> Sikand references the argument about Sai Baba’s Hinduization such that his chapter on the saint is part nostalgia for a bygone era of cross-fertilization between religious traditions and part trepidation about the difficulty of maintaining a shared religious tradition in modern India.<sup>40</sup> A similar assessment is found in a 2014 article published on the website of the Indian magazine *Outlook* on Sai Baba and the “gentle charms of syncretism.”<sup>41</sup>

Many new and productive avenues for thinking about Shirdi Sai Baba in modern India have come out of Karline McLain’s two recent publications. In her article “Be United, Be Virtuous: Composite Culture and the Growth of Shirdi Sai Baba Devotion” (2011), McLain argues that Sai Baba’s vision of the religious/spiritual unity of India’s religions is one of the main factors accounting for his popularization over the last century. In doing so, she uses a combination of devotional materials (hagiography, poster art) and ethnography among devotees in Mumbai to refute the theory prevalent in previous scholarship, viz. that Sai Baba’s legacy has been compromised by the forces of Hinduization. Her findings suggest that Sai Baba still represents – at least in the minds of

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<sup>39</sup> Yoginder Sikand, *Sacred Spaces: Exploring Traditions of Shared Faith in India* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 20.

<sup>40</sup> See the short write-up of Shirdi in Saba Naqvi, *In Good Faith: In Search of an Unknown India* (New Delhi: Rainlight, 2012), 52-59.

<sup>41</sup> Chetan Krishnaswamy, “Gentle Charms of Syncretism,” *Outlook*, January 13, 2014, <http://www.outlookindia.com/article.aspx?288980>, accessed December 26, 2015.

some devotees – the “composite culture” of India. This compositeness manifests in the poster that inspired the article’s title: a depiction of Sai Baba wearing the colors of the Indian flag in the center and framed by a mosque, a temple, a gurdwara, and a church in the four corners. McLain’s ethnography brings out the multiple, but not competing, understandings of Sai Baba as an incarnation of the Hindu god Dattatreya, someone who was “just like the Prophet [Muhammad] was,” and “the guru who leads us to God,” thereby suggesting that Sai Baba’s accessibility across religious lines is attractive to people who refute the antagonistic agenda of religious nationalism, especially Hindutva.<sup>42</sup>

McLain’s second publication on Sai Baba is a chapter, “Praying for Peace and Amity: The Shri Shirdi Sai Heritage Foundation Trust,” in the edited volume *Public Hinduisms* (2012). In this work, McLain continues to refute the Hinduization thesis about Sai Baba’s legacy by showing how Hindus and non-Hindus “are drawn to this new movement because they perceive Shirdi Sai Baba’s life and teachings as a syncretistic example of spirituality that defies rigid religious boundaries.”<sup>43</sup> Her ethnography in New Delhi highlights Sai Baba devotees who express little interest or concern with the politics of religious identity and Hinduization, hagiographic or otherwise. Instead, Sai Baba functions for them as a focus of devotional practice through *sevā*, humanitarian service rendered as worship to one’s guru, which can appeal to anyone (e.g, Hindus and Sikhs), anywhere and with any sort of preexisting faith-based commitment. Devotees, including C.B. Satpathy, the founder of the Trust and a prolific author of devotional literature, talk

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<sup>42</sup> Karline McLain, “Be United, Be Virtuous: Composite Culture and the Growth of Shirdi Sai Baba Devotion,” *Nova Religio* 15, 2 (2011): 39.

<sup>43</sup> Karline McLain, “Praying for Peace and Amity: The Shri Shirdi Sai Heritage Foundation Trust,” in *Public Hinduisms*, eds. John Zavos, Pralay Kanungo, Deepa S. Reddy, Maya Warriar, and Raymond Brady Williams (London: SAGE Publications, 2012), 192.



about Sai Baba's vision of India's composite culture as a form of spirituality, which unites people, and not religion, which divides humanity into mutually exclusive categories.

Following McLain's work on devotional posters, William Alison is one of several scholars currently reframing the issue of Sai Baba's popularity as a matter of visual culture.<sup>44</sup> His article, "Sai Baba of Bombay: A Saint, His Icon, and the Urban Geography of Darshan," notes that the handful of historical photographs of Shirdi Sai Baba from the early twentieth century – which are the basis of later visual representations – posed a significant question to the saint's devotees: Does the photograph (or image based on a photograph) of the saint contain a portion of the power that the saint had when he was alive? And what happens, Alison asks further, when that image transmits Sai Baba's power to its onlookers?<sup>45</sup> Alison argues that to understand the place of the ecumenical Sai Baba's image in Bombay, a city with so many groups of viewers (Hindus, Muslims, and others), requires a nuanced way of thinking about *darśan*, the quintessential concept of "sacred seeing" in South Asia. Here, having *darśan* of the image is a matter of recognition or subjectification of the onlooker by the object of his/her gaze. In other words, the power-charged image of Sai Baba reaches out to its onlookers and "works" on them in two ways, attracting those who surrender to the saint's power and repulsing those might otherwise defile sacred turf. Alison's article deftly combines a study of the *Satcarita*, appearances of Sai Baba in films in the 1970s, and ethnographic fieldwork at

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<sup>44</sup> Additionally, Robert F. and Mary N. Roberts have started a project on Shirdi Sai Baba and visual practices. Their field sites include India, Germany, Ghana, and Mauritius. In Fall 2016, the Roberts will host an art-exhibition at Hamilton College and publish their research in a book titled, *A Global Saint in a Virtual World: Devotional Diasporas of Shirdi Sai Baba*. For more information, see their website: [www.shirdisaibabavirtualsaint.org](http://www.shirdisaibabavirtualsaint.org).

<sup>45</sup> William Alison, "Sai Baba of Bombay: A Saint, His Icon, and the Urban Geography of *Darshan*," *History of Religions* 54, no. 2 (2014): 159.

several shrines, large and small, in Mumbai. He also captures the moment in 2003 when the Bombay High Court in 2003 ordered the demolition of numerous “illegal religious structures.” This action mobilized Bombay’s religious communities – Hindus to save Hindu shrines, Muslims to save Sufi shrines, and so on. Sai Baba’s characteristic ecumenicism enabled the erection of his shrines throughout the city’s multireligious neighborhoods, but this “broader and shallower basis of a demarcation of generically... sacred space” meant that there was no closely-knit community to come together and protest the demolition of the saint’s shrines.<sup>46</sup>

Another burgeoning area of Shirdi Sai Baba scholarship looks at the growth and development of Shirdi from an unremarkable hamlet in the saint’s day to one of modern India’s new hotspots of religious tourism. An article by Kiran Shinde and Andrea Pinkney is largely descriptive on topics like the history of the increasing number of devotees coming to Shirdi, the town’s recent urbanization, and the economy of its religious tourism. Notably, the article also highlights one new trend in Shirdi’s evolution: the establishment of a residential colony several kilometers outside of Shirdi, which is exclusively for the large number of people coming from Andhra Pradesh and looking for work in Shirdi’s service sector. This colony (Saipattam) has its own Sai Baba temple, a sort of local alternative for Andhra devotees who want their own Sai Baba experience without having to navigate through the crowds in town. Shinde and Pinkney’s conclusion is that while contemporary Shirdi evidences a harmonious “compartmentalization” with different people from different regions (like the Andhra emigrants) living in their own

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 186.

areas in town, conflicts between new arrivals and longtime residents are certainly possible, perhaps even likely, as the town's growth continues unabated.<sup>47</sup>

In terms of quantitative data, Samit Ghosal and Tamal Maity have brought forth important information regarding the devotees who visit Shirdi and the conveniences that are now available for them. Their chapter, "Development and Sustenance of Shirdi as a Centre for Religious Tourism in India" in Rana Singh's edited volume *Holy Places and Pilgrimages: Essays on India* (2011), has four subjects of study: the role of tourism in Shirdi's development, the creation and maintenance of Shirdi as a pilgrimage site, tourism's socioeconomic impacts on the town and its inhabitants, and the relations between hosts and guests and the cultural content produced by their interactions. Most interesting are the statistics collected by Ghosal and Maity that tell us about who visits Shirdi. Over half of the visitors are under the age of 40 and typically come either in couples or in groups of three to five. Approximately forty percent work in service with another twenty-five percent who work in business. First-timers are in the minority (13%), while many people (42%) make the trip annually. To echo Shinde and Pinkney's observation on the large number of Andhra emigres, Ghosal and Maity's numbers show that twenty-three percent of visitors are from Andhra Pradesh. Another twenty-two percent are from Mumbai, and twenty-five percent are from other parts of Maharashtra. Not surprisingly, the overwhelming majority of respondents (92%) are Hindu, while others – Muslims (3%), Christians (2%), Parsis (2%), and Sikhs (1%) – are far fewer.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Shinde and Pinkney, "Shirdi in Transition," 567.

<sup>48</sup> Samit Ghosal and Tamal Maity, "Development and Sustenance of Shirdi as a Centre for Religious Tourism in India," in *Holy Places and Pilgrimages: Essays on India*, ed. Rana P.B. Singh (New Delhi: Shubhi Publications, 2010), 271-275.

With an eye toward the intersection of religion and economics, Suhas Kulkarni and Manohar Sonawane's edited volume *Devācyā Navane* (2012) is a collection of essays in Marathi, which embodies the collaboration of journalists at the news service Unique Features in Mumbai and scholars at the University of Pune. This edited volume focuses on the saints and sites that have emerged in Maharashtra over the last two centuries, including Swami Samartha of Akkalkot, Gajanan Maharaj of Shegaon, and Sai Baba of Shirdi. In its introduction, Rajeshwari Deshpande, a political science professor at the University of Pune, argues that there is nexus of a new type of religiosity (*dharmakāraṇa*) and a new type of industry (*udyog*) operating under the name of God and that this new nexus is a response to the crises (*pecaprasaṅga*) wrought on India's aspirational middle-class (*ākāṅkṣī madhyamavarga*) by globalization and capitalism, particularly after the liberalization of the Indian economy in 1991.<sup>49</sup> Manohar Sonawane and Vijay Chauvan's chapter on Shirdi Sai Baba looks at faith (*śraddhā*) in a miracle-working holy man (*camatkāri satpuruś*) as an active agent in driving the Shirdi's economy. Faith inspires devotees to travel to Shirdi in search of blessings and make monetary donations at the tomb-temple complex. The Sai Baba Sansthan and Trust, the organizational body that oversees the maintenance of the tomb-temple complex, then uses the funds to make devotees' experiences at Shirdi more comfortable and enjoyable. The better the experience is for the devotee, the more likely it is that s/he will develop the

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<sup>49</sup> Rajeshwari Deshpande, "Samakālīn dharmakaraṇa āṇi artha rājkīya tāṇebāṇe," in *Devacyā Nāvāne*, ed. Suhas Kulkarni (Mumbai: Unique Features, 2012), 18-20. Here, Deshpande outlines three crises affecting India's aspirational middle class after 1991. First, the access to new goods has made consumerism (*grāhakavād*) into a middle-class aspiration and virtue. Second, the interconnectedness of global economies increases the chance for instability (*asthirtā*) caused by events far away. And third, the march forward of consumerism and globalization breaks existing social and cultural bonds, which leads people to search for a new sense of group or communal belonging (*navīn sāmuhik-sāmudāyik jīvanacā śodha*). Deshpande's examples of new sources of group identity in middle-class urban settings are laughing clubs, senior citizen organizations, and rotary clubs.

faith to make more trips and donate more money in the future. In talking with devotees, the authors find that the saint's reputation as a miracle-worker overshadows his spiritual ecumenicalism:

Overall, Shirdi Sai Baba is an important symbol of the equal respect that should be shown for all religions (*sarvadharmasambhāva*) and religious coexistence in India. But it became apparent after talking to devotees here that they were not very interested in that but rather had a greater affinity for Sai Baba's miracles. The movies, television serials, cassettes, and books about Sai Baba's life are based primarily on his miracles.<sup>50</sup>

### **This Dissertation vis-à-vis Existing Scholarship on Shirdi Sai Baba**

This dissertation on the life and legacy of Shirdi Sai Baba in history and hagiography engages with both waves of existing scholarship that I have outlined above. Most importantly, I see this dissertation as a necessary theoretical intervention in the study of Sai Baba hagiography. The first wave of scholarship on Sai Baba endeavored either to build a single, coherent narrative of the saint's life by stitching together multiple hagiographic works (Rigopoulos 1993), or to apply the methodology of positivist historicism in projects like “rediscovering” (Shepherd 1986) and “unravelling” (Warren 1999) the saint from his hagiographers. Scholars have been using hagiography as an archive from which one can extract the Sai Baba, who walked, talked, and lived in Shirdi in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This methodological approach inevitably involves the adjudication of certain sources and representations of the saint as more authentic (read: “historical”) than others, an approach to hagiography that I find

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<sup>50</sup> Chavan and Sonawane, “Sāikṛpecā gaḍad chāyā,” 35. *Ekandarīt, sātībābāñcī śirḍī he sarvadharmasambhāvācā, dhārmik saha-astivāca deśātala ek mahattvapūrṇa pratīk tharala āhe. Paṇ ithe yeṇāryā bhāvīkāmśī bolalyānantar lakṣāt yeta, kī tyāñcyā manāt tyābaddal phārsa kautuk nasūn tyānnā sātībābāñcyā camatkārāmbaddal adhik oḍh āhe. Sātībābāñcyā jīvanāvar nighālele citrapaṭ, tī-vhī mālikā, kaseṭs, pustakahī yā camatkārāmbhovatīc kendrit jhālyāca disata.*

rather problematic. Warren’s self-described “detective story” sees her culling through the vast of body of hagiographic literature to locate the “numerous hints and subtle references” to Sai Baba’s Islamic heredity.<sup>51</sup> Recall that Shepherd relies on brief descriptions of Sai Baba as a Muslim in hagiographies about the Parsi mystic Meher Baba, while Warren takes the personal notebook of a Muslim devotee as evidence that Sai Baba was essentially a Muslim saint. And Rigopoulos draws uncritically from multiple hagiographic sources to reconstruct an essentialized Shirdi Sai Baba without identifying how the saint’s story changes from text to text, and from generation to generation of hagiography.

Admittedly, it is an alluring possibility. Sai Baba’s time is so close to ours. We have photographs showing what he looked like and how he lived, and a great deal of Sai Baba’s iconography on posters, calendars, and stickers has the aesthetic of realism: portraits that show a kindhearted and bearded face, a head covered with a simple *ṭopī*, and a body draped in a plain robe, sitting in his trademark posture with one leg crossed over the other. However, I propose that it is impossible for academic study to determine, absolutely and consensually, whether Sai Baba was “actually” a Muslim or a Hindu in any categorical sense. We simply do not have the resources at our disposal. What we can do is change the trajectory of academic inquiry. Instead of going back in time to arrive at the pre-hagiographical Sai Baba (as Warren and Shepherd try to do), we can instead move forward and examine how Sai Baba’s story has been told and retold at different times, by different people, in different languages and styles, and with different purposes. To point out that the representation of a saint in hagiography evolves over time is nothing

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<sup>51</sup> Warren, *Unravelling the Enigma*, 20.

novel to the study of sainthood in South Asia – but it is an important theoretical intervention in the study of Shirdi Sai Baba and his hagiographic tradition.

This dissertation not only provides a comprehensive study of the many texts and films about Sai Baba (many of which, it should be noted, have not been featured in previous scholarship).<sup>52</sup> I also see my work as complementing the various ongoing projects in the burgeoning subfield of “Shirdi Sai Baba Studies.” Many scholars have placed the saint as a topic in visual culture in India (McLain 2011; Elison 2014) and the Indian diaspora (Roberts and Roberts forthcoming), while others (S. Srinivas 1999; McLain 2012) have employed ethnographic fieldwork to study devotional communities in Bangalore and New Delhi. Others (Ghosal and Maity 2010; Chavan and Sonawane 2012; Shinde and Pinkney 2013) have turned attention to the town of Shirdi as an example of development propelled by the economy of religious tourism. What is missing from this rapid accumulation of knowledge about Sai Baba are the ways in which hagiographers have constructed and reconstructed Shirdi Sai Baba in texts and films. Because hagiography is one (but certainly not the only) means through which people come to know about who Sai Baba was and why he is important now, a reconsideration of the saint’s life and legacy in history and hagiography complicates how we understand who Sai Baba was and what vision of the future he offers people today.

Additionally, no one in the first or second wave of scholarship has explored the full range of Shirdi Sai Baba miracle stories recorded in the hagiographic tradition. The

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<sup>52</sup> The two texts and authors that have received the majority of scholars’ attention are Dabholkar’s *Satcarita* and Narasimhaswami’s *Life of Sai Baba*. The works of Das Ganu – chapters on Sai Baba in the *Santakathāmṛt* (1903), *Bhaktalīlāmṛt* (1906), and *Bhaktisārāmṛt* (1925), as well as the *Śrī Sāināth Stavanamañjarī* (1918) – have not factored into academic studies of Sai Baba hagiography, save for limited analysis in Warren’s *Unravelling the Enigma* (2004 [1999]). Recent scholarship (McLain 2011; Elison 2014) draws exclusively from the *Satcarita*. The content of hagiographic films like *Shirdi ke Sai Baba* (1977) has likewise received very little scholarly attention.

only study of Sai Baba’s miracles (Rigopoulos 2011) is on his “yoga powers” like lighting lamps with water instead of oil and revivifying after temporary death, but it only offers descriptions of what the saint did and how it compares to what other saints have done. The present study broaches second-order analytical questions – like how the telling of this miracle has evolved from being described as a public event in the Marathi poetry of the *Satcarita* (1929) to becoming an emotionalized expression of a young girl’s faith in the saint in the Hindi film *Shirdi ke Sai Baba* (1977). Moreover, existing scholarship has very little to say on the other miracles that take place in personalized exchanges between Sai Baba and devotees. In this dissertation, the study of Sai Baba’s lamp lighting miracle (Chapter 5), healing miracles (Chapter 6) and “conversion” miracles (Chapter 7) opens up new and fruitful avenues for understanding how sainthood – as it is constructed in hagiographic media – functions, in part, as an adaptive response to issues like the tension between religious faith and scientific rationality and caste-based discrimination in twentieth-century India. “My business is to give blessings,” says Sai Baba in B.V. Narasimhaswami’s *Sri Sai Baba’s Charters and Sayings* (1939), a compilation of aphorisms and parables purportedly uttered by the saint to various devotees. That being the case, the second half of this dissertation looks at what that business has offered people, both spiritual and temporally.

### **Hagiography and *Pothī***

Although “hagiography” has its origin in Christian traditions and a long history of application in academic scholarship on the lives of Christian saints and saintly figures, there are many corollaries in South Asia to the genre of sacred life writing: Sufi *tazkirāt* literature, the *janam-sākhīs* relating the life of Guru Nanak, and the medieval-era



compilations of various saints' lives in Nabhadās's *Bhaktamāl* (early seventeenth century) and its commentarial expansion, Priyadas's *Bhaktirasabodhinī* (early eighteenth century). This is not to exclude much earlier forms of hagiographic literature: the auto-hagiographical poems of Vaishnava and Shaiva *bhakti* saints, the Buddhist *jātaka* tales, and Jain stories about monks renouncing domestic life. An expansive understanding of what constitutes hagiography in South Asia would also include the life stories of major religious figures in Sanskrit literature like the Buddha, as he is imagined and constructed in Ashvaghosha's *Buddhacarita*, and Rama, the incarnate deity in Valmiki's *Rāmāyaṇa*.

In Maharashtra – the cultural and geographical context for Shirdi Sai Baba – one of the most common words for a sacred text, including hagiographic literature, is *pothī*. A *pothī* is a religious text – which, in Maharashtra, often employs the traditional meter of religious poetry, *ovī* – that is memorized and recited, viz. the phrase *pothī-pāṭh*, meaning something memorized as if it “can be easily read and explained from the book.”<sup>53</sup> As Christian Novetzke notes, “*pothī*” typically denotes texts that are written in Sanskrit, but the category of *pothī* has also been applied to non-Sanskrit texts like the poet-saint Jnaneshwar's Marathi commentary on the *Bhagavad Gītā*, which has become known for its author's namesake as the *Jñāneśvarī* (late thirteenth century).<sup>54</sup> In this way, many sacred texts, including hagiographical texts, are considered *pothīs*, even if the text's composer does not explicitly identify the work as such. For example, G.R. Dabholkar's *Śrī Sāi Satcarita* – the central scripture of the Shirdi Sai Baba phenomenon – is

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<sup>53</sup> J.T. Molesworth, *A Dictionary, Marathi and English* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Bombay: Bombay Education Society Press, 1857), 533.

<sup>54</sup> Christian Novetzke, *Religion and Public Memory: A Cultural History of Saint Namdev in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 100-101.

considered *pothī*, even though Dabholkar never uses the term explicitly to describe his composition of more than nine thousand verses, or *ovīs*.

However, the term *pothī* does appear in the stories about Sai Baba recorded in the *Satcarita*. Consider one of the episodes in chapter twenty-six of the *Satcarita* where Sai Baba saves the life of Gopal Narayan Ambadekar, a worker in the excise department in the colonial government. After being forced into retirement and returning to an unhappy home life, Ambadekar resolves to commit suicide in Shirdi by throwing himself down a well. In timely fashion, Ambadekar meets a devotee of Sai Baba who gives him a hagiography – the word here is *pothī* – about Swami Samartha (d. 1878), a saint who had lived in the nearby village of Akkalkot. Ambadekar miraculously finds something in that text that resonates with his situation – a story about Swami Samartha counseling a suicidal man. The swami’s advice is that one must experience both the good and the bad fruit of past actions and that suffering through the bad fruit is the only way to finish it off because suicide only delays suffering’s inevitable ripening in the next life. Ambadekar’s story ends with his change of heart brought on by recognizing the omnipresent nature of Sai Baba’s benevolent protection, and he goes on to find a new livelihood in retirement as an astrologer. Dabholkar summarizes what we learn about Sai Baba at the end – an example of the saint’s resourcefulness in using the *pothī* as a pretext (*pothīcem karūniyām nimitta*) to save someone’s life.<sup>55</sup>

This episode highlighting the miraculous timing behind the prevention of Ambadekar’s suicide is one of Sai Baba’s *līlās*, a theological concept in Hindu religious traditions that refers to the deeds of a deity done on earth. While Dabholkar does not use

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<sup>55</sup> Dabholkar, *ŚSSC*, 26:113-148.

“*pothī*,” he does refer to the power of reading and listening to the *līlās* that comprise Sai Baba’s life story. Four syllables are enough to obliterate everyday problems (*jīvācā durdin osare*), while the whole story transports the listener over the ocean of cyclical existence (*bhāvārthī utarel bhavapār*).<sup>56</sup> Relatedly, Sai Baba devotees believe that the ritualized reading/reciting of the text breaks the bonds of *karma*, destroys misdeeds, and invokes the saint’s protection in all activities – all of which Dabholkar mentions in the *Satcarita*.<sup>57</sup>

Today, the conventional understanding of the basic difference between the two genres of life writing – the hagiographical and the biographical – is that the hagiographic text and its subject (*hagios*, or the “holy person”) are believed to be capable of doing extraordinary things, while the empirical biography – a type of life writing increasingly prominent after the eighteenth century that purports to present the true, objective version of its subject’s story – is about a person who may indeed be remarkable but not in a way that crosses over into the realm of the superhuman or supernatural.<sup>58</sup> The boundary between hagiography and biography, however, is much blurrier than it is often perceived to be. For example, other texts that collect and present Sai Baba’s *līlās* but have neither the traditional poetic form or ritual usage as Marathi *pothī* – like Narasimhaswami’s text in English prose *Life of Sai Baba* – indeed make similar claims about the spiritual benefits of reading the saint’s story.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 2:43.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 2:41 and 2:43.

<sup>58</sup> For a thorough discussion of the characteristics, presumptions, and historical development of the empirical biography, which helps to understand the storytelling method of the sacred biographer, see Thomas Heffernan, *Sacred Biography: Saints and Their Biographers in the Middle Ages* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 39-71.

<sup>59</sup> See the introductory section of Chapter 3 that contrasts and compares the *Satcarita* and *Life of Sai Baba* as two hagiographic texts.

To bridge this gap in terminology, I opt to use “hagiography” as a heuristic device that designates forms of religious life writing that structurally resemble traditional *pothī* (like the *Satcarita*) and those that do not but are nonetheless invested with *pothī*-like power (like *Life of Sai Baba*). In doing so, I do not seek to import a “Western” or “Christian” term into the study of South Asian religious traditions but rather place my work alongside the many other scholars – Western and Indian alike – who have found productive ways to engage critically with hagiographies and hagiographic traditions that are attached to the lives and legacies of saints and saintly figures in South Asia and beyond.

### **“Hagiography” and “Hagiographic Tradition”**

To further clarify the epistemological underpinnings of my use of “hagiography” and “hagiographic tradition,” I begin by drawing from Thomas Heffernan, who views the life story of a sacred figure as “a documentary witness to the process of sanctification for the community [of believers] and in so doing becomes itself a part of the sacred tradition it serves to document.”<sup>60</sup> Here, one might clarify Heffernan’s statement by adding that hagiography is not only a passive witness but also an active producer – a material manifestation in the form of books, films, posters, stickers, and other media that elevates its subject to a status and realm beyond the ordinary. In this light, devotees and scholars alike witness the production of sacredness when reading the hagiographic text, or watching the hagiographic film. Importantly, Heffernan also highlights the “interpretive

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<sup>60</sup> Heffernan, *Sacred Biography*, 16. I have also found enlightening the work of Donald Capps and Frank Reynolds, who have highlighted the two functions of the hagiographic genre: (a) establishing a record of a holy life and (b) participating in its establishment by making arguments about the sanctity of its subject. See Donald Capps and Frank Reynolds, *The Biographical Process: Studies in the History and Psychology of Religion* (The Hague: Mouton, 1976), 3.

circularity in the composition and reception” in reiterative tellings and retellings of sacred life stories.<sup>61</sup> This calls attention to the relationships not only between hagiographer and saint, but also hagiographer and the audience of the hagiographic work. Focusing on these relationships, in turn, raises lively questions regarding how hagiographers selectively interpret their hagiographic subjects for their audiences. With an intensely historiographical method, it becomes possible to chart the history of hagiographic transformations brought to bear on a sacred figure’s life story, as well as to reveal an instance of hagiographical storytelling – and indeed, any form of biographical storytelling, one might argue – as a form of selective representation. For the present study, what results from this methodological approach is not a simplified, streamlined understanding of the empirical, or the “real,” Sai Baba but rather the awareness that there are many Sai Babas that have been produced in hagiographic works over the last century.

Whereas Heffernan’s work on the *vitae* of medieval Christian saints in Europe primarily engages these sacred stories in texts, I also view as hagiography anything that conveys biographical information, in textual and non-textual forms, about a holy life that is designed to affect its audience by stimulating devotion and possibly worship. In this context, hagiography includes a written record of a saint’s life as much as a film about the saint, or a television program, or a comic book, or any other medium through which we learn about a holy person and why s/he should be considered holy. To understand the unique religiously character of hagiography, Robin Rinehart offers a helpful analogy for the special character of hagiography in a familiar South Asian idiom:

When a deity’s image is carved out of stone or wood, it may be viewed simply as a work of art; in order for it to become the object of worship in a home or temple, it must first be ritually empowered (typically through the

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<sup>61</sup> Heffernan, *Sacred Biography*, 16.

rite of *prāṇapraṭiṣṭhā*). The hagiography is similar – readers may approach it as they would any story, and place it on the shelf as with the rest of their libraries. But the hagiographer’s goal goes beyond the mere telling of a story. If the subject is to become part of the reader’s spiritual life, the reader has to be convinced that the subject is worthy.<sup>62</sup>

Hagiography (lit. “writing about sacred people”) is a type of biographical writing that tells about the lives of saints and saintly figures. Following Rinehart’s metaphor, the distinguishing characteristic of the hagiographic subject, or *hagios*, is that it is charged with a sense of sacred power, a vital force – the *prāṇa* that enlivens otherwise mundane things with divine presence that sets extraordinary lives apart from ordinary lives.<sup>63</sup> One might also consider the contents of different types of life writing. In the Shirdi Sai Baba hagiographic tradition, there is a prominent admixture of moral guidance and faith-inspiring tales, as well as supernatural events and stories of miraculous intercession on behalf of devotees in conflict or danger.<sup>64</sup> By comparison, the perception of the biography, particularly the empirical biography, is that it presents the scientific, rational, unbiased account of its subject’s life by amassing so many “facts” that there remains no room for doubt or conjecture. These categories, of course, are rigid in reality. If memorials like Graceland and Raj Ghat have become pilgrimage sites for fans of

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<sup>62</sup> Robin Rinehart, *One Lifetime, Many Lives: The Experience of Modern Hindu Hagiography* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999), 126.

<sup>63</sup> Although Rinehart’s *prāṇapraṭiṣṭhā* metaphor reflects the contemporary understanding of the difference between hagiography (a genre of sacred life writing) and biography (a genre of secular life writing), one must also remember that this distinction is rather modern. For example, Gail Corrington-Streete has observed that the difference between the *bios* (way of life of philosophers) and the *hodos* (way of life of spiritual adepts, including early Christians) was never so clear in Greco-Roman antiquity. See Gail P. Corrington-Streete, “Trajectories of Ascetic Behavior: Response to the Three Preceding Papers,” in *Asceticism*, eds. Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 119-124.

<sup>64</sup> Comparatively, Sufi hagiographic traditions in South Asia prioritize collections of a saint’s sayings (*malʿūzāt*) over life histories (*tazkirāt*), while the *Satcarita* has been said to resemble Saraswati Gangadhar’s *Guru Caritra* (mid-sixteenth century), a Hindu hagiographic text that highlights the miracles and moral lessons gleaned from the lives of two human incarnations of the god Dattatreya, Shripad Shri Vallabha and Shri Narasimhaswami Saraswati.

American music and citizens of India, then the books and films about historical figures – like an Elvis or a Gandhi – challenge the existence of a firm boundary between the “hagiographical” and the “biographical” genres.

The religious character of hagiography, Rupert Snell observes, has contributed to its marginalization, even in academic discourse, as a “tedious impediment to verifiable historiography.”<sup>65</sup> One illustrative example is the eminent historian of Maharashtrian history and literature S.G. Tulpule’s assessment of Narahari Malu’s *Bhaktikathāmṛt*: “The lives it contains are complete in every biographical detail. Only, they are all concocted and most unreliable.”<sup>66</sup> Moreover, Christian Novetzke has noted that the dichotomy between history and religion, which often manifests itself in the juxtaposition of historical “fact” against hagiographic “fiction,” is not limited to the discussion of Hegel, the “Hindoos,” and the perceived lack of historical consciousness on the subcontinent in nineteenth-century European scholarship; it remains entrenched in some areas of the modern academy, too.<sup>67</sup> Writing in another academic context, Elizabeth Stuart observes that some scholars still look at hagiography through “spectacles of suspicion” because its content contravenes the efforts of history – that is, the capital-H History of positivist historians – to produce objective knowledge about people and events in the past.<sup>68</sup> Similarly, Elizabeth Johnson inquires about the usefulness of the traditional lives of saints in modernity because “the modern and postmodern spirit offer a poor fit

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<sup>65</sup> Rupert Snell, “Introduction: Themes in Indian Hagiography,” in *According to Tradition: Hagiographical Writing in India*, eds. William A. Callewaert and Rupert Snell (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1994), 1.

<sup>66</sup> S.G. Tulpule, *Classical Marāṭhī Literature: From the Beginning to A.D. 1818* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1979), 432.

<sup>67</sup> Christian Novetzke, “The Theographic and the Historiographic in an Indian Sacred Life Story,” *Sikh Formations*, 3, no. 2 (December 2007): 170-172.

<sup>68</sup> Elizabeth Stuart, *Spitting at Dragons: Towards a Feminist Theology of Sainthood* (Woonsocket, RI: Mowbray Publishers, 1996), 133.

for traditional appreciation of the saints. Not only does this age deflate heroes, but the hagiography and iconography of many established saints render them remote and even singularly unattractive to contemporary concerns.”<sup>69</sup> At least in the United States, popular usage of the term “hagiography” beyond the academy, as in *New York Times* reviews of films about Olympic runner turned WW2 soldier Louis Zamperini or Myanmar opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, indicates that it is something not to be trusted, something that “paralyzes history” and distorts the truth, viz. presenting a “life embalmed in hagiographic awe.”<sup>70</sup>

Due to its conceptual baggage, one option is to jettison “hagiography” from scholarly discourse because its roots in Christian traditions would prohibit cross-cultural application, or because it has become synonymous with pious fiction, the antithesis of “true history.” To this end, Lucien Febvre notes that the ossification of the products of language – things like labels, terms, and categories – can be an impediment to academic study.<sup>71</sup> This reasoning is the basis for Thomas Heffernan’s decision to adopt a new category of analysis, “sacred biography,” in lieu of the now-pejorative “hagiography.”<sup>72</sup> Part of the reason that I have elected to keep and engage with “hagiography” – as a heuristic device, a convenient conceptual tool – is that surrendering the term is to buy

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<sup>69</sup> Elizabeth Johnson, *Friends of God and Prophets: A Feminist Theological Reading of the Communion of Saints* (New York: Continuum, 1998), 17-18.

<sup>70</sup> Manohla Dargis, “Surviving the Sea, and the Cruelties Beyond,” review of *Unbroken*, dir. Angelina Jolie, *New York Times*, December 25, 2014, [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/25/arts/unbroken-directed-by-angelina-jolie.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/25/arts/unbroken-directed-by-angelina-jolie.html?_r=0), accessed December 26, 2015; A.O. Scott, “A Life and a Nation, Tightly Bound,” review of *The Lady*, dir. Luc Besson, *New York Times*, April 11, 2012 <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/11/movies/the-lady-by-luc-besson-set-in-myanmar-stars-michelle-yeoh.html>, accessed December 26, 2015.

<sup>71</sup> Roger Chartier, “Intellectual History of Sociocultural History? The French Trajectories,” in *Modern European Intellectual History: Reappraisals and New Perspectives*, ed. Dominick LaCapra and Steven L. Kaplan (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), 16.

<sup>72</sup> Heffernan, *Sacred Biography*, 15-16.



into the dialectical opposition between history as fact and hagiography as fiction. To counter this opposition, one might follow Hayden White and Edward Said who have shown that all forms of knowledge, including historical and hagiographical narratives, must be contextualized and that all presumptions of objectivity must be scrutinized. This brings us the necessary reminder that history and hagiography are much more similar in structure and aesthetics than they are often perceived to be. Historians writing history, White argues in *Metahistory* (1973), “emplot” the people, places, and events about whom they write in aesthetic frames (comedy, tragedy, satire, romance) that put protagonists and antagonists into conflicts and push them towards resolutions.<sup>73</sup> Consider the different names for the war that took place in the United States between 1861 and 1865. To some in the South, it was a War of Northern Aggression; others in the North held it as a War of Rebellion. Each historiography resonates in different socioeconomic contexts and political agendas. More pertinently to the present subject of study, one might also remember that 1857 was a “mutiny” for the British and the “first war of independence” for nationalist historians in India.

One criticism of the first wave of scholarship on Sai Baba is that the dialectical opposition between history and hagiography undergirds the study of the saint. Let’s consider one example of trying to tease history out of hagiography in Marianne Warren’s *Unraveling the Enigma*. In an appendix titled “1857: Sai Baba and the War of Indian

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<sup>73</sup> See also Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987). This later work of Hayden White pursues his critique of positivist historiography by showing that history assumes different meanings according to the different narrative imaginations brought to bear on historical “facts.” Moreover, this work is helpful for the study of hagiography because it reveals that narrative forms produce new content. In this dissertation, an example of a new form of hagiographic expression producing new hagiographic content comes in Chapter 5, where we will examine the hagiographical transformation of Sai Baba’s lamp lighting miracle in text and film over the twentieth century.

Independence,” Warren highlights a piece of testimony from Balakrishna Govind Upasani Shastri, the brother of the saint Upasani Maharaj of Sakori (d. 1941). As recorded in B.V. Narasimhaswami’s *Charters and Sayings*, Shastri says that he once heard Sai Baba say: “I was at the battle in which [the] Rani of Jhansi took part. I was then in the army.”<sup>74</sup> A lively question for the positivist historian, who looks at the past as a rational and linear progression of events, would be: Did Sai Baba, as this devotee claims, *actually* join the rani’s army and fight the British in the Mutiny of 1857? Warren first evaluates the source of information in a way not unlike Bukhari, Muslim, and other compilers of Islamic *hadith* and determines that Shastri, who (she notes) is from a reputable family, offers such a “bald statement [that] sounds like a genuine remembrance as it was a remark made in passing, leaving us with a tantalising lack of detailed information.”<sup>75</sup> The unembellished nature of the testimony, argues Warren, should be enough to certify its authenticity.

Warren then offers three possible explanations to account for Shastri’s testimony. First, Sai Baba’s upbringing as a Sufi – which is the principal argument in *Unravelling the Enigma* – would prohibit him from fighting in war, so the statement must be fiction or one of Sai Baba’s enigmatic utterances.<sup>76</sup> Second, Sai Baba’s Sufi upbringing might have included the virtues of “upholding law and order and protection of one’s mother country,” so he might have joined the army but did not fight.<sup>77</sup> Third, Sai Baba’s saintly mission on earth might have included the liberation of India from foreign rule, so it is possible that he joined and fought in the army. Warren ultimately concludes that “there is

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<sup>74</sup> Narasimhaswami, *Charters and Sayings*, 209.

<sup>75</sup> Warren, *Unravelling the Enigma*, 393.

<sup>76</sup> In premodern South Asia, some Sufis did, in fact, fight in wars. See Eaton, *The Sufis of Bijapur*, 19ff.

<sup>77</sup> Warren, *Unravelling the Enigma*, 393.

no satisfactory conclusion” to the story because it is “a matter of belief or rejection.”<sup>78</sup> Scrutinizing this testimony for its purported historicity adds nothing to our understanding of Sai Baba. This particular testimony, far from whether it *reports* actual events or not, is important because it *transfers* symbolic capital to Shirdi Sai Baba. It emplots – to borrow White’s verbiage – the young Sai Baba (before his arrival in Shirdi) into the narrative of India against the British and puts him alongside one of the conflict’s principal anticolonial warriors. Furthermore, the connection missed in Warren’s analysis is that Shastri’s testimony is not just picked up by anybody. It appears in the works of B.V. Narasimhaswami, the hagiographer (as we will see in Chapter 3) with keen interest in connecting Sai Baba to India’s national unity. This testimony enables Narasimhaswami to state in his English (re)telling of Sai Baba’s story that the saint was “fully absorbed the modern spirit and understood the conditions of India,” part of which owes to his being “a fighter for Indian independence in 1857.”<sup>79</sup>

To be clear, this does not mean that we should reduce hagiography to pious exaggeration. In her study of accounts about the life of the sixteenth-century Vaishnava guru Advaita Acharya, Rebecca Manring reminds us that hagiographers write lives of saints that should stimulate the reader’s faith and challenge the limits of what the reader thinks is possible in this world. Manring continues: “These authors are not attempting to mislead their audiences with any devious or malicious intent, but rather are acting in the name of devotion to further an agenda they understand to have been propounded by the individual whose life story they relate, or that they themselves want to advance. They are

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 401.

<sup>79</sup> Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba*, 716.

writing several levels deep.”<sup>80</sup> Following this lead, I hold that the study of hagiography need not involve the determination of certain sources as more authentic (read: historical) than others, an approach that sacrifices the truth claims made in hagiography on the altar of positivist historicism.<sup>81</sup> It is more productive and interesting to consider a wide range of hagiographic sources, each of which paints a picture of an extraordinary life – a picture colored by the language, structure, and purpose with which a hagiographer creates hagiography. And it is, above all, an argument about why this life deserves attention.

A history of the arguments made in hagiography illuminates how the memory of a saint is contextual, fluid, and occasionally contested. As Rinehart observes in her study of modern Hindu hagiography, a hagiographic tradition “constitutes a kind of history – the history of how the saint’s followers have chosen to remember him or her.”<sup>82</sup> My references to the Shirdi Sai Baba hagiographic tradition do not to make any sort of normative claim about which source(s) should be included or excluded from the tradition in any singular, monolithic sense. Rather, I view the hagiographic tradition as possessing both continuities (i.e., the same stories being told) and ruptures, as information about Sai Baba is added and omitted over the last century’s worth of texts and films.

For example, the Sai Baba in Dabholkar’s *Satcarita* and Narasimhaswami’s *Life of Sai Baba* never mentions the subject of population control. However, Ashok Bhushan’s film *Shirdi ke Sai Baba* (1977), which was released in the midst of the Congress Party’s “small family, happy family” (*choṭā parivār, sukhī parivār*) campaign,

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<sup>80</sup> Manring, *The Fading Light*, 6.

<sup>81</sup> For similar methodological approaches to the study of history and hagiography, see Manring, *The Fading Light*, 4-9; Vincent Cornell, *Realm of the Saint: Power and Authority in Moroccan Sufism* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998); xl-xliv; Aviad Kleinberg, *Prophets in Their Own Country: Living Saints and the Making of Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 63-70.

<sup>82</sup> Rinehart, *One Lifetime, Many Lives*, 8.

ties the saint to the issue. While talking with an “untouchable” (*achūt*) girl from the village who says that she has two children, the actor Sudhir Dalvi’s Sai Baba turns hard to the camera, as if speaking to the audience, to announce: “It’s good when the family is small” (*ghar-samsār jab choṭā ho, tabhī acchā lagtā hai*). This is quite clearly anachronistic, for the film aligns Sai Baba with the Congress-sponsored discourse of the 1970s.<sup>83</sup> I do not mean to imply that Bhushan’s film obscures our understanding of the historical Sai Baba, or the Sai Baba imagined who – in early hagiographic texts – voiced no opinion on population control. Rather, I follow Andrew Quintman’s study of the Tibetan saint Milarepa in viewing the history of a hagiographic tradition “as a gradual process of embodiment,” an accretive layering of the significances attached to a holy person’s life and legacy.<sup>84</sup> A salient example of embodiment in the Shirdi Sai Baba hagiographic tradition comes through the disclaimer shown at the start of *Shirdi ke Sai Baba*, in which the filmmaker clearly invokes creative license: “In order to properly disseminate Baba’s message to all of humanity, [the film] has taken recourse to use some new characters and new issues to round out the story [of Sai Baba].”<sup>85</sup> Like any effective hagiography, additions, such as the “untouchable” girl and the saint’s advocacay of family planning, are pragmatic moves designed to make the saint relevant to new audiences. Accordingly, we should see *Shirdi ke Sai Baba* as exemplifying how hagiography – or, in this case, hagiographic film – can align a late nineteenth-century

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<sup>83</sup> For other connections between Sai Baba and Congress Party discourse in Bhushan’s hagiographic film *Shirdi ke Sai Baba*, see Elison, “Sai Baba of Bombay,” 174-176.

<sup>84</sup> Andrew Quintman, *The Yogin and the Madman: Reading the Biographical Corpus of Tibet’s Great Saint Milarepa* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 3.

<sup>85</sup> In transliterated Hindi, the disclaimer at the beginning of Bhushan’s film *Shirdi ke Sai Baba* reads: *Mānav jāti ke nām bābā ke sandeś ko pūrṇa rūp se peś karne ke liye kahānī ke adhūre hisson ko pūrā karne ke liye kuch naye nām aur nayī bāton kā sahārā liyā gayā hai.*

saint with a late twentieth-century social message, thereby making Sai Baba relevant to the times in which his story is told through film.

Another similarly anachronistic addition occurs in Bhushan's *Shirdi ke Sai Baba* when Sai Baba consoles the same "untouchable" girl who is upset because a Brahmin priest prohibited her from going into a Khandoba temple. Sai Baba then mollifies her by saying that she is "untouchable" because others "can't serve humanity the way you do. And in the Lord's eyes, the one [who] serves humanity is so great that a common person cannot even touch him. That is why they call you untouchable."<sup>86</sup> In doing so, we see the film making the saint into an ally of "untouchables," but it should also be noted that Dalit communities often regard this spiritualized redefinition of "untouchability" as disingenuous and dismissive of their experiences of Brahminical oppression. Notably, neither Dabholkar in the *Satcarita* nor Narasimhaswami in *Life of Sai Baba* have much to report on what Sai Baba thought about caste-based discrimination and the circumstances of the "untouchables."<sup>87</sup> As with Shastri's testimony about Sai Baba and the War of 1857, it is not insightful to analyze the content of a hagiographic film in light of the "real" Sai Baba. Rather, Sai Baba's spiritualized definition of "untouchability," like his approval of small families, expands the repertoire of what Sai Baba can be said to represent. By building the historiography of the Shirdi Sai Baba hagiographic tradition, we can see how

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<sup>86</sup> In transliterated Hindi, the dialogue attributed to Sai Baba reads: "Tum jaise mānav sevā ve kar nahīn sakte. Aur bhagvān kī nazaron meñ mānav sevā karnevālā itnā ūñcā hotā hai jise ām ādmī chū nahīn sakte. Isīlye ve log tumheñ achūt kahte haiñ." See Chapter 7 for further discussion of cinematic representations of Sai Baba with "untouchables."

<sup>87</sup> Many of the references to caste in Dabholkar's *Satcarita* are generalized statements about how people from "all castes" (ŚSSC 19:226 *bhakta aṭharā pagaḍ jātī*) came to Sai Baba and how he "treated all the *varṇas* equally and never distinguished *jātīs* from one another" (ŚSSC 7:19 *sakal varṇā samsamān / tayā na bhinnapaṇ jātīñcem*). When Sai Baba does teach others in the *Satcarita* about renouncing caste-based notions of purity and pollution, he does so while speaking with upper-caste Hindus (mostly Brahmins), not "untouchables." For more on this topic, see this dissertation's Chapter 7.

Sai Baba acquires a reputation – as he does in very recent sources like S. Nigam’s Hindi book *Sāī Bābā ke camatkār* – for being a modern-day humanist: “[Baba] didn’t believe in any caste or sect. For him, the most important religion was the religion of humanity (*mānav kā dharma*).”<sup>88</sup> For Nigam, this is more than rhetorical flourish because it sets up the portrayal of Sai Baba as a saint who opposes specific social ills like superstition (*andhaviśvās*), dowry (*dehaj*) and the practice of *sati* (*satī prathā*).<sup>89</sup> One might legitimately point out that the topic of *satī* does not appear in Dabholkar’s *Satcarita* or the works of Das Ganu. However, I approach the claims made in hagiographic and devotional literature not in terms of whether or not they are “true” or “factual” relative to a singular, standard, authoritative understanding of Shirdi Sai Baba but instead with the aim to paint a picture of a century’s worth of hagiographic tradition populated with many Shirdi Sai Babas.

### Chapter Synopses

As a point of departure for audiences unfamiliar with this dissertation’s subject, Chapter 1 is an overview of Shirdi Sai Baba’s life story. I organize this chapter around four major phases and events that reappear throughout the saint’s hagiographic tradition: 1) his arrival in Shirdi from parts unknown as a teenaged youth in the late 1850s; 2) his model of religious synthesis that combined Hindu and Islamic vocabularies and practices; 3) his public performance of two miracles evidencing his divine power (the seventy-two hours during which the saint entered into and came back from a deathlike meditative state of *samādhī* in 1886 and the time that he lit lamps in his mosque with consecrated water

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<sup>88</sup> Sunit Nigam, *Sāībābā ke camatkār* (New Delhi: Hind Pocket Books, 2013), 13.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 14 and 86.

instead of oil in 1892) and other miracles that he performed for smaller audiences; and 4) his physical death, or *mahāsamādhi*, and burial in the Samadhi Mandir, the tomb-temple complex in Shirdi that has become the epicenter of Shirdi Sai Baba devotion. This first chapter provides the necessary introduction to the highlights of the saint's life and legacy, which, as we will see in subsequent chapters, have evolved over the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

In the second chapter, I look at the earliest written account about Shirdi Sai Baba: the Marathi poetry in Chapter 57 of Das Ganu Maharaj's *Santakathāmṛt* (1903). This text showcases what I call the "philosophizing Sai Baba," a representation of the saint wherein he speaks like an erudite guru explicating Hindu philosophical concepts like *brahmajñāna*, *caitanya*, and *māyā*. I argue that the *Santakathāmṛt* is important for the holistic study of the hagiographic tradition because its image of the "philosophizing Sai Baba" is a curiosity vis-à-vis later hagiographic sources claiming that the saint never gave long, elaborate discourses on metaphysical subjects. I use this chapter to explore the production of hagiography in the context of the relationship between Sai Baba and the hagiographer Das Ganu, and it profiles the first example of Sai Baba's semiotic flexibility, by which I mean the saint's ability to mean different things to different people in different contexts. Das Ganu's portrayal of Sai Baba in this text, I suggest, reflects what the saint looks like to a hagiographer who understands a pivotal moment in his life as necessitating the wisdom to discriminate the real from the illusory.

Chapter 3 draws attention to a subtle but significant change in the manner of describing Sai Baba's ambiguous religious identity. From a comparative study of two hagiographic texts, we see that Sai Baba goes from being "neither Hindu nor Muslim" in



early twentieth-century Marathi sources like Dabholkar's *Satcarita* to becoming "both Hindu and Muslim" in later works, particularly B.V. Narasimhaswami's English text *Life of Sai Baba* (1955). I argue that to understand the shift from Dabholkar's apophatic "neither/nor" to Narasimhaswami's integrative "both/and" requires looking at Narasimhaswami's literary career not as a malevolent attempt to "convert" a Muslim into a Hindu saint (as some have argued), but as his strategy to repurpose Sai Baba for a postcolonial audience and a postcolonial discourse, namely, the discourse of national integration in newly independent India. To argue that Sai Baba is a composite figure, Narasimhaswami synthesizes other hagiographic sources and devotees' testimonies to build a narrative of Sai Baba's earliest years, a subject about which Dabholkar's *Satcarita* is silent. In Narasimhaswami's narrative, the young Sai Baba (before coming to Shirdi) is born to Brahmin parents, tutored for a few years by Sufi fakir, and initiated by a Brahmin guru named Venkusha – a Brahmin-to-Muslim-to-Brahmin origin story that remakes Sai Baba into a composite figure whose connection with Islam is sandwiched between slices of Brahminism. Narasimhaswami's narrative of Sai Baba's earliest years, however, does contain some loose ends, like how the baby Sai Baba was transferred from his Brahmin parents to the Sufi couple just after his birth. For additional information on Shirdi Sai Baba's origin, this chapter concludes with revelations from the saint's purported reincarnation Sathya Sai Baba who brings the Hindu deities Shiva and Parvati into his predecessor's birth story. When we look at the history of the hagiographic tradition, we thus see that interpretations brought to bear on Sai Baba's earliest years accrue over the twentieth century: from the mystery in the *Satcarita* to the theory of Brahmin birth in *Life*

of *Sai Baba* and to Sathya Sai Baba's revelation that Shirdi Sai Baba was an incarnation of Shiva.

Chapter 4 further explores some of the questions raised in Chapter 3 regarding the political implications of making Shirdi Sai Baba into a spokesman for national integration and peacebuilding in modern India. In Chapter 4, I begin by interrogating the usefulness and appropriateness of applying the term "syncretism" to Shirdi Sai Baba, a saint known for mixing religious forms and blurring the boundaries between categories like "Hindu" and "Muslim." I argue that Shirdi Sai Baba is indeed a syncretistic saint inasmuch as he has been constructed and deconstructed as such by his devotees and detractors. First, I study the representations of Shirdi Sai Baba's syncretistic nature in two Hindi films: *Amar, Akbar, Anthony* (dir. Manmohan Desai, 1977) and *Shirdi ke Sai Baba* (dir. Ashok Bhushan, 1977). I argue that while these representations aim to show a saint in whom religious differences can be unified, they come with a politics of compositeness in which the saint is marked as being more "Hindu." This means that the films assign the saint a Hindu-inflected compositeness, one capable of encompassing non-Hindu others within a Hindu embrace. Second, I do a close reading of two recent instances of anti-Shirdi Sai Baba sentiment: the war of words between a Hindu religious leader named Swami Swaroopananda and Sai Baba devotees in the summer of 2014; and the public page on Facebook called "Shirdi Sai Baba: The Biggest Hypocrite in the History of India" (*śirḍī sāī bābā: bhārat ke itihās kā sabse baḍā pākhaṇḍ*). Through these sections, I argue that the swami and the Facebook page's creators implicate Shirdi Sai Baba in another type of politics of compositeness, one that involves dissecting the claim that the saint is

syncretistic, thereby exposing him as a Muslim holy man incompatible with “proper” Hinduism (i.e., *sanātana dharma*).

The fifth, sixth, and seventh chapters advance one of the dissertation’s principal arguments pertaining to the organic and accretive nature of the Shirdi Sai Baba hagiographic tradition by examining the descriptions and portrayals of the saint’s miracles in hagiographic text and film. Chapter 5 introduces the topic of Shirdi Sai Baba’s thaumaturgy by looking at the emic terms for “miracle” in hagiographic sources: *līlā* and *camatkār*. The remainder of this chapter focuses on the history of one particular miracle story – Sai Baba’s lamp lighting miracle – as it has been told and retold in many hagiographic sources, including texts like Das Ganu’s *Bhaktalīlāmṛt* (1906), Dabholkar’s *Satcarita* (1929), Narasimhaswami’s *Life of Sai Baba* (1955), and Sunit Nigam’s *Sāī Bābā ke camatkār* (2013), as well as Ashok Bhushan’s hagiographic film *Shirdi ke Sai Baba* (1977). In charting the history of the hagiographical transformation of the lamp lighting miracle, we see how generations of hagiographers have tweaked the story in various ways such that by the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the story has evolved from being an evidentiary miracle establishing the saint’s divine power to becoming a miracle with stronger epistemological overtones in the context of the saint’s interaction with a particular individual.

Chapter 6 focuses on a specific theme within a selection of Shirdi Sai Baba miracle stories in Dabholkar’s *Satcarita* and Narasimhaswami’s *Devotees’ Experiences of Sri Sai Baba* (1940). Many accounts of Sai Baba’s ability to cure illnesses and diseases of various sorts, hagiographers and devotees – many of whom belong to the well-educated middle classes newly emerging in colonial society – often refer to the conflict of

two epistemological worldviews: one that is grounded in a logical, rational, or scientific understanding of the world; and one that stems from the faith in Shirdi Sai Baba's miraculous means that transcend logical causality. As I bring attention to the recurrent theme of epistemological conflict in devotional testimonies about the experience of miraculous power, I also use this conflict to explore the methodological assumptions behind my interpretation of Shirdi Sai Baba miracle stories. Here, I contend that the anthropology of credibility is an appropriate and useful analytic frame for navigating the emic descriptions of miraculous experiences and elucidating what the miracles mean to their experiencers – like the well-educated middle class devotees for whom Sai Baba's miracles challenge their understanding of what can and cannot be rationally explained.

Chapter 7 focuses on another selection of miracles stories. In hagiographic text (Dabholkar's *Satcarita*) and film (Bhushan's *Shirdi ke Sai Baba*), we see a number of encounters between the saint and Brahmins, and we find that a pattern clearly emerges. The Brahmins initially oppose Sai Baba for a variety of reasons but eventually see the error of their ways as a result of miraculous experiences engineered by the saint. In this chapter, I approach these encounters as a way to understand the inclusion of Brahmins into the Sai Baba devotional community, a context where one's high-caste status would be more of a social liability than an advantage. In doing so, I show that the Shirdi Sai Baba hagiographic tradition contains elements of anti-Brahminism that manifest in miracle stories that critique Brahminical excesses, while this critique simultaneously becomes subordinated to the construction of Sai Baba as a saint through whom anyone and everyone can be morally and spiritually rehabilitated.

## Chapter 1

### **A Synopsis of the Life of Sai Baba of Shirdi (d. 1918)**

As the first step in the study of the Shirdi Sai Baba hagiographic tradition, this first chapter is my abbreviated reconstruction, or synopsis, of the saint's life story. The purpose of this synopsis is to provide the reader with an overview of the story's major events and themes, many of which will be explored further in the dissertation's proceeding chapters. In this reconstruction, I draw most heavily from G.R. Dabholkar's *Śrī Sāī Satcarita*, a hagiographic text with 9,000-plus verses of Marathi religious poetry and the closest thing to a "central scripture" in the world of Sai Baba devotion. However, in line with the multivocal composition of Sai Baba's life and legacy in many hagiographic texts and films, I also highlight some of the parts of the story that undergo transformation in other hagiographic sources like the Marathi poetic compositions of Das Ganu Maharaj (e.g., *Bhaktalīlāmṛt* [1906], *Bhaktirasāmṛt* [1925]), B.V. Narasimhaswami's four-volume text *Life of Sai Baba* (1955) in English prose, and Ashok Bhushan's 1977 hagiographic film *Shirdi ke Sai Baba* in Hindi. For the sake of clarity and concision, I have divided this chapter into four sections:

- Sai Baba's mysterious arrival in Shirdi as a teenaged youth coming from parts unknown, sometime in the late 1850s;
- Sai Baba's behavior in Shirdi, including his synthesis of Hindu and Islamic vocabularies and practices;
- the numerous miracles attributed to Sai Baba and the growth of his popularity beyond Shirdi in the first two decades of the twentieth century;
- and Sai Baba's death in 1918, followed by his burial in the structure that became the Samadhi Mandir.

It is impractical to catalogue every event, including every miracle, recorded in the Shirdi Sai Baba hagiographic tradition, let alone Dabholkar's voluminous *Satcarita*. There are

many viable sources – both devotional<sup>1</sup> and academic<sup>2</sup> – with more comprehensive reconstructions of Sai Baba’s life story. However, this synopsis is useful to begin the present study on how Shirdi Sai Baba has been imagined, transformed, and constructed hagiographically – or, in other words, how the saint’s “bones” have spoken to his hagiographers and devotees over the last century.

### **The Young Sai Baba Arrives, Leaves, and Returns to Shirdi**

According to Dabholkar’s *Satcarita*, the origin of Sai Baba before his arrival in Shirdi is a complete mystery about which no one has any definite information. In *Sacarita* 5:24, Dabholkar writes: “This Sai is indestructible and very ancient – neither Hindu nor Muslim (*nāhīm hindū nā yavana*), without caste, descent, family, and lineage. Know that his real form is self-realization.”<sup>3</sup> And, in *Satcarita* 10:119, he reiterates: “[Baba] is neither Hindu nor Muslim. He has neither *āśram* nor *varṇa*. But he can bring about the complete extinction of worldly concerns.”<sup>4</sup> Earlier hagiographic accounts composed by Das Ganu Maharaj similarly reference the unknowability of Sai Baba’s origin because the

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<sup>1</sup> In addition to the earlier works by hagiographers like Das Ganu, Dabholkar, and Narasimhaswami, see more recent publications, such as Kamath and Kher’s *Sai Baba of Shirdi: A Unique Saint* (1991), S.P. Ruhela’s *Shirdi Sai the Supreme* (1997) and *Shri Shirdi Sai Baba: The Unique Prophet of Integration* (2000), and C.B. Satpathy’s *Shirdi Sai Baba and Other Perfect Masters* (2001). See also hagiographic films such as Ashok Bhushan’s *Shirdi ke Sai Baba* (1977), Om Sai Prakash’s *Bhagwan Sri Sai Baba* (1993), and Deepak Balraj Vij’s *Shirdi Saibaba* (2001).

<sup>2</sup> For a monograph-length study of Sai Baba’s life and teachings, see Rigopoulos’s *The Life and Teachings of Sai Baba of Shirdi*. A good synopsis is available in the first chapter of Smriti Srinivas’s *In the Presence of Sai Baba*.

<sup>3</sup> Dabholkar, *ŚSSC*, 5:24 *sāi avināś purātan / nāhīm hindū nā yavana / jāt pāt kuḷ gotahīn / svarup jān nijabodh*.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 10:119 *to nā hindū nā yavana / tayā nā āśram vā varṇa / pari karī samūḷ nikṛntan / niḥsantān bhavāce*.

saint is “beyond any affiliation with any specific caste or lineage” (*jātagotātītā*)<sup>5</sup> and questions about his birthplace and real name made him very angry.<sup>6</sup>

In the fourth chapter of the *Satcarita*, we learn that the youth who would eventually become known as Sai Baba first appeared sitting in a meditative posture underneath a tree on Shirdi’s outskirts. An elderly woman – the mother of a future Sai Baba devotee named Nana Chopdar – describes the boy as fair, handsome, and apparently immune to the effects of heat and cold while practicing his meditational austerities (*tap*), but the *Satcarita* provides no other information on the boy’s background: “Baba’s birthplace, lineage, and the identity of his mother and father – no one knew anything about these matters... Having left his parents, loved ones, and all ties with others in the world (*samsārajāt*), he manifested in Shirdi for the welfare of humanity.”<sup>7</sup> To provide a familiar interpretive frame, the hagiographer Dabholkar finds parallels between Sai Baba and other saintly figures with regard to their inexplicable advents: “Just as Gonai fortuitously found Namdev and Tamal found Kabir in oyster shells in the Bhima River and Bhagirathi River [respectively], so too did Sai Nath, at the tender age of sixteen years, first show himself to devotees under a *neem* tree in Shirdi village.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Das Ganu, *ŚSSM*, 125.

<sup>6</sup> G.D. Sahasrabuddhe (alias Das Ganu Maharaj), *Bhaktalīlāmṛt* (hereafter: *BLA*), 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Gorha: Shri Das Ganu Maharaj Pratishthan, 2010 [1906]), 33:14-20. These verses are discussed further in Chapter 2.

<sup>7</sup> Dabholkar, *ŚSSC*, 4:113 *janma bābāñcā koṇya deśīm / athavā koṇyā pavitra vaṁśī / koṇyā māṭāpitarāñcyā kuśīm / he koṇāsī ṭhāvēṁ na*; 4:115 *soḍūni mātā pītar āpta / gaṇagot āṇi jāṭ pāt / tyāgūni sakal samsārajāt / prakāṭalā janahitārtha śirḍīnt*.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 4:110-111 *jaisā goṇās bhīmarathīnt / tamālās bhāgīthīnt / nāmā kabīr śimpālyā-ānt / sudaive prāpta jāhale // taisece he sāināth / taruṇ solā varṣāñce vayānt / nimbāṭalīm śirḍī gāvāt / pratham bhaktārtha prakāṭale*. On Namdev’s birth, see Novetzke, *Religion and Public Memory*, 54-55. On Kabir’s birth, see David Lorenzen, *Kabir Legends and Ananta-Das’s Kabir Parachai* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1991), 44.

The *Satcarita* does not explicitly identify why the teenaged saint came to Shirdi and sat under one of its *neem* trees. It would be an understatement to say that Shirdi had little political and economic significance before Sai Baba's arrival in the middle of the nineteenth century. The village was little more than a hamlet with two hundred dwellings and approximately one thousand inhabitants.<sup>9</sup> Administratively, nineteenth-century Shirdi was part of Ahmednagar District in the British-controlled Bombay Presidency, but it also straddled the border with the Nizam of Hyderabad's territory. The nearest railway station in Kopergaon was about fifteen kilometers away, while the nearest village (Rahata) with a weekly market was several kilometers away. In an interview obtained by the hagiographer B.V. Narasimhaswami in 1936, Tarabai Sadashiv Tarkhad – the wife of R.A. Tarkhad, the secretary of Bombay's Khatau Mills – described how the village looked about a century ago: “Shirdi in those days was a neglected hamlet without any lighting, sweeping and other conveniences of civilization. It has had some improvement since. But when I was there, the streets and passages were all dark and unlit at night.”<sup>10</sup> Due to its remote and rural character, the village of Shirdi does not appear on the maps produced by the British colonial administration, like those in the Imperial Gazetteer.

In the story of Sai Baba's first arrival in Shirdi in the *Satcarita*, another episode suggests why the saint was drawn to the village. After being spotted by the elderly woman, other villagers become curious about the boy. Some individuals – the *Satcarita* offers no further details about them – go to the village's Khandoba temple and enter into a trance-like state of possession by the god (*khaṇḍobāre vārem ālem*).<sup>11</sup> Speaking through

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<sup>9</sup> Rigopoulos, *The Life and Teachings*, 123.

<sup>10</sup> Narasimhaswami, *Devotees' Experiences*, 67-68.

<sup>11</sup> Dabholkar, *SSSC*, 4:124



the mediums, Khandoba calls for a hoe and tells the others to dig below the *neem* tree. They find some bricks, and eventually a cave-like cell with four miraculous burning candles along with a stool ornamented with the face of a cow (*gomukhī pāt*) and a beautiful string of beads used during meditation (*māl sundar*).<sup>12</sup> At this point, Dabholkar's *Satcarita* presents two explanations for this underground structure. The medium possessed by Khandoba says that the boy had previously performed austerities for twelve years at this place in Shirdi, while the boy tells the villagers that it is actually the place of his guru, or *gurusthān*. While Dabholkar remarks that the latter statement by the boy was probably a joke (*gamatī*), the hagiographer ultimately dismisses the search for the truth amidst these two explanations: "This must be an example Baba's childlike fondness for joking. Is it important whether this places belongs to him or his guru?"<sup>13</sup> In Shirdi today, a small shrine has settled the mystery, as it commemorates the site as not just the place his guru had once resided and practiced but also the guru's tomb.<sup>14</sup>

Another way to approach the mystery hanging over the identity of the guru associated with Sai Baba's *gurusthān* is to consider the narrative context in the *Satcarita* in which this issue is broached. After uncovering his *gurusthān*, the teenaged saint lived in the village for three years before abruptly leaving. Hagiographers, including Das Ganu, Dabholkar, and Narasimhaswami, do not speculate where the saint went during this time – although there is a peculiar devotional testimony in Narasimhaswami's *Devotees' Experiences* that claims Sai Baba once referred to his participation in the Mutiny of 1857

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 4:125-129.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 4:134 *bābā mūlaceci vinodapriya / aselahī bhuyār tyāñceñc ālay / parī guruceṁ mhaṇatām kāy jāy / mahattva kāy veñce kīm.*

<sup>14</sup> See the explanation of the *gurusthān* on the website of the Shri Sai Baba Sansthan and Trust in Shirdi: [https://www.shrisaibabasansthan.org/new\\_eng%20template\\_shirdi/shirdi/gurusthan.html](https://www.shrisaibabasansthan.org/new_eng%20template_shirdi/shirdi/gurusthan.html).

as a warrior in Lakshmibai's army at Jhansi.<sup>15</sup> The saint's disappearance is generally regarded as the saint's period of wandering around the borderlands between the British-controlled Ahmednagar District and the territory of the Nizam of Hyderabad. Upon Sai Baba's return to Shirdi, the *gurusthān* is not mentioned again; it becomes simply another episode in the catalogue of episodes in the *Satcarita* that builds the enigmatic character of Shirdi's resident saint.

Following the episode of arrival to and departure from Shirdi, the chronology of Sai Baba's life story progresses to his encounter with a Muslim man named Chand Patil. The fifth chapter of the *Satcarita* describes how Patil, the headman (*grāmādhikārī*) of Dhupkheda village (approx. 100km east of Shirdi) in the Nizam's territory, had lost his mare on his travels through the countryside. While searching, he finds a young man dressed like a Muslim mendicant, or fakir, wearing a headscarf (*topī*) and long robe (*kafanī*), sitting underneath a mango tree and smoking crushed tobacco in a pipe (*cilīm*). The fakir invites Patil to smoke with him, and over conversation, the fakir learns of Patil's problem. When the fakir tells Patil exactly where to find his missing mare at a nearby rivulet, he thinks to himself, "I have met a true saint" (*manīm mhaṇe awliyā bheṭalā*).<sup>16</sup> The headman's astonishment deepens as the fakir pulls out his pair of tongs (*cimṭa*), thrusting them into the ground and pulling out a burning ember. Another miracle follows; the fakir hits the ground with his walking stick (*saṭkā*) and draws the water necessary to wet the cloth covering the pipe that he and Patil share.

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<sup>15</sup> Narasimhaswami, *Devotees' Experiences*, 230. The author of this testimony is Balakrishna Govind Upasani Shastri, the brother of the saint known as Upasani Maharaj of Sakori, and he claims: "[Baba] said he had been at the battle in which the Rani of Jhansi took part. He was then in the army." In this dissertation's introduction, I argue that the historical analysis of this claim by Marianne Warren (cf. *Unravelling the Enigma*, 391-401) misses the point of this episode, which is the portrayal of the saint as an active participant in the fight for Indian independence.

<sup>16</sup> Dabholkar, *ŚSSC*, 5:13.

Another hagiographic account of the Baba-Patil encounter adds considerable detail to what happened in the countryside. Writing contemporaneously with Dabholkar and his *Satcarita*, the other major early twentieth-century Marathi hagiographer Das Ganu Maharaj describes the encounter in Chapter 52 of the *Bhaktisārāmṛt* (1925). In this account, one minor difference is a change in terminology. After witnessing the fakir drawing embers and water out of the ground, Patil declares him to be a messenger (*paigambar*), not a saint (*awliyā*).<sup>17</sup> Another significant difference between the *Satcarita* and *Bhaktisārāmṛt* versions of this story is that the latter is about three times longer than the former. Das Ganu gives much more dialogue to Sai Baba, who both locates Patil's mare and also teaches him to be wary of attaching to material possessions. This version of Sai Baba – who resembles the “philosophizing Sai Baba,” a version of the saint in one of Das Ganu's earlier texts, the *Santakathāmṛt* (1903) – warns Patil: “Oh, stupid Chandbhai! See that everything in the world is illusion (*māyā*). Keep God (*allā ilāhī*) in your mind, always remember the Provider (*parvardigār*).”<sup>18</sup>

From this point onward, the story of the encounter between Sai Baba and Chand Patil follows the same narrative trajectory in Dabholkar's *Satcarita* and Das Ganu's *Bhaktisārāmṛt*. To repay the fakir for his kindness, Patil invites him to his village Dhupkheda. Coincidentally, one of Patil's relatives – his wife's nephew – had just become engaged to a girl from a family in Shirdi. Sai Baba accepts the invitation to join the wedding party on its journey westward. There is no indication in either text that anyone in Shirdi immediately recognizes the fakir as the young boy who had previously

<sup>17</sup> Das Ganu, *BSA*, 52:31 *āpaṇ sākṣāt paigambar*.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 52:40 *are veḍyā cāndbhāī / hī avaghī māyā pāhī / manīm allā ilāhī / parvardigār āṭhavī bā*. The term *parvardigār* is a Persian name for God that means “the Cherisher, the Provider, Providence.” See John T. Platts, *A Dictionary of Urdu, Classical Hindi, and English* (London: W.H. Allen and Co., 1884), 256.

stayed in the village for several years. Mhalsapati, the caretaker of the village's Khandoba temple, greets the fakir by calling out, "Sai, please come" (*yā sātī*).<sup>19</sup> As noted in the dissertation's introduction, scholars and subsequent generations of hagiographers have proposed different etymologies for this term as being derived from Persian or Sanskrit terminology. Neither Das Ganu nor Dabholkar offer their own etymology; they simply state that it is the term first used by Mhalsapati and that it simply stuck so that the newcomer came to be known as the Sai Baba of Shirdi.

By Dabholkar's estimation, this encounter between Sai Baba and Chand Patil occurred in or around 1858. Given that Sai Baba lived for sixty years in Shirdi and that the saint was about twenty years old on his return to Shirdi with the Patil wedding party, Dabholkar deduces that the saint might have been born in 1838.<sup>20</sup> Currently, this span of the saint's lifetime (1838-1918) is commonly cited in devotional and academic literature, but other variations exist. For example, Sathya Sai Baba (1926-2011), the self-professed reincarnation of Shirdi Sai Baba, revealed previously unknown information about his predecessor in the early 1990s, including a richly mythicized narrative of the circumstances leading to the saint's birth. In doing so, Sathya Sai claimed that Shirdi Sai was actually born in 1835.<sup>21</sup>

### **Sai Baba's Model of Religious Synthesis in Shirdi**

Whereas Dabholkar frames Sai Baba's decision to settle in Shirdi as the village's inexplicable good fortune, the hagiographer also reviews the general reasons for the

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<sup>19</sup> Dabholkar, *SSC*, 5:25.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 10:43 "Given his eighty-year lifetime, one might surmise that Baba was born in *śake* 1760 [1838 CE]" (*evam aiśīcā āyurdāy / sthūlamānācā hā niścay / kīm śake satarāśem sāṭh hoy / janma-nirṇay babāñcā*).

<sup>21</sup> For more on Sathya Sai Baba's revelations about his predecessor's origin, see Chapter 3.

earthly incarnation of saints (*santāñcā avatār*).<sup>22</sup> He uses one of the standard hagiographic tropes in South Asia, namely, the description of the present age, the *kaliyuga*, as full of social, religious, and ethical turmoil: Brahmins eating meat and disregarding the fourfold life stages of *varṇāśrāmadharma*, Shudras trying to become Brahmins, and the wicked “instigating communal hatred” (*panthadveṣa jātī mājūn*).<sup>23</sup> Moreover, Dabholkar frames Sai Baba’s arrival as a modern-day fulfillment of *Bhagavad Gītā* 4:8, the verse in which Krishna vows to take births age after age. But in the *Satcarita*, it is Sai Baba who has come to awaken righteousness (*dharmajāgrtī*) amidst its waning (*dharmaglāni*).<sup>24</sup>

More explicitly, in the *Satcarita*’s tenth chapter, Dabholkar contextualizes Sai Baba’s arrival in in Shirdi as the staging ground for the fulfillment of the saint’s mission to foster Hindu-Muslim comity. First, he briefly describes the circumstances two hundred years before Sai Baba:

India was under the assault of the Muslims (*yavanākrānta*). Hindu kings had been trampled underfoot; the path of religious devotion (*bhaktimārga*) had all but disappeared; and the people had lost their righteousness.

At that time, Ramdas appeared. As the moral support of the ruler Shivaji, he protected the kingdom from the Muslims and safeguarded the cows and Brahmins.

In less than two hundred years, relations between Hindus and Muslims (*avindha*) deteriorated and Hindu-Muslim enmity (*duhī*) took hold. This is precisely what Baba eliminated.

Ram and Rahim are one. There is no difference between the two. So, why hesitate to grasp the concept of devotion? Why behave harshly [with others]?

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<sup>22</sup> Dabholkar, *ŚSSC*, 4:2.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 4:5-8.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 4:11.

You foolish children! Fasten the bonds of Hindu-Muslim comity. Be firm in rising up to virtuous thoughts. Then you will reach the shore beyond (*pailthaḍ*).<sup>25</sup>

Through the examples of Ramdas and Shirdi Sai Baba, Dabholkar argues that saints have appeared in *bharatabhūmī* – “the land of Bharata,” or India – at specific moments to address specific concerns. Ramdas is the seventeenth-century saint whose moral exhortations, his devotees say, revived Hindu *dharma* and provided the moral foundation for the Maratha chieftain Shiva Maharaj’s uprising against Muslim rule in premodern Maharashtra.<sup>26</sup> Dabholkar’s characterization of Ramdas and Shivaji in the *Satcarita* aligns with the views of contemporary Hindu nationalist organizations (e.g., RSS, Shiv Sena) that these two savior-type figures helped liberate Hindus (in Maharashtra) from Muslim domination.<sup>27</sup> By the early twentieth century, the memory of proto-national agents of Indian liberation like Ramdas and Shivaji often dovetailed with the discourse of communalism, the idea that Hindus and Muslims in India have been warring against one another for ages.<sup>28</sup> While the appropriateness and usefulness of “communalism” as an analytic category is a topic beyond the scope of this dissertation, it

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 10:47-51 *bharatabhūmi yavanākrānta / hindū nṛpa pādākrānta / bhaktimārga jhālā lupta / dharmarahit jan jhāle // taim rāmdās jhāle nirmāṇ / śivarāyātem hātīm dharūn / kelem yavanāmpāsūn rājyarakṣaṇ / gobrāhmaṇ saṁrakṣaṇ // purīm donhī na śatakeṁ gelīm / pūrvīl ghaḍī punaśca bighaḍālī / hindu avindhīm duhī padaḷī / tī mag bābānnī toḍālī // rām āṇi rahīm ek / yatkiñcit nāhīm farak / mag bhaktīñca dharāvī kām aṭak / vartāveṁ tuṭak kimartha // kāy tumhī leṅkareṁ mūḍh / bāndhā hindu avindhāñcī sāṅgaḍ / vḥā dṛḍh suvicārārūḍh / tarīc pailthaḍ pāvāl.*

<sup>26</sup> On the life and legacy of the seventeenth-century saint Ramdas, see G.B. Sardar, *The Saint-Poets of Maharashtra: Their Impact on Society*, trans. Kumud Mehta (Bombay: Orient Longmans, 1969).

<sup>27</sup> On Hindu nationalism and Hindutva more broadly, see Jyotirmaya Sharma, *Hindutva: Exploring the Idea of Hindu Nationalism* (London: Penguin Books, 2011); *Hindu Nationalism: A Reader*, ed. Christophe Jaffrelot (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

<sup>28</sup> Gyanendra Pandey has persuasively argued that communalism – like nationalism – is fundamentally an idea created by human agents, British and Indian, whose shared experiences refract the ideologies and struggles of different communities. On the other hand, C.A. Bayly has posited that sectarian conflicts identified as “communalism” in late nineteenth-century colonial India actually resemble earlier, precolonial sectarian conflicts, thereby suggesting that communalism existed well before the advent of British colonialism in South Asia. See Gyanendra Pandey, *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); C.A. Bayly, “The Pre-History of ‘Communalism?’ Religious Conflict in India, 1700-1860,” *Modern Asian Studies* 19, no. 2 (1985): 177-203.

suffices to note that the above excerpt from Dabholkar's *Satcarita* deploys the basic idea of communalism, namely, the intractability of Hindu-Muslim conflict. Moreover, Dabholkar, who worked as a first-class magistrate in Bombay before taking up residence in Shirdi in 1916, would have been aware of the spate of Parsi-Muslim violence in his city in the 1870s; the Hindu-Muslim riots in 1893 and 1894 in Bombay and Pune; and the Hindu nationalist agitations and anti-Muslim rhetoric of figures like B.G. Tilak (1856-1920).<sup>29</sup> In light of very real episodes of violence, Dabholkar finds in Sai Baba the solution to communal violence: a saint specifically on earth to show Hindus and Muslims that God – the Hindu's Ram and the Muslim's Rahim – are one and the same.

To that effect, Dabholkar's *Satcarita* records several examples of Sai Baba in the act of promoting harmony between Hindus and Muslims in Shirdi. In one instance, Sai Baba intervenes in a conflict between Shirdi's majority Hindu villagers and a Rohilla, a Muslim of Afghan descent, with the peculiar practice of reciting the *Qur'ān* in a loud and annoying voice. When the villagers complain, Sai Baba chastises them and professes his liking for displays of true devotion, even the unmelodious ones. The hagiographer Dabholkar then supplies the moral of the story about the democratizing power of genuine devotion: "Whether Brahmin or Pathan, both are equal [in the eyes of Baba]."<sup>30</sup> Another story in the *Satcarita* recalls how Sai Baba accepts a manner of worship that he had previously repudiated. A Brahmin devotee named Dr. Pandit applies a Shaiva sectarian marking on the saint's forehead with sandalwood paste. Explaining why he granted the devotee permission, Sai Baba says that this Brahmin considered the mosque-dwelling,

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<sup>29</sup> See Prashant Kidambi, *The Making of an Indian Metropolis: Colonial Governance and Public Culture in Bombay 1890-1920* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2007).

<sup>30</sup> See Dabholkar, *SSSC*, 3:141. See Chapter 3 for further discussion of this story.

fakir-looking saint the same as his Brahmin guru, the significance of which is that worship of Shirdi Sai Baba transcends Hindu-Muslim difference.<sup>31</sup> This egalitarian vision of religious peace and comity appears to be the complete antithesis of the Hindu chauvinism that was beginning to emerge in Maharashtra contemporaneously with Dabholkar's writing of the *Satcarita* (e.g., the establishment of the RSS in Nagpur in 1925). Exclusivist interpretations of India as a first and foremost "Hindu nation" have often demanded that India's religious minorities – particularly Muslims and Catholic Christians – should continually demonstrate their allegiance to the nation over their ties to places of authority beyond the nation, such as Mecca and Rome. Here, in this episode in the *Satcarita*, one finds Sai Baba dismissing the attempt to categorize individuals, communities, or religious traditions as comparatively inferior or superior.

Shirdi Sai Baba's primary method for promoting this egalitarian vision of Hindu-Muslim friendship is his personal synthesis of Hindu and Islamic vocabularies and practices. This combination leaves devotees, including the hagiographer Dabholkar, unable to determine the saint's socioreligious categorization. Consider Dabholkar's line of reasoning in the thirty-eighth chapter of the text:

Sometimes people guessed, and some said that Sai was a Brahmin and some said he was a Muslim (*musalmān*). But he was without birth/caste (*jñātivihīn*).

Nobody had any idea the caste into which he was born, where he was born, or who his mother and father were, and whether they were Brahmins or Muslims.

If he were a Muslim, though, why would he keep a sacred fire (*agnyārāadhan*) in the mosque? If he were [a Muslim], why was there a *tulasi* tree in the mosque, and why would he tolerate the ringing of bells there?

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<sup>31</sup> See Chapter 3 for further discussion of this story from the eleventh chapter of the *Satcarita*.



Why did he allow the blowing of conches, storytelling, and *kīrtans* with musical instruments like *ṭāl*, *ghoḷ*, and *mṛdang* used to invoke the name of God (*harīnām*)?

If he were a Muslim, why did he sit in the mosque and allow [others] to smear [him] with sandalwood paste? Why did he invite everyone to eat (*sahabhojan*) with him there?

If he were a Muslim, why did he have pierced ears, and why did he contribute toward the renovation of Hindu temples?<sup>32</sup>

One should certainly note that Dabholkar’s partial listing of Sai Baba’s religious practices is focused on asking rhetorically how one could categorize the saint as a “Muslim” despite the other passages in the *Satcarita* describing how he referred to himself as a Muslim mendicant (*fakīr*)<sup>33</sup> and had the name of Allah always on his lips.<sup>34</sup> Even at this early stage in the Shirdi Sai Baba hagiographic tradition – a tradition comprised almost exclusively of Hindu (and mostly Brahmin) hagiographers – there is some detectable effort to create separation between Sai Baba and Islam, a process of domesticating (but never fully erasing) the saint’s Muslim-ness that becomes more pronounced in post-*Satcarita* hagiographic sources.<sup>35</sup>

Among the religious practices outlined in the above excerpt from the *Satcarita*, the two most well-known are that the saint opted to live in the village’s dilapidated

<sup>32</sup> Dabholkar, *ŚSSC*, 38:117-122 *karūni kāhītarī anumān / koṇī sāīs mhaṇatī brāhmaṇ / koṇī tayā musalmān / jñātivihīn asatām to // nāhīm jayācem ṭhāvṭhikāṇ / kavaṇyā jñātīm kevhām janān / kavaṇ mātā pitā hem jñān / musalmān brāhmaṇ vā // asatā jarī musalmān / kaiseṁ maśidīnt agnyārādhan / asateṁ kā teth tulasīvṇḍāvan / ghaṇṭāvādan sāhatā kā // kurūm detā śaṅkhasphoraṇ / savāditra kathā kīrtan / ṭāl ghoḷ mṛdangavādan / harināmgarjan maśidīm // asatā jarī musalmān / maśidīnt svayēṁ baisūn / kurūm detā kām gandhacarcān / teth sahabhojan karitām kā // asatā jarī musalmān / asate kāy savindha kān / nijapallavace dām veṅcūn / karitām kām jīrṇoddhār deulācem.*

<sup>33</sup> For example, in Dabholkar’s *Satcarita* 13:74, Sai Baba tells a man suffering from tuberculosis: “The fakir here is very compassionate; he will take away your pain” (*fakīr yethīncā moṭhā dayāḷu / karīl vyathecem nirmūḷu*). In *Satcarita* 28:173, Sai Baba remarks to a Gujarati Brahmin named Megha: “What use is Ganga water to a fakir like me” (*kimartha maj fakīrākāraṇ / gaṅgājīvan maj kāy*)?” See also *ŚSSC* 13:4, 16:41, and 19:45.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 4:50, 5:94, 7:30, and 10:31.

<sup>35</sup> On the hagiographic approaches to and reconstructions of Sai Baba’s liminality between “Hindu” and “Muslim” categories, see Chapters 3 and 4.

mosque – a structure that he named Dwarka Mai<sup>36</sup> – and that he kept in the mosque a constantly burning wood-fire, or *dhunī*. Despite living in the mosque for nearly sixty years and occasionally reading or having someone else read from the *Qur'ān*, most hagiographic sources, including testimonies from devotees who knew the saint when he was alive, maintain that the saint did not perform *namāz*, the obligatory five-daily Islamic prayers.<sup>37</sup> In the purview of Brahmin hagiographers like Dabholkar and Narasimhaswami, the fact that Sai Baba sat for long periods of time in front of the *dhunī* in his mosque, a space for Islamic ritual prayer, reflects his “heterodox” interpretation of Islam.<sup>38</sup> Alternatively, the British scholar Charles White suggests that Sai Baba’s use of the *dhunī* is indicative of his overlap with the religious practices of the Naths, a religious path (*panth*) or sect (*sampradāy*) of mostly Shaiva ascetics who follow the esoteric and yogic teachings of their mythohistorical twelfth-century founder Gorakhnath.<sup>39</sup> The contact in medieval India between Nath yogis and Sufi saints is well-attested in various scholarly sources, and the confluence of Hindu and Islamic ascetic traditions, White further suggests, gives ample historical precedent to the model of religious synthesis

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<sup>36</sup> In Hindu mythology, Dwarka is the city where the Hindu god Krishna relocated after events necessitated his departure from Mathura. Naming the mosque “Dwarka Mai,” or “Mother Dwarka” further exemplifies the cross-fertilization of Hindu and Islamic traditions in Sai Baba’s religious synthesis.

<sup>37</sup> In his testimony collected in Narasimhaswami’s *Devotees’ Experiences*, Das Ganu says that Sai Baba never performed *namāz* (131). A Muslim devotee in the same text reports that Sai Baba prayed but did so “without however bending the whole body on knees as others did” (307). This is not to presuppose that “being Muslim” and culturally determined ideas of proper Islamic prayer are coterminous. Muslim mystics and charismatics like *majzūbs*, *qalandars*, and Sufis of various orders have longstanding traditions of Islamic practice that either incorporates other forms of prayerful contemplation alongside traditional *salāt* or neglects the pillar entirely.

<sup>38</sup> See Dabholkar’s line of questioning in Chapter 7 and 38 of the *Satcarita* in which he rhetorically asks how one could categorize Sai Baba as a “Muslim.” See also Narasimhaswami’s line in *Life of Sai Baba* in which he entertains the hypothetical nature of considering Sai Baba as a Muslim saint: “If he was a Muslim, he was a very heterodox Muslim” (598).

<sup>39</sup> C. White, “The Sai Baba Movement,” 867-868.

embodied by Shirdi Sai Baba in the late nineteenth/early twentieth century.<sup>40</sup> One of the saint's most common epithets is Sai Nath, a title that invites comparisons between Sai Baba absorbed in yogic contemplation in his mosque and Shiva, the Lord of Yogis (*yogēśwar*) and the Original Nath (*ādināth*), withdrawn from worldly affairs in the Himalayas.

One approach to understanding Sai Baba's model of religious synthesis is to emphasize its resemblance to the religious sensibility of premodern South Asia, especially at the village level. In a recent article, Antonio Rigopoulos proposes that the "liminal, hybrid character" of Shirdi Sai Baba is "the result of a complex, 'non-dual' process of identity development, freely combining Hindu and Islam elements 'on the ground.'"<sup>41</sup> For additional nuance, it is necessary to consider other influences that represent more liminal religiosities, such as the Nath Sampraday and medieval poet-saints like Kabir and Sheikh Muhammad.

A second and complementary approach to understanding Shirdi Sai Baba looks at sainthood as an adaptive response to modernity and its (dis)contents. In this light, we would see the saint as Dabholkar and others saw him: a critic of the divisiveness endemic in Indian society under the aegis of British colonial rule. Consider an instructive and humorous exchange between Sai Baba and a colonial official found in Das Ganu's devotional testimony in Narasimhaswami's *Devotees' Experiences*. (Notably, this incident is not mentioned in Das Ganu's body of work, or Dabholkar's *Satcarita*).

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 868. Notable scholars who have worked on the Nath Sampraday and Nath yogis include Ann Gold, Daniel Gold, Véronique Bouillier, David Gordon White, and Shashibhushan Dasgupta. For an overview of Nath Studies, see David Lorenzen and Aldrián Muñoz, "Introduction" in *Yogi Heroes and Poets: Histories and Legends of the Naths*, eds. David Lorenzen and Aldrián Muñoz (Albany: SUNY Press, 2011), ix-xviii.

<sup>41</sup> Rigopoulos, "Sāi Bābā of Śīrdī and Yoga Powers," 423-424.

According to Das Ganu's 1936 interview, there was a jewel thief, who was arrested and brought to trial. The thief claimed that he was innocent because Shirdi Sai Baba had recently given him the jewels. Sai Baba was summoned to court, but he ignored the order to appear. Consequently, a first-class magistrate named Nana Joshi was dispatched to interview the saint in Shirdi. Joshi's conversation with Sai Baba went as follows:

- Joshi the magistrate: What is your name?  
 Shirdi Sai Baba: They call me Sai Baba.  
 J: Your father's name?  
 B: Also Sai Baba.  
 J: Your guru's name?  
 B: Venkusha.<sup>42</sup>  
 J: Creed or religion?  
 B: Kabir.  
 J: Caste or race?  
 B: Parvardigar (i.e., God)  
 J: Age, please?  
 B: Lakhs of years.  
 J: Will you solemnly affirm that what you are going to say is the truth?  
 B: Truth.  
 J: Do you know the accused so and so?  
 B: Yes, I know him and I know everyone.  
 J: The man says he is your devotee and that he lived with you. Is that so?  
 B: Yes, I live with everyone. All are mine.  
 J: Did you give him jewels as alleged?  
 B: Yes I gave [to] him. Who gives what to whom?  
 J: If you gave him the jewels, how did you get them and become possessed of them?  
 B: Everything is mine.  
 J: Baba, here is a serious charge of theft. That man says that you delivered the jewels to him.  
 B: What is all this? What the devil I have to do with all that?

At this point, Das Ganu reports that Joshi was "floored" by the saint's answers and that he did not know how to proceed. Someone thought of another solution – check the village's diary marking the arrival of visitors and the length of their stays. Given that the

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<sup>42</sup> See Chapter 3 for further discussion of this figure.

diary did not include the jewel thief's name and that Sai Baba never left Shirdi, the accused was declared guilty and sent to jail.<sup>43</sup>

To reiterate the point made in this dissertation's introduction, I am less concerned about the historicity of the events recorded in the Shirdi Sai Baba hagiographic tradition and more interested in exploring the reservoir of meanings attached to Sai Baba in multiple hagiographic sources. Did the Baba-Joshi conversation *actually* took place, or is it a devotee's imagination of what the saint would have said in such a situation? I contend that this line of inquiry misses the message conveyed through this episode. As I read it, the saint's dialogue with the first-class magistrate is satire – a means to expose the inanity of a colonial system predicated on collecting information about colonized subjects. In this way, I would suggest that the hagiographer's inability to categorize Sai Baba along the lines of being “Hindu” or “Muslim,” as well as Sai Baba's mockery of the formulaic process of information collection so ubiquitous throughout the colonial administration, reflects the much more fluid and porous boundaries between traditions and communities in premodern South Asia – and it also functions as a cogent form of protest against the rapidly rigidifying social categorization taking place in late colonial India.

### **Miracles and the Growth of Shirdi Sai Baba's Popularity**

From the late 1850s to the middle of the 1880s, there were few individuals in Shirdi who were close to the saint. In addition to Mhalsapati – the caretaker of the Khandoba temple who greeted the newcomer with the appellation *sāī* – there was Bayjabai, the woman who carried a basket of *bhākarī* bread to the young saint when he went to wander and meditate

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<sup>43</sup> Narasimhaswami, *Devotees' Experiences*, 128-130.

in the forested countryside just outside the village.<sup>44</sup> Both Mhalsapati and Tatya Kote, the son of Bayjabai, used to sleep in the mosque alongside the saint after his arrival.<sup>45</sup>

Another early devotee was Kashiram Shimpi, a tailor who sewed one of the saint's robes (*kafnī*), filled his chillum with tobacco, maintained the *dhunī* in the mosque, and contributed money for necessary expenditures. (According to tradition, Sai Baba once started inexplicably yelling and screaming in the mosque, which devotees recognized as the saint signaling that a devotee was in trouble. Later, it was discovered that Sai Baba's outburst coincided with Kashiram's encounter with robbers in which Kashiram was attacked and left for dead. When help arrived, Kashiram insisted on being taken to Shirdi in lieu of a hospital, and he attributed his recovery to Sai Baba's grace/*kṛpā*).<sup>46</sup>

At this time, Sai Baba's interaction with others in the village was relatively limited. Most perceived him as a "mad fakir" (*veḍā fakīr*), a peculiar and unpredictable mendicant. However, the performance of two miracles evidencing his divine power changed the public perception of the saint.

The first major miracle is the seventy-two hours during which the saint voluntarily entered into and returned from a deathlike meditative state, or *samādhī*. Thirty-two years before Sai Baba's death in 1918, during an attack of asthma (*damā*), Sai Baba tells his devotee Mhalsapati: "For three days, I am going to merge my breath (*prāṇ*) into the universe (*brahmāṇḍa*), so don't disturb me."<sup>47</sup> Pointing to one of the corners outside the mosque, he further instructs Mhalsapati to dig the place for his temporary

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<sup>44</sup> Dabholkar, *ŚSSC*, 8:106.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 8:117.

<sup>46</sup> M.V. Kamath and V.B. Kher, *Sai Baba of Shirdi: A Unique Saint* (Bombay: Jaico Publishing House, 1991), 85-86.

<sup>47</sup> Dabholkar, *ŚSSC*, 44:65.

*samādhī*, and also to take care of his body during this time. As word spreads that Sai Baba has stopped breathing and lost his pulse, people come to pay their respects. On the second day, some people begin to agitate for the saint’s burial. The *Satcarita* describes them as Muslim figures – “*maulvīs, mulanās, and fakīrs.*”<sup>48</sup> (Note that the identity of the pro-burial party is recast in Ashok Bhushan’s hagiographic film *Shirdi ke Sai Baba*, where the Brahmin antagonists Mangloo and Kulkarni try to convince the village to bury the saint). Mhalsapati remains steadfast in his promise to prevent the saint from being disturbed, and after three full days, the saint’s promise comes true. His body starts to move; his eyes open; his breathing returns to normal; and he starts to recognize the people around him. Everyone who witnesses the saint’s return are fully astonished (*āścaryamagna*), while those who wanted to bury him – the *maulvīs* et al. – turn white in the face at the terrible mistake they almost made.<sup>49</sup> The hagiographer Dabholkar concludes this episode with the lesson to impress on this story’s audience, namely, that Sai Baba is beyond physical form: “A vessel measuring three and a half cubits long – that’s all that Sai’s body and its organs is. Is this really our Sai? Let go of this delusion at once.”<sup>50</sup> Other hagiographers identify this miracle as the turning point in terms of Sai Baba’s mission, as Narasimhaswami opines: “What did the passing away from earthly life and the return to it in 1886 mean? Baba evidently returned to the world because more of the ‘*prarabd*’ of the Sai body, i.e. HIS MISSION, remained unfulfilled, and therefore,

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 44:78.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 44:87-88.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 44:96 *auṭ hātācā sthūḷ gāḍā / dehendriyāñcā jo sāṅgāḍā / to kāy āpulā sāl nidhaḍā / samūḷ soḍā hā bhram.*

he had to get back into the same body to work out the remaining portion of the present life.”<sup>51</sup>

The second major miracle – which the saint performed in 1892 – is the lighting of lamps with water instead of oil. According to Dabholkar’s *Satcarita*, Sai Baba regularly visited Shirdi’s grocers and begged for a small amount of oil for small lamps kept in his mosque. One day, to get out of this obligation, the grocers lie to the saint about the oil’s availability. The saint returns to his mosque, mixes water with the smidge of leftover oil in his pot, and drinks the mixture as a religious offering (*brahmārpaṇa*).<sup>52</sup> He proceeds to light the lamps with this consecrated substance, as the grocers watch in utter shock. The grocers ultimately ask for and receive Sai Baba’s forgiveness, a move that Dabholkar interprets as the saint’s equanimity toward everyone (*sarva hī prāṇī sārīkhe*), including those who wrong him.<sup>53</sup> Hagiographers and scholars agree that the lamp lighting miracle marks the turning point in Sai Baba’s popularization in Shirdi – or, in Das Ganu’s terms, the shift in the public’s perception from seeing a “mad saint” (*veḍā-pīr*) to recognizing “God born on earth” (*pratī īśvar janmalā*).<sup>54</sup>

While not portrayed in hagiography as responsible for drawing specific individuals into the devotional community, these two miracles coincided with Sai Baba’s acquisition of his most influential devotees, N.G. Chandorkar and G.D. Sahasrabuddhe. Chandorkar, a district collector in Ahmednagar District, first met the saint around 1892. Following his transformation into a Sai Baba devotee, Chandorkar raised the saint’s profile among the new colonial middle-classes of clerks, police inspectors, solicitors,

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<sup>51</sup> Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba*, 142.

<sup>52</sup> Dabholkar, *ŚSSC*, 5:109.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 5:114.

<sup>54</sup> Das Ganu, *BLA* 31:35 and 46.



judges, and other civil servants in the colonial administration. Meanwhile, Sahasrabuddhe, a police constable with a knack for poetic composition, came to Shirdi through his professional association with Chandorkar around 1892. As detailed in Chapter 2, the constable's transformation into the Sai Baba hagiographer and *kīrtankār* Das Ganu introduced the saint to two large audiences: the rural literati who read his Marathi hagiographic accounts and the illiterate masses who attended his sermons of devotional songs about the power of *bhakti* and the greatness of his guru. Following Chandorkar and Das Ganu, numerous other figures began to make regular trips to Shirdi from various parts of the Bombay Presidency: the Ahmednagar District deputy collector and settlement officer H.V. Sathe (1904); the Nashik lawyer S.B. Dhumal (1907); the Pandharpur sub-judge Tatyasaheb Noolkar (1908); the prominent Bombay solicitor H.S. Dixit (1909); the Amraoti lawyer and political activist G.S. Khaparde (1910); the Bombay magistrate-turned-hagiographer G.R. Dabholkar (1910); and the professor of geology and chemistry at Pune's College of Engineering G.G. Narke (1913).

Many of these newly arriving devotees were Brahmins. Their prominent place in the hagiographic tradition – a topic explored in Chapter 7 – probably stems from their social capital as professional, well-educated, high-caste individuals becoming the devotees of a rural country preacher who purportedly transcended the limitations of caste and religion. Of course, not all early devotees were Brahmins, high-caste, or Hindu. While the *Satcarita* offers comparatively fewer specific stories about them, Dabholkar says that various kinds of people were welcomed into Sai Baba's "court" (*darbār*), such as astrologers, the extremely rich, ascetics living off alms and pilgrims on their way to other sacred sites, travelling singers and dancers, low-caste Mahars, people from the

Lingayat sect, the blind and lame, Nath yogis, followers of Nanak (i.e., Sikhs), drummers and tumblers, and many others.<sup>55</sup> Dabholkar's *Satcarita* also features the stories of several notable Muslim devotees – most prominently Abdul, the caretaker of the mosque and one of Sai Baba's closest confidants who kept a notebook in Urdu with the saint's Sufi sayings and teachings.<sup>56</sup> Other Muslim devotees include a *hājī* named Siddiq Falke<sup>57</sup> and two acquaintances, Ali Mohamed and Ismu Mujawar, who saved a carved image of Sai Baba from an iconoclastic relative and gave it to the hagiographer G.R. Dabholkar for safekeeping.<sup>58</sup>

One way to gauge the saint's rising popularity in the first two decades of the twentieth century is the proliferation of miracles (*camatkār*) recorded in hagiographic sources and dated to this period of time. Many miracle stories – but certainly not all – deal with the miraculous properties of the sacred ash (*vibhūtī*, or *udī*) produced by Sai Baba's *dhunī*. For example, an incident dated to 1904 has become known in some hagiographic sources as the "Jamner Miracle."<sup>59</sup> In Jamner (approx. 150km northeast of Shirdi), the daughter of N.G. Chandorkar is having complications during childbirth. As Chandorkar implores Sai Baba for help, a renunciant (*gosāvī*) named Ramgirbua suddenly develops the strong desire to return to his home in Khandesh, a region of northern Maharashtra that includes Jamner village. Rambirgua receives Sai Baba's permission to leave Shirdi, and tells him to bring a small packet of *udī* and a piece of devotional poetry (*ārātī*) to Chandorkar in Jamner on the way. At the train station, a

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<sup>55</sup> See Dabholkar, *ŚSSC*, 32:113-120.

<sup>56</sup> See Warren's *Unravelling the Enigma* (2004 [1999]) for a full study of this unpublished and uncirculated hagiographic source.

<sup>57</sup> See *Satcarita* Chapter 11 for Haji Falke's encounter with Sai Baba.

<sup>58</sup> See *Satcarita* Chapters 40 and 41 for the story of the Muslims who give Sai Baba's image to Dabholkar. For a recent analysis of this story, see Elison, "Sai Baba of Bombay," 165-169.

<sup>59</sup> Kamath and Kher, *Sai Baba of Shirdi*, 8; Rigopoulos, *The Life and Teachings*, 127.

bearded, Muslim-looking horse-cart driver identifies Ramgirbua by name and says that he has been sent by Chandorkar.<sup>60</sup> The driver delivers Ramgirbua to Chandorkar's home, and Ramgirbua gives the *udī* to Chandorkar's daughter, which enables her to deliver the child without trouble. Ramgirbua asks about the cart that had been sent for him, but Chandorkar replies, "What cart?" By the time they realize that something miraculous has happened, the driver and his horse-cart have disappeared without a trace. Dabholkar concludes this miracle story with its significance: "Whence the cart in all of this, and whence its driver? It's all the theatrics (*nāṭakī*) of Mother Sai who comes running at times of trouble, out of love for his devotees."<sup>61</sup> In other miracle stories, Sai Baba's *udī* remedies severe medical conditions like a bone ulcer and guinea worms;<sup>62</sup> and grants children to childless petitioners (e.g., the Parsi businessman Ratan Shapoorji Wadia, the wealthy gentleman Damaunna Rasane).<sup>63</sup>

By the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, the influx of people visiting Shirdi to receive the saint's blessings produced another significant transformation in the saint's popularization: the shift from more individualized, ad-hoc forms of worshipping Sai Baba to collective worship complete with daily rituals and an officiating *pūjārī*, a Gujarati Brahmin named Megha. It is at this point, sometime around 1908 or 1909, that the four daily *āratīs* began to be performed at the mosque with regularity. While tradition maintains that Sai Baba remained disinterested in the formalization of his

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<sup>60</sup> Interestingly, according to Dabholkar's *Satcarita*, Ramgirbua asks the driver who he is, and the latter replies that he is from Garwhal (northern India) and a Rajput by caste (33:100).

<sup>61</sup> See Dabholkar, *ŚSSC*, 33:119 *kuṭhalā tāngā kuṭhalā śipāī / naṭ nāṭakī hī māulī sāī / saṅkatasamayīm dhāmvat yeī / bhāvāpāyīm bhaktāñcyā*. For the full miracle story, see Dabholkar, *ŚSSC*, 33:63-119.

<sup>62</sup> See *Satcarita* Chapter 34.

<sup>63</sup> See *Satcarita* Chapter 14 and 25, respectively.

worship by devotees, the outer displays of devotion became richer and more elaborate.

As Rigopoulos notes:

Thus [from 1909 onward] the use of fans, clubs, silver umbrellas, and other paraphernalia were introduced in his worship. Decorations were also placed around the mosque and the *cāvaḍī* [the village assembly hall]. A palanquin with regal ornaments and a horse were soon acquired by devotees and used during processions to and from the *masjid*.<sup>64</sup>

What might explain the sudden rise in the number of people coming to Shirdi to see its resident saint in the first two decades of the twentieth century? Smriti Srinivas points out that the emergence of “congregational worship” in Shirdi “was paralleled by a shift in the economy of the Godavari river region in which Shirdi lies [which became] a prosperous sugar zone.”<sup>65</sup> In a region frequented by outbreaks of famine and plague but with a newly robust and rapidly changing economic climate, it is quite likely that many individuals felt affinity for a miracle-working saint who purportedly said, “My business is to give blessings.”<sup>66</sup> Srinivas also suggests that Shirdi Sai Baba’s “polyvalent personality” and “support of several traditions” enabled devotees from various backgrounds and communities to find meaning in his teachings and actions, including his miracles that “contravened or interrogated [the] bourgeois rationality that exerted increasing power over these classes.”<sup>67</sup> Relatedly, Ramachandra Gandhi theorizes that the many *santas* and *sādhus*, *pīrs* and *fakīrs*, and *bābās* of various backgrounds acquired such great levels of popularity in the colonial period because they brought a more integrative and flexible understanding of religion at a time when social and religious categories had rigidified under British rule. Moreover, Gandhi contends that nineteenth-century Indians in colonial

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<sup>64</sup> Rigopoulos, *The Life and Teachings*, 141.

<sup>65</sup> S. Srinivas, *In the Presence of Sai Baba*, 37.

<sup>66</sup> Narasimhaswami, *Charters and Sayings*, 8.

<sup>67</sup> S. Srinivas, *In the Presence of Sai Baba*, 38.

India also found figures like Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Swami Vivekananda, and Sri Aurobindo to be attractive alternatives to the more sober reformist organizations like the Brahma Samaj and the Prarthana Samaj.<sup>68</sup> Indeed, the best framework to explore the sociology of Sai Baba's popularity in the early twentieth century – a topic that is tangential to this project on hagiography – will further elucidate the nexus of the new economic development in Ahmednagar District, the social and cultural discourses (e.g., scientific rationalism, anti-superstitious notions of religion) being promoted through colonial institutions, and the spreading fame of a saint tailored to meet the needs and the anxieties of individuals caught in rapidly changing times.

### **Shirdi Sai Baba's Death and Burial**

In the forty-second chapter of the *Satcarita*, Dabholkar describes an event that took place on Vijaya Dashami (i.e., Dussehra) in 1916. During the festival's procession that ritually crosses over a village's border (Marathi: *śilāṅgaṇ*, Sanskrit: *sīmmollaṅghana*), Sai Baba suddenly flies into a rage. He tears off his *kafnī* and *laṅgoṭ*, throws them into the fire of the *dhunī*, and yells at the onlookers present: "Look as much as you want – Am I Hindu or Muslim? Decide freely in your own minds and remove all doubt!"<sup>69</sup> The implication is that people could look upon the naked saint and determine his religious identity, viz. Hindu or Muslim, according to his circumcision or lack thereof. Elsewhere, in the seventh chapter of the *Satcarita*, Dabholkar states that the saint was, in fact, circumcised, but in this story, Dabholkar is silent. The text provides no resolution to the saint's

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<sup>68</sup> Ramachandra Guha, *The Seven Sages: Selected Essays*, ed. A. Raghuramaraju (London: Penguin UK, 2015).

<sup>69</sup> Dabholkar, *ŚSSC*, 42:28 *garjoni bābā vadatī pahā jī / mī hindū kīm yavana ājī / nirdhārā yathecha manāmājī / āśaṅkā ghyā jī pheḍūniyām*.

challenge to his devotees to determine his religious identity. They simply tremble in fear of the saint's inexplicable anger. One devotee, the leper Bhagoji Shinde, approaches the naked Sai Baba and tries to clothe him, while the saint proclaims that this day is his *śilāṅgaṇ* – the moment marking the beginning of his crossing over the boundary between life and death.<sup>70</sup> Hagiographic tradition thus maintains that this episode was the saint's way of preparing his devotees in Shirdi for his death, which would take place two years later.

The above episode reflects the inexplicable and occasional nature of changes in the saint's temperament. A gentler, more compassionate memory of the saint and his fondness for his devotees lies in the eleven assurances (Marathi: *akarā vacaṇe*; Hindi: *gyārah vacan*) that the saint purportedly gave devotees before his death in 1918. In the English rendering of the website of the Sri Sai Baba Sansthan and Trust, these assurances are as follows:

- 1) No harm shall befall him, who steps on the soil of Shirdi.
- 2) He who comes to my Samadhi, his sorrow and suffering shall cease.
- 3) Though I be no more in flesh and blood, I shall ever protect my devotees
- 4) Trust in me and your prayer shall be answered.
- 5) Know that my spirit is immortal, know this for yourself.
- 6) Show unto me he who has sought refuge and has been turned away.
- 7) In whatever faith men worship me, even so do I render to them.
- 8) Not in vain is my promise that I shall ever lighten your burden.
- 9) Knock, and the door shall open, ask and it shall be granted.
- 10) To him who surrenders unto me totally I shall be ever indebted.
- 11) Blessed is he who has become one with me.<sup>71</sup>

To be clear, there is no section in Dabholkar's *Satcarita* – or any other early twentieth-century hagiographic text – in which Sai Baba speaks these eleven assurances at one

<sup>70</sup> Rigopoulos, *The Life and Teachings*, 250-251 n.22.

<sup>71</sup> "Shri Sadguru Sai Baba's Assurance to His Devotees," Shri Saibaba Sansthan and Trust, [https://www.shrisaibabasansthan.org/new\\_eng%20template\\_shirdi/shri%20saibaba%20trust/saibaba's%20assurance.html](https://www.shrisaibabasansthan.org/new_eng%20template_shirdi/shri%20saibaba%20trust/saibaba's%20assurance.html), accessed December 26, 2015.

time. Rather, it seems that they have been compiled after the saint's death. Some of these assurances are scattered throughout various stories and chapters of the text like the saint's promises that true devotees will never want food or clothing<sup>72</sup> and that one should always trust in the ability of the saint's bones to speak beyond the grave.<sup>73</sup> There are some slight changes in the comparing the language of the assurances vis-à-vis Dabholkar's *Satcarita*. For example, Dabholkar's *Satcarita* attributes the following teaching to the saint: "Whatever comes your way, endure it. Allah is our Lord and Protector. Always think of him because he bears all of our anxieties."<sup>74</sup> Meanwhile, the eighth assurance changes the bearer of burdens – from Allah to Sai Baba. Additionally, it is noteworthy that there are slightly different versions of Sai Baba's eleven assurances available in print, and especially on the internet. One of most commonly cited aphorisms of Shirdi Sai Baba – "If you look to me, I will look to you" – does not appear on many lists of the saint's promises to devotees, but it nonetheless appears throughout the hagiographic tradition in text and film.<sup>75</sup>

According to the *Satcarita*, Sai Baba died after a prolonged bout of fever in the afternoon of October 15, 1918 (i.e., on Vijaya Dashami/Dussehra). Knowing that his death is approaching, the saint calls to his side Lakshmibai Shinde, a devotee whom the

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<sup>72</sup> Dabholkar, *SSSC*, 6:33-35. In these verses, Dabholkar reports that Sai Baba promised to look after the welfare of those devoted to him, noting the similarity between the saint's promise and Krishna's words in *Bhagavad Gītā* 9:22.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 25:105. This verse reads: "Although I am no longer living, remember the truth to my promise that my bones will bring you reassurance beyond the grave" (*jhālom jarī gataprāṇ / vākya mājhem mānā pramāṇ / majhīm hāḍem turvatimadhūn / detīl āśvāsan tumhāms*).

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 34:70 *jem jem yeil tem tem sāhem / allā mālik vālī āhe / sadā tayācyā cintanīm rāhem / kāḷajī vāhe to sārī*.

<sup>75</sup> This aphorism – "If you look to me, I look to you" – does not appear in the *Satcarita*, but it is in Narasimhaswami's *Charters and Sayings*. At the conclusion of Ashok Bhushan's 1977 hagiographic film *Shirdi ke Sai Baba*, this aphorism flashes on screen over the saint's *mūrti* before the credits roll, concluding the film on a didactic note.

saint had praised for her compassionate habit of feeding the village's dogs and pigs. To Lakshmibai, Sai Baba gives his last nine rupees, the symbolism of which has been worked out in the hagiographic tradition to correspond to the nine different types of *bhakti* and the nine characteristics of the ideal devotee. Additionally, he informs two Muslim mendicants in nearby Aurangabad about his declining health and instructs them to prepare a ritual feeding of the poor.<sup>76</sup> Many in Shirdi know of the impending nature of the saint's death due to an incident that occurred about one month prior. This is the breaking of one of his most cherished possessions: a brick (*vīṭ*) upon which he used to rest his head when sleeping. Other hagiographic sources, particularly the works of Narasimhaswami, supply more information about the brick as a gift given to the saint by his guru before his arrival in Shirdi. The *Satcarita*, however, makes no mention on the connection between Sai Baba's brick and his guru.

When a devotee accidentally drops the brick, Sai Baba responds prophetically: "It is not the brick but rather my *karma* that has broken."<sup>77</sup> Then, the saint closes his eyes and falls unconscious. His death occurs shortly thereafter. The devotional hermeneutic of Sai Baba hagiographers, of course, reframes the saint's "death" as his *mahāsamādhi*, the full and final absorption into God. In the *Satcarita*, Dabholkar also tacitly invokes the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* by invoking one of its key pronouncements – "Having become one with Brahman, one goes to Brahman" (*brahmaiva sanbrahmāpyeti*)<sup>78</sup> – as a means to explain to the reader that Sai Baba has not really departed. It is only the physical form

<sup>76</sup> Warren, *Unravelling the Enigma*, 343.

<sup>77</sup> Dabholkar, *ŚSSC*, 44:50 *vīṭ nāhīm kīm karmaci phuṭalem*.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 42:79.



which has passed away. The God capable of taking human form (*manuṣyarūpeṁ devaci hote*) never fully abandons the faithful.<sup>79</sup>

Interestingly, Dabholkar reports that before his death, Sai Baba tells devotees: “I will manifest again, as an eight-year-old child, among my devotees.”<sup>80</sup> This statement, one might surmise, would confirm the appearance of Sathya Sai Baba (1926-2011), the self-professed reincarnation of Shirdi Sai Baba. In doing so, one must exercise some hermeneutic creativity with the dates, because Sathya Sai was *born* eight years after Shirdi Sai’s death in 1926 but only *realized* his divine status at age fourteen in 1940. Shirdi Sai Baba hagiographers have different strategies for dealing with this proclamation, the most prominent of which is simply purging it from the retellings of the saint’s story. Unsurprisingly, hagiographic sources on Shirdi Sai Baba that are written by Sathya Sai Baba devotees emphasize this link between the two. Om Sai Prakash’s hagiographic film *Bhagwan Sri Sai Baba* (1993), for example, makes this promise to return to his devotees as the saint’s last words, pronounced right before he expires. In contrast, Bhushan’s film *Shirdi ke Sai Baba* ignores this aspect of the saint’s legacy completely.

With regard to the location of Sai Baba’s tomb, a debate quickly emerges among the Hindus and Muslims in Shirdi. Muslims want to bury the saint on open land, a custom common in the construction of *dargāhs* for Muslim saints in South Asia. Hindus, however, maintain that Sai Baba wanted to be buried in a large building (*wāḍā*) being

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 43:127.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 43:139 *āṭhā varṣācā bāl janīm / prakāṣ hoīm mī māgutēnī / aiseṁ mahārāj bhaktāñlāgunī / āhetī sāṅgunī rāhilo.*

built by a wealthy devotee from Nagpur named Bapusaheb Buti.<sup>81</sup> Upon the arrival of a colonial official – the revenue officer, or *māmlatdār*, of Kopergaon – there was a vote between the two parties.<sup>82</sup> The party of Hindus favoring burial in the Buty Wada won handily. The structure became known as Shirdi Sai Baba’s Samadhi Mandir, and the Muslim devotee Abdul became the tomb’s custodian.

As argued by Antonio Rigopoulos, the decision to bury the saint in the Samadhi Mandir – and not in a more Islamic-oriented *dargāh* – marks the completion of the saint’s Hinduization.<sup>83</sup> This assessment should not overlook the creation of the Sri Sai Baba Sansthan and Trust in 1922. On the order of the Ahmednagar District court, the Sansthan was formed to regulate and oversee the ritual activities at the tomb-temple complex in Shirdi, as well as its finances. Shortly after its formation, the Sansthan’s all-Hindu board of trustees ousted Abdul from his position as the tomb’s caretaker, a move that Warren equates with the removal of Muslim influence over the future of Sai Baba worship in Shirdi.<sup>84</sup> Another concrete step towards marking the Samadhi Mandir as the tomb of a Hindu saint occurred in 1954: the addition of a large marble image of the saint above his tomb, a *mūrtī* consecrated in Hindu fashion.

We thus come to the end of Sai Baba’s lifetime on earth and the start of his prolific afterlife, which includes many hagiographic works that retell the saint’s life story but never in exactly the same way. Hagiography – or rather, the history of a hagiographic tradition – creates a record showing how people have understood and interpreted who Sai

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 43:158. In this verse, Sai Baba says: “Let my body rest in the [Buty] *wada*” (*wāḍiyānt paḍo hem śarīr*).

<sup>82</sup> Rigopoulos, *The Life and Teachings*, 241.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Warren, *Unravelling the Enigma*, 347.

Baba was and what he said and did when he was alive. In this way, the saint's life may have concluded in 1918, but it is not consigned to the past. Rather, it continues to speak to new generations of devotees and hagiographers, the latter of whom also undertake the responsibility, whether consciously or unconsciously, to retell the saint's story as it speaks to them and as they want it to speak to others. Now, we shall return to the beginning of the Shirdi Sai Baba hagiographic tradition, as we turn to the first hagiographic account of the saint in Das Ganu's *Santakāthāmṛt*.

## Chapter 2

### **Sai Baba Never Gave Philosophical Discourses (Except When He Did): The “Philosophizing Sai Baba” in Chapter 57 of Das Ganu’s *Santakathāmṛt* (1903)**

This chapter begins my critical engagement with the Shirdi Sai Baba hagiographic tradition. It focuses on the first written account about the saint: Chapter 57 of Das Ganu Maharaj’s *Santakathāmṛt* (1903).<sup>1</sup> This text is a compendium of more than fifty short biographies and vignettes of “modern” (i.e., between the eighteenth and twentieth century) saints, most of whom are known in the Maharashtrian cultural area.<sup>2</sup> In Chapter 57 of the text, the hagiographer Das Ganu presents a conversation between Sai Baba and N.G. Chandorkar, the Deputy Collector of Ahmednagar District and one of the more prominent members of the early Sai Baba devotional community. The account begins on

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<sup>1</sup> Academic scholars (e.g., Rigopoulos, Warren) and authors of devotional literature (e.g., Kamath and Kher, Ruhela) maintain that Chapter 57 of Das Ganu’s *Santakathāmṛt* is the first published account of Shirdi Sai Baba. In an interview with B.V. Narasimhaswami in 1936, Das Ganu also names the text as his first publication on the saint (see Narasimhaswami, *Devotees’ Experiences*, 138). The *Santakathāmṛt* itself suggests something different, as Das Ganu writes in Chapter 57, verse six: “Previously, I have discussed Sai Nath, who lived in Shirdi village, in Chapters 31, 32, and 33 of the *Bhaktalīlāmṛt* (*māge bhaktalīlāmṛt granthāt / je mī varṇilā sānāth / ektīs battīs tehattīsāt / śirdī grāmī vās tyāñcā*.” In other accounts of saints in the *Santakathāmṛt*, Das Ganu makes similar references to having previously discussed the life of a saint in the *Bhaktalīlāmṛt*. For example, see *Santakathāmṛt* 23:2 on Sakharam Bua of Amalner; 24:5 on Govind Maharaj of Utran; and 40:7 on Manik Prabhu of Humnabad. All of these verses make it seem that the *Santakathāmṛt* came after the *Bhaktalīlāmṛt*, a text by Das Ganu that all aforementioned academic and devotional sources identify as being published later (i.e., in 1906). Perhaps these verses reflect Das Ganu’s intention to publish the *Bhaktalīlāmṛt* before the *Santakathāmṛt* (which did not happen), or perhaps they have been added to later editions of the *Santakathāmṛt*, like its third edition (which was published in 1921). This is the edition that I am using. Whatever the case may be, I am proceeding in this chapter according to the conventional wisdom that places the *Santakathāmṛt* as the very first entry in the Shirdi Sai Baba hagiographic tradition.

<sup>2</sup> See Appendix A in this chapter for the list of the saints profiled in the *Santakathāmṛt*. Some of the more notable saints who came from or lived in locales in the present-day state of Maharashtra include Manik Prabhu of Humnabad (d. 1865), Narayan Swami of Nanded (d. 1956), and Vasudevananda Saraswati (d. 1914), also known as Tembe Swami. A few of the saints in the text are from outside Maharashtra like the Bengali mystic Ramakrishna Paramahansa (d. 1886) and the Sikh gurus Tegh Bahadur (d. 1675) and Gobind Singh (d. 1708). The inclusion of the latter two Sikh gurus is probably due to the fact that Das Ganu retired from the police force in 1903 and relocated to Nanded to start his career as a hagiographer. Much earlier, in 1708, Guru Gobind Singh made Nanded his residence and died there later that year, and the *gurdwāra* that contains his remains is one of the Sikhs’ *pañjā takht*, or “five seats of power.” Writing on these Sikh gurus at the start of his text is, perhaps, Das Ganu’s way of paying homage to the saintly figures important in his new hometown.

Dhanu Sankranti<sup>3</sup> as Chandorkar approaches the saint with a philosophical inquiry: “Tell us today about the Lord (*parameśvar*) – Who is he? What is he like? Where is he?”<sup>4</sup> Sai Baba addresses Chandorkar’s question by explaining concepts in Hindu philosophy, like the means to obtain spiritual knowledge (*brahmajñāna*), the nature of the universal force that animates all living things (*caitanya*), and its difference from the obscuring power of *māyā*, the illusoriness that makes the impermanent seem permanent and limits the apprehension of the real. While other hagiographic accounts feature Sai Baba handling metaphysical subjects – like the effects or ripening of accumulated action (*karma*), the concept of “destiny” (*dehaprārabdha*, lit. “that which has already been collected at the start of this body/lifetime”), and the state of liberation (*mukta sthiti*) – in a way that emphasizes ethical teachings, what is unusual about Das Ganu’s chapter in the *Santakathāmṛt* is that it portrays Sai Baba speaking in purely metaphysical terms. The discursive image of the saint in this text – the image of Sai Baba that comes to mind as the reader reads Chapter 57 – is that of the “philosophizing Sai Baba,” the Hindu guru giving a discourse on how to discriminate between the world of illusion and the truth beyond illusion.

The *Santakathāmṛt* is important for the holistic study of the Shirdi Sai Baba hagiographic tradition because its image of the “philosophizing Sai Baba” is a curiosity vis-à-vis later hagiographic sources claiming that the saint never gave elaborate

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<sup>3</sup> This is the time of the year when the sun moves into the constellation *dhanu* on the first day of the Hindu month of Pausha (December-January).

<sup>4</sup> G.D. Sahasrabuddhe, *Santakathāmṛt* (hereafter: *SKA*), 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Gorha: Shri Das Ganu Maharaj Pratishthan, 1999), 57:22. In transliterated Marathi, the relevant part of the verse reads: *āj sāṅgā parameśvar / koṅ kaisā koṭhe ase*. An English translation of Das Ganu’s body of Marathi texts on Shirdi Sai Baba (i.e., the relevant chapters in the *Santakathāmṛt*, *Bhaktalīlāmṛt*, and *Bhaktisārāmṛt*) is available in Rabinder Nath Kakarya’s *Sai Hari Katha* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 2007). Given that this is not a scholarly work, all translations are my own.

philosophical discourses. One of the strongest statements on the matter is from Hari Sitaram Dixit, who served as the first secretary of the Sansthan and Trust, the institute that oversees the saint's tomb in Shirdi, from its establishment in 1922 until his death in 1926. During this time, Dixit wrote a foreword to G.R. Dabholkar's *Śrī Sāī Satcarita* (1929), and it was added to the text upon its completion. In the foreword, Dixit states that Sai Baba never talked at length on metaphysical subjects during the saint's thrice-daily audiences with devotees:

In those three meetings, Maharaj gave out knowledge (*bodh*) in the form of stories (*goṣṭī*). At that time, there would be revelations of various things going on in the minds of devotees that came out in Maharaj's speech. Maharaj never gave detailed discourses (*vivaraṇ*) on Vedanta topics, nor did he give lectures (*pravacaṇ*) on the Upanishads. His messages were mostly ethical (*naitik*)... Compared to open-ended verbal knowledge, many more times valuable is the knowledge gained through the experience of Maharaj, and this is how devotees with faith in Maharaj received their greatest benefits.<sup>5</sup>

Other hagiographic sources voice the same opinion. For example, there is a discernible undercurrent in Dabholkar's *Satcarita* that pits devotion to Sai Baba over and against traditional Brahminical sources of religious knowledge. Dabholkar weaves verses throughout his text about how sacred scripture (*veda-śāstra*) falls silent and the tricks of logic become fruitless when one tries to comprehend a saint's greatness.<sup>6</sup> He also warns his audience to beware the danger of falling under the influence of scholars well-versed

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<sup>5</sup> Dabholkar, *ŚSSC*, xx. In transliterated Marathi, this passage reads: *Tīnhī baiṭhakīce veḷī goṣṭīrūpāne mahārāj bodh karīt. Mahārājāñcyā bolānyāt tethe tyā veḷī aslelyā nīrnirālyā maṇḍaḷīcyā manāt ghoḷat asalelyā nīrnirālyā bābisambandhāne khulāse hoūn jāt. Mahārāj gahan vedānta viṣayāñce prakāṣ rīṭīne vivaraṇ karīt nasat kimvā upniṣadāmvar pravacaṇ det nasat. Tyāñcā upadeś mukhyataḥ naitik ase... Paṇ yā ughaḍ śābdik bodhāpekṣā asaṅkhyā paṭīne maulyavān asā anubhavarūpāne bodh mahārājāmpāsūn mīlat ase va tyāmuḷec mahārājāñkaḍe śraddhene yeṇāryā bhaktāñce atiucca pratīce hit hot ase.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:48 *tayāceṃ vānāvayā mahimān / vedaśāstrīm dharileṃ maun / yuktijukṭiceṃ pramāṇ / tetheṃ jāṇ cālenā.*

in the Vedas and Vedic sciences,<sup>7</sup> adding that the actions of a true teacher (*sadguru*) are wordless teachings that are not communicable through religious lectures (*vyākhyāṇem*) and mythological stories (*purāṇem*).<sup>8</sup> Later, in the English text *Life of Sai Baba* (1955), B.V. Narasimhaswami follows the line of Dixit and Dabholkar when he writes that “Baba seldom delivered any lengthy address to his disciples, especially after the masses began to come to him in 1908-1909,” and this is because most of the people who came to him were “hardly fit to understand high philosophy.”<sup>9</sup> S.P. Ruhela, one of the more prolific contemporary authors of Sai Baba devotional literature, further reiterates the position of his predecessors in *Shirdi Sai the Supreme* (1997): “[Sai Baba] preached no sermons, gave no discourses on Vedanta, Upanishad, Bhagavad Gita, etc. His instruction was mainly ethical.”<sup>10</sup> Similarly, the website of the Sansthan and Trust similarly describes Sai Baba’s “style of teaching,” stating that he “did not deliver lectures and rarely gave formal teachings” but rather “taught orally by parable, direct experience and the example of his own life.”<sup>11</sup> Nowhere in these sources does one find criticism of Das Ganu or his account in the *Santakathāmṛt* for misrepresenting Shirdi Sai Baba, or alleging that the hagiographer fabricated the philosophical conversation between Sai Baba and the devotee Chandorkar. What we have in the hagiographic tradition, then, is not an issue of

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 3:8 *śāstraviśārad vedavādī / prajñāvanta paṇḍitādi / ghaṭapaṭādivādpravādī / yāñcyā nādīm bharuṃ nakā* .

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 8:84 *kārya navhe jem vyākhyāṇem purāṇem / sukar hoī tem satpurūṣācaraṇem / tayācem hālṇem cālṇem / upadeśaṇem niḥśabda*.

<sup>9</sup> Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba*, 640. Narasimhaswami’s hagiographical work marks a major attempt to reevaluate and remake Sai Baba’s legacy some fifty years after the latter’s death. On the subject of Sai Baba’s school of philosophy, Narasimhaswami determines that the question is “unanswerable except by saying that He belongs to no school or to all schools” (*Life of Sai Baba*, 639).

<sup>10</sup> S.P. Ruhela, *Shirdi Sai the Supreme* (New Delhi: Diamond Pocket Books, 1997), 43-44. As discussed later in this chapter, Ruhela’s statement overlooks the important and oft-told story in the *Satcarita* and other sources about the time that Sai Baba interpreted *Bhagavad Gītā* 4:34 and demonstrated knowledge of Sanskrit in another conversation with Chandorkar.

<sup>11</sup> “Personality,” Shri Saibaba Sansthan Trust [https://www.shrisaibabasansthan.org/new\\_eng%20template\\_shirdi/miscellaneous/personality.html](https://www.shrisaibabasansthan.org/new_eng%20template_shirdi/miscellaneous/personality.html)), accessed December 27, 2015.

controversy or competition – but this account does represent a curiosity when examining the hagiographic tradition holistically.

How does one account for the “philosophizing Sai Baba” in Das Ganu’s *Santakathāmṛt* when it apparently – and I emphasize this word, *apparently* – contradicts how other hagiographic sources remember the saint? One possible emic response – that is, the perspective of Sai Baba devotees – might maintain that the simplest explanation is that the humble, illiterate saint from the countryside is a divine, omniscient personage. This approach posits that Sai Baba has natural access to spiritual knowledge, even though it has always been the prerogative of the literate, well-educated Brahmin elite. While the suggestion that Sai Baba had a Brahmin birth appears in the later hagiographic work of B.V. Narasimhaswami, Das Ganu agrees with his contemporary Dabholkar in stating that the saint’s origin is unknown and that his caste and religious identity are indeterminable.

Another explanation from the devotee’s perspective might be that Sai Baba received an education in Hindu metaphysics from his Brahmin guru Venkusha. Such a proposition, however, requires some clarification gleaned from secondary literature. Das Ganu, unlike Dabholkar, writes a great deal about Sai Baba’s guru and develops the theory that Venkusha was actually Gopalrao Deshmukh, a Brahmin landholder and saintly figure who lived in Selu, a town about 250 kilometers southeast of Shirdi. In the 1920s, Das Ganu uncovered a local legend in Selu about Deshmukh’s transformation into Venkusha, a name indicative of his devotion to the Venkateshwara form of Krishna. Venkusha’s story is the subject of Chapter 26 in the *Bhaktisārāmṛt* (1925), another compendium of saints’ lives penned by Das Ganu. According to the story, an old Muslim widow visited Venkusha in Selu in the mid-nineteenth century. She gave to Venkusha her



young son – “who was Kabir in a previous lifetime”<sup>12</sup> – to be raised under his care just before she died; and that boy eventually became Shirdi Sai Baba. In the 1970s, the Sai Baba devotee and researcher V.B. Kher scrutinized this theory by revisiting Selu. Kher discovered that Deshmukh/Venkusha, although a historical figure, had lived from 1715 to 1802. This makes it impossible, Kher argues, for Deshmukh to have been the guru of Sai Baba, whose birth is approximated to 1838.<sup>13</sup> Notably, in the *Santakathāmṛt*, Sai Baba mentions that his guru is named “Sri Vyankushah” – the spelling of the last syllable follows the Persian word *śahā*<sup>14</sup> – but the text offers no other information about this figure beyond this single enigmatic reference.

Pushing beyond the presumptions that Sai Baba is a self-enlightened soul or that his guru, whoever he was, taught him Hindu philosophy, I want to suggest that there is another way to approach the “philosophizing Sai Baba” in Das Ganu’s *Santakathāmṛt*. This requires looking at the relationship between the hagiographer and the hagiographic subject in the production of hagiography. One commonality found in the earliest hagiographic accounts about Sai Baba, including Dabholkar’s *Satcarita* and the works of Das Ganu, is that they are full of small stories – like the *pericopes* in the New Testament, and the *līlās* of the Bengali mystic Ramakrishna – where Sai Baba establishes personalized relationships with individuals. This is a trademark of Sai Baba’s sainthood: his knack for appearing to individuals as they wish, or need, to see him. In some stories, there is “Sai Baba the powerful miracle-worker” or “Sai Baba the compassionate healer,”

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<sup>12</sup> Das Ganu, *BSA*, 26:153 *jo pūrvīncā kabīr satya*.

<sup>13</sup> Kamath and Kher, *Sai Baba of Shirdi*, 75. After travelling to Selu and claiming to have debunked Das Ganu’s theory about Deshmukh as Venkusha, Kher opines that Sai Baba’s guru was a “Sufi divine” of unknown name and origin.

<sup>14</sup> Das Ganu, *SKA*, 57:24.

while other stories give us “Sai Baba the egalitarian theologian,” “Sai Baba the ethicist,” and “Sai Baba the peacemaker between Hindus and Muslims.”<sup>15</sup> I argue that this semiotic flexibility – by which I mean Sai Baba’s ability to mean different things to different people in different contexts – is a helpful conceptual tool for understanding the variance of the saint’s discursive images in the many texts and films in the hagiographic tradition.<sup>16</sup> Forthcoming chapters will further explore more aspects of this semiotic flexibility, for example, in the hagiographical reconstruction of Sai Baba’s religious identity from “neither Hindu nor Muslim” to “both Hindu and Muslim” (Chapter 3) and the genre of miracle stories where Sai Baba takes the form of other religious personages to humble proud, purity-minded Brahmins (Chapter 7). This chapter closely examines the very first discursive image of Sai Baba – what I will call the “philosophizing Sai Baba” – not as a contradiction vis-à-vis what so many later hagiographic sources say but as a product of the relationship between saint and hagiographer. I suggest that if we understand the spiritual transformation of the police constable G.D. Saharabudde into the hagiographer Das Ganu Maharaj – a metamorphosis engineered by Sai Baba – then we gain insight into the impetus for portraying the saint as an expert in Hindu metaphysical subjects. Simply put, the Sai Baba in the *Santakathāmrt* tells us more about

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<sup>15</sup> The argument that a saint’s sainthood is multidimensional is not particularly novel to the study of saints in South Asia or the broader field of sainthood studies. However, current scholarship is uncovering the range of possibilities for constructing and transforming the memory of a saint. For instance, Christian Novetzke’s work on the cultural history of the fourteenth-century Indian saint Namdev includes the careful study of the story in which the robber Namdev becomes a saint. See Novetzke, *Religion and Public Memory*, 162ff.

<sup>16</sup> In another South Asian religious context, Chad Bauman speaks of the “semiotic flexibility” of Sathya Sai Baba, the purported reincarnation of Shirdi Sai Baba and a guru/godman with a truly globalized following. Bauman’s article, which focuses on Indian-American immigrants at a Sai Baba center in Indianapolis, explores how “Sai, as a symbol, means many things to many people (and different things in different contexts).” See Chad Bauman, “Sathya Sai Baba: At Home Abroad in Midwestern America,” in *Public Hinduisms*, eds. John Zavos et al. (London: Sage, 2012), 142.

Das Ganu and his relationship with the saint than it does about what Sai Baba “actually” said and taught. The significance of this text is that it problematizes the assertion that Shirdi Sai Baba was one to philosophize. To Das Ganu at least, he was.

This chapter proceeds in four stages. First, we will examine the content of the 140 verses in Chapter 57 of the *Santakathāmṛt*. Second, we will look at other hagiographic representations of Sai Baba handling philosophical subjects, which, unlike the conversation recorded in the *Santakathāmṛt*, wed the saint’s ethical teachings to philosophical discourse. Third, we will look at the only other major instance of the “philosophizing Sai Baba” in early hagiography: the time that Sai Baba demonstrated his knowledge of Sanskrit grammar and taught Chandorkar – the same interlocutor in the *Santakathāmṛt* – the “deeper” meaning of a *Bhagavad Gītā* verse. We will then turn to Das Ganu and his relationship with Sai Baba, which is well-documented in the hagiographer’s own words in an interview published in *Devotees’ Experiences of Shri Sai Baba* (1940). Here, I suggest that the transformation of an ordinary person named G.D. Sahasrabuddhe, who was busy pursuing worldly pleasures, into the “modern-day Mahipati”<sup>17</sup> known as Das Ganu Maharaj will shed some light on why this account portrays Sai Baba as a guru explicating the difference between perception and reality. And we will conclude with some reflection on the contributions that the study of Das

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<sup>17</sup> Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba*, 325. Mahipati (d. 1790) is the great hagiographer of Marathi saints whose texts became the standard source of information on their lives and deeds. Two of his more widely circulated hagiographic compendiums are the *Bhaktavijay* (1762) and the *Bhaktalīlāmṛt* (1774). The latter should not be confused with Das Ganu’s *Bhaktalīlāmṛt* (1906), which some refer to as the “modern” (*arvācīn*) text due to its coverage of “modern-day” saints. For more information on Mahipati, see Jon Keune, “Gathering the Bhaktas in Marāṭhī,” *Journal of Vaishnava Studies* (2007): 169-187. See also Jon Keune, “Eknāth Remembered and Reformed, Bhakti, Brahmans, and Untouchables in Marathi Historiography” (Ph.D. Dissertation, Columbia University, 2011).

Ganu's *Santakathāmṛt* gives to the study of Shirdi Sai Baba specifically and hagiography more generally.

### **A Synopsis of Chapter 57 of the Santakathāmṛt**

In the *Santakathāmṛt*, Sai Baba's conversation partner is Narayan Govind Chandorkar, the Deputy Collector of Ahmednagar District. From later sources (e.g., Narasimhaswami's *Life of Sai Baba* [1955]), we learn that Chandorkar was born to a respected and pious Brahmin family in Kalyan. He excelled in school and obtained a bachelor's degree in philosophy, complementing his college studies with the *Bhagavad Gītā* and Shankaracharya's commentary on the same. By age twenty, he had finished his higher education and entered the government sector, quickly rising in the colonial bureaucracy from gazetted officer to deputy collector in seven years. In 1891 or so, Sai Baba sent Appa Kulkarni, the village accountant (*karnam*), to invite Chandorkar to Shirdi. During their first meeting, Sai Baba told Chandorkar that the two had been connected with each other over four previous lifetimes and that the invitation to Shirdi is a request to renew their "contract" as guru and disciple for another.<sup>18</sup> Chandorkar became an ardent devotee, tradition says, after experiencing the saint's protection even when he was far away from Shirdi.<sup>19</sup> In the works of prolific hagiographers like Narasimhaswami and S.P. Ruhela, Chandorkar and Das Ganu are described as Sai Baba's two principal

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<sup>18</sup> Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba*, 250.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 249-256. In his text's second volume, Narasimhaswami describes the moment that deepened Chandorkar's faith in Sai Baba. Chandorkar had climbed to the top of a goddess shrine on Harischandra Hill, about sixty kilometers from Shirdi. The climb exhausted him, and he prayed to Baba for some water to quench his thirst. At that moment, Chandorkar saw a Bhil (someone from one of the local hill tribes) and asked him for a drink of water. (The significance of the Brahmin Chandorkar humbly requesting water from a member of a much lower caste is not lost on Narasimhaswami). The Bhil directed Chandorkar to look under the rock that he was sitting on, which is where he found a handful of water. Afterwards, Chandorkar returned to Shirdi and saw Sai Baba, who said, "Nana, you were thirsty. I gave you water. Did you drink?" This incident convinced Chandorkar that Sai Baba was "God omnipresent" (256).

recruits in the early devotional community. These two devotees are also compared as a pair of opposites, each raising the saint's profile in his own way. The less-educated Das Ganu used his poetic abilities to bring the masses to Sai Baba through *kīrtans* and hagiographic texts. Meanwhile, Chandorkar was university educated and worked in the government sector, which enabled him to introduce a host of judges, clerks, civil servants, and others to the greatness of Shirdi's resident saint.

The conversation between Chandorkar and Sai Baba begins with the former's request to the saint for information about the Lord. Sai Baba responds by outlining the practices of someone "possessed of the four measures" (*sāadhanacatuṣṭayasampanna*) that cultivate the knowledge of the cause and essence of the universe, or *brahmajñāna*. The first is the power of discrimination (*viveka*), namely, the ability to differentiate between impermanent (*anitya*) and permanent (*nitya*) things like the phenomenal world and Brahman, respectively. The second is ascetic-like dispassion (*vairāgya*) – the state of having no desire for this world or the world beyond. The third is the "group of six practices like *śama*, *dama*, etc." (*śamadamādi ṣaṭka*): controlling the senses (*śama*), restraining the mind (*dama*), bearing misery without lamentation (*titikṣā*), disinterest in worldly affairs (*uparati*), faith (*śraddhā*), and equanimity (*samādhān*). The fourth and final means is the pursuit of liberation from transmigratory existence (*mumukṣutva*). These four measures are the same as those specified by the eighth/ninth-century Advaita philosopher Shankaracharya in the *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi*.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* 1:19 *adau nityānityavastuviveka pariṅyate / ihāmutraphalabhogāvīrāgastadanantaram / śamādiṣaṭkasampattirmumukṣutvamiti sphuṭam*. There is a robust debate among scholars regarding the authorship and date of the *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi*. Comans finds that the style and terminology of the text indicates that it "is more than likely to be a composition of some later Śaṅkarācārya, perhaps connected to the Śrīṅgeri *pīṭham*." See Michael Comans, *Extracting the Essence of the Śruti: The Śrutiśārasamuddharaṇam of Totakācārya* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1996), xvi. On the other hand, Grimes argues that "a strong case can be made that the *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* is a genuine

Next, Sai Baba states that liberation (*mokṣa*) is attaining neither the abode of Vishnu (*vaikuṅṭha*) nor the abode of Shiva (*kailās*) but rather the total absorption (*tādātmya hoṇe*) with the indestructible first cause of the universe, *caitanya*,<sup>21</sup> Chandorkar asks Sai Baba to explain this *caitanya*, and the saint defines the concept: “That which is the support of the world and envelops all of creation, that into which the world will dissolve, that first cause of the whole process is the luminous *caitanya*. Know that the world that appears before you, Narayan, is an illusion (*bhās*).”<sup>22</sup> Chandorkar needs further clarification, saying that it is difficult to understand how one universal force resides in different bodies with different souls: “The soul (*ātmā*) experiences pleasure and pain, but one does not affect another. How can you say that the same *caitanya* exists in them? Just as bodies are different, so too does it seem that souls are different and that the soul is different from *caitanya*.”<sup>23</sup>

Sai Baba corrects Chandorkar’s understanding by offering two analogies to explain *caitanya*. In the first analogy, the saint says that different colors can be mixed into vessels of water to make the contents appear red, white, black, blue, etc., but the water in each vessel is the same. Similarly, the mixture of the soul and the heart (*hrday*) enables one to have the sensations of pleasure and pain, which are properties of the heart/body. The souls that experience these properties are non-different from one another;

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work of Śaṅkarā’s and that it differs from his other works in certain respects in that it addresses itself to a different audience and has a different emphasis and purpose.” See John Grimes, *The Vivekacūḍāmaṇi of Śaṅkarācārya Bhagavatpāda: An Introduction and Translation* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 2004), 13.

<sup>21</sup> See Das Ganu, *SKA*, 57:26-50.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 57:52-53 *je jagāce jagadādhār / je vyāpūn urale carācar / jyācec ṭhāyī akher / lay hoṇār jagatācā // aise je kā ādya mūl / tec caitanya sojjvaḷ / jagat je diste nivaḷ / to bhās jāṇ nārāyaṇā.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 57:68-69 *ātmyāce sukhaduḥkhabhān / na hoy anyonyalāgūn / mag avaghyāt ek caitanya / āhe kaise mhṇāve // jaisī śarīr bhinna bhinna / taisec ātme bhinna bhinna / ātmā caitanyapāsūn / vāṭe asāvā nirālā.*

they are all infused with the same *caitanya*.<sup>24</sup> The second analogy involves *caitanya*'s three qualities: spiritual (*pāramārthik*), practical (*vyāvahārik*), and illusory (*pratibhāsik*). Sai Baba compares these to the three developmental stages of the soul. Mature souls are the ones whose knowledge of *caitanya* puts them in the category of holy people, the *sādhūs*. Adolescent souls understand the scripturally mandated customs pertaining to what is right and what is wrong (*tyājyātyājya*), while childlike souls confuse truth and falsehood and are covered with the film of ignorance (*ajñānpaṭal*). However, each soul is the same inasmuch as it is a soul. Sai Baba further compares the qualities of *caitanya* to the different levels of royal power (*rājsattā*) accessible to the emperor, officers, and messengers in an empire. The emperor sits on a throne and controls the actions of the others; the officer acts according to the emperor's orders; and the messengers carry out the royal decrees filtered down from above. But all three of their essences, viz. emperorship, officership, and messengership, depend on the same and singular royal power, which is independent of its components and also the cause for all of their actions in the empire. Sai Baba says that Deputy Collector Chandorkar and the servant who waves the fan over his head are both supported by the same royal power (i.e., the British Raj), although the latter exercises a much smaller share of it.<sup>25</sup>

Chandorkar raises an objection: "How can there be divisions in the indivisible *caitanya*? If there are divisions, doesn't its indivisibility disappear?"<sup>26</sup> Beginning his final discourse, Sai Baba explains the difference between reality and perception, and between the concepts of *caitanya* and *māyā*. It is possible to perceive divisions in *caitanya* as its

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 57:70-77.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 57:78-99.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 57:101 *niravayava rājasattece / amśa kaise paḍatīl sāce / amśa paḍatā tiyece / niravayavatva jāīl*.

qualities engender different experiences, as with the example of access to royal power. Just as one perceives different amounts of space filling glasses, cups, and jugs of various sizes but realizes that space is ultimately indivisible, so too is the perception of the singular *caitanya*'s divisions the result of the "trick of *māyā*" (*māyecā khe!*). The universe (*brahmāṇḍa*) takes shape through the union of *caitanya*/Brahman and *māyā*, wherein the two are inseparable like jaggery and its sweetness, or the sun and its light. (At this point, Sai Baba tells Chandorkar that this topic is covered in Jnaneshwar's *Amṛtānubhāva*, a late thirteenth-century text that synthesizes *advaita* philosophy and *bhakti* devotionalism, and that he will not repeat it in full). Furthermore, *māyā* has two functions. It covers everything (*jhākaṇe*), and it makes what is not real seem real (*je nāhī te bhāsaviṇe*). Arising from *māyā* is the soul's sense of ego and separation from other souls in thinking, "I'm so-and-so." The notions of separate identities obscure reality just like a laborer who dreams of being a king. *Māyā* first makes the laborer forget that he is a laborer, and then it projects onto him an illusory reality in which he is a king. Sai Baba concludes the conversation with Chandorkar with the exhortation to remove this veil of illusion/*māyā* by obtaining the knowledge/*jñāna* necessary to see the universe's underlying singular spirit/*caitanya*. At the end, Chandorkar and the other devotees who heard Sai Baba's discourse in the mosque (e.g. Vaidya Sathe, Nana Nimonkar) bow to their guru in satisfaction.<sup>27</sup>

### **Philosophy Wedded to Ethics in Shirdi Sai Baba's Didactic Style**

Chapter 57 of Das Ganu's *Santakathāmṛt* gives the impression that Sai Baba is comfortable and competent using the vocabulary of Hindu metaphysics, for he speaks

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 57:101-140.



like the head abbot (*śaṅkarācārya*) of a Hindu monastery. To reiterate the point made in this chapter's introduction, this "philosophizing Sai Baba" is a bit of a curiosity because it is a representation of the saint that differs from many other hagiographic sources maintaining that the saint never spoke as he does in this earliest account. This does not mean that Sai Baba never speaks about metaphysical subjects. Rather, other hagiographic sources typically feature Sai Baba explaining concepts like *karma* and *mukta sthiti* by imparting ethical teachings, for example, on the evils of lust, the virtues of doing business honestly, and the importance of maintaining faith and forbearance – *śraddhā* (or *niṣṭhā*) and *saburī* – in all situations. This ethical component is absent in the *Santakathāmṛta*'s purely philosophical discourse.

Consider how G.R. Dabholkar represents Sai Baba's explanation of *brahmajñāna* in Chapters 16 and 17 of the *Śrī Sāi Satcarita*. Most of this section features Dabholkar's original commentary – the hagiographer's own words – on the necessity of a guru's grace (*gurukṛpā*) in obtaining the knowledge to discriminate between spiritual aims like *mokṣa* and material ends (e.g., having a son, getting a job). Dabholkar's *Satcarita* also gives us a different narrative and a different conversation vis-à-vis the discussion of *brahmajñāna* in the *Santakathāmṛt*. In the *Satcarita*, a wealthy man comes up to Sai Baba and asks the saint to give him *brahmajñāna*. In the flow of conversation, Sai Baba tells a young boy nearby to go to a shop and bring back five rupees. The boy goes to several shops, but each is empty. Sai Baba knows – the hagiographer Dabholkar tells us, breaking into the narrative – that the shopkeepers are away. This small monetary request is the saint's plan to expose the greed of the wealthy man who is hoarding 250 rupees in his pocket, another fact that Sai Baba intuitively knows. The man's heart is impure and not ready to receive

the saint's grace, the conduit of *brahmajñāna*. When Sai Baba tells him to “take the Brahma out of his pocket,” the man sheepishly pulls out the wad of cash.<sup>28</sup> He is both ashamed and awed that Sai Baba is an *antarjñānī*, one with intuitive knowledge of others' secret thoughts and desires. Then, the saint delivers an abbreviated discourse on *brahmajñāna*, stating that its prerequisite is the renunciation of greed and not the four measures, *sādhana-catustaya*, which are outlined in the *Santakathāmṛt*: “Gather up your Brahma! Without getting rid of greed, you'll never find Brahma. How can the one whose mind is absorbed in acquiring sons, animals, wealth, etc. obtain *brahmajñāna*, without being free from the obstruction of wealth?”<sup>29</sup> Dabholkar's *Satcarita* thus shows Sai Baba taking the topic of *brahmajñāna* in another direction, as part of the saint's evaluation of his interlocutor's ethical shortcomings. Accordingly, Sai Baba concludes this conversation in the *Satcarita* with his stipulation for dispensing blessings to petitioners: “My store (*bhāṇḍār*) is full. I'll give whatever to whomever who wants it, but I have to gauge the capacity of the taker (or “customer,” *grāhak*). I'll give only what he can bear.”<sup>30</sup>

Das Ganu's post-*Santakathāmṛt* hagiographic writing also moves away from the purely “philosophizing Sai Baba” and toward representations of a Sai Baba who combines morals and metaphysics. Consider Chapters 32 and 33 of the *Bhaktalīlāmṛt* (1906), a text published only three years after the *Santakathāmṛt*, and the conversations

<sup>28</sup> Dabholkar, *ŚSSC*, 17:63 *kādhā pāhūm bāher ātām / brahma tom khīśānt tumcec*.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 17:66-67 *mag bābā mhaṇatī te veḷe / guṇḍāḷ āpuleṃ brahmaguṇḍāḷeṃ / lobhāceṃ jāhlyāvīm vāṭoleṃ / brahma na mīḷe tujalāgīm // putrapasvādi vittārjan / āsakta yāntci jayāceṃ man / tayās kaiñceṃ brahmajñāna / dravyavyavadhān na suṭatām*.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 17:78 *mājhā bhāṇḍār bharpūr āhe / deṅ jo jo jem jem cāhe / pari grāhakācī śakti pāhem / detom mī sāhe teñc kīm*.

between Sai Baba and Chandorkar therein.<sup>31</sup> In the thirty-second chapter, Chandorkar inquires with Sai Baba about the connection between *karma* and the body. The saint replies that one cannot get rid of one's *karma* without experiencing its fruits, the effervescent feelings of pain and pleasure that are the "covering" or "film" (*paṭal*) obscuring reality.<sup>32</sup> And the unavoidability of experiencing the fruit of one's *karma*, Sai Baba says, means that one should learn how to live virtuously in the world. Among the tenets of the ethical life covered by Sai Baba in Chapter 32 are: being humble in wealth and poverty alike, knowing that wealth is essential but should not be an entanglement, giving to the sick, disabled, and orphaned, dressing modestly, refraining from insulting others, and doing what needs to be done (*kartavya*) but giving its fruits (*phal*) of actions to the Lord (*īśvar*) so as to remain pure (*alīpta*).<sup>33</sup> All of the saint's guidance is summarized in the following exhortation to Chandorkar: "Be engaged in action. Don't

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<sup>31</sup> Whereas Chapters 32 and 33 of Das Ganu's *Bhaktalīlāmṛt* are conversations between Sai Baba and Chandorkar, Chapter 31 records several of Sai Baba's demonstrative miracles like the lamp lighting miracle and his sleeping on a slender plank hanging from the mosque's ceiling by ragged clothes. In Chapter 31, Das Ganu also writes down several of Sai Baba's interactions with individual devotees. Two devotees in a rush to get home leave Shirdi without having a meal with Sai Baba, and they end up needlessly hungry, as their train is delayed three hours at the station. Appa Kulkarni follows Sai Baba's advice, which saves him from being charged with embezzling government money. Sai Baba speaks aloud the innermost prejudiced thoughts of Narayan Krishna Phense, which makes Phense believe in the saint's omniscience. Prompted by the foreknowledge that Kondya Sutar's crops are on fire, Sai Baba teaches Chandorkar that gain and loss, birth and death, etc. are under God's control. Ganesh Vishnu Berey, a district agriculture inspector, heeds Sai Baba's warning to leave Shirdi as quickly as possible, and on the road, his horse-cart speedily passes by another, which was stopped by robbers. Haripant, a devout but unhappy Brahmin from Pune, is a childless widower in his fifties who finds a woman and gets remarried, per the saint's blessing.

<sup>32</sup> Das Ganu, *BLA*, 32:45. There are exceptions to Sai Baba's dictum that one must inevitably experience the fruits of *karma*. Sai Baba occasionally acts as a mediator between a devotee and the ripening of his/her *karma* that has produced a dangerous situation or a painful illness. An example of the latter is the story in the *Satcarita* in which Sai Baba takes pity on Dr. Pillai, whose leg is infested with multiple guinea worms (*nārū vyatha*). Pillai says he will happily take ten more births to exhaust the *karma* causing this pain, and Sai Baba responds that this suffering can be ended earlier by compressing it into ten days. Sai Baba tells Pillai that a crow will peck at the wounds and make them better. Then, Abdul, the saint's Muslim attendant, accidentally steps on Pillai's leg, rupturing the wounds and causing lots of pain. Pillai applies sacred ash (*udṭ*) to his leg, and ten days later, the worms are discharged. See Dabholkar, *ŚSSC*, 34:48-90.

<sup>33</sup> See Das Ganu, *BLA*, 32:67, 75, 79, 93, 94, and 107.

become stale like withered flowers. This is the purpose of life. How much more should I tell you?”<sup>34</sup>

The conversation continues a few days later, which Das Ganu offers in Chapter 33 of the *Bhaktalīlāmṛt*. Here, Sai Baba announces that he will tell Chandorkar about the state of liberation transcending the perceptions of pain and pleasure (i.e., *mutka sthitī*) and the behavior required for liberation. Sai Baba covers three topics. First, he distinguishes between the “fruit of one’s actions” (*karmaphala*) and the “allotment by destiny of bodily enjoyment and suffering” (*dehaprārabdha*), telling Chandorkar that one should live ethically while accepting what has been destined.<sup>35</sup> Second, Sai Baba prescribes a series of instructions for the “ethical conduct of men and women” (*puruṣastrīnītī*). Each sex has its specific set of guidelines, the gist of which is that men should be pure in thought and honest in action and women should be humble, pious, and subservient to their husbands.<sup>36</sup> By having Sai Baba speak on this issue, Das Ganu constructs the saint as addressing a relevant topic of debate and discussion in colonial India, namely, gender-based ideas of morality.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 32: 110 *aṅgī asāve kartṛtva / na rahāve nirmālyavat / hāc puruṣācā puruṣārtha / kiṭī sāṅgū tujapraī*.

<sup>35</sup> Das Ganu, *BLA*, 33:26-30. While the concept of *karma* generally holds that good produces good and bad produces bad, Sai Baba clarifies that the force of previously accumulated actions – the *karma* behind one’s “destiny” (*dehaprārabdha*) – also produces exceptions. He gives the example of two thieves. Both have committed crimes, but destiny prescribes one to roam freely and the other to be caught and punished. The immorality (*pāp*) of the thief acquitted for his crime, however, will ripen in the next lifetime.

<sup>36</sup> See Das Ganu, *BLA*, 34-67. In this conversation, according to Sai Baba, men are supposed to fulfill their desires with their wives and not give into impure thoughts when seeing other women. They should hate bad deeds and resist giving into pride; and also listen to stories about virtuous people, keep the mind pure, and respect their parents and wise people. In terms of family life, men should neither joke with their sons, nor be too friendly with servants, nor sell their daughters. The duty of women (*stryāñcā dharma*) is to serve their husbands, and they should be humble and not speak to other men when no one else is around. A woman’s body is preyed upon by immorality (*anītī*), so it should be protected, as one protects a sheep from wolves, with a fence – a fence of intensely religious vows (*tīvra vrat kumpanāte*). Women should also be ready to participate when they see that their husbands are amorous. And the widow should live a strictly celibate and pious life if her husband dies.

<sup>37</sup> On the subject of gender and ethics in colonial India, see Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion, and Cultural Nationalism* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001); Partha Chatterjee,

In the last half of the chapter, Sai Baba explains the two states of the soul, being bound in transmigratory existence (*baddha sthitī*) and being desirous of liberation (*mumukṣā*), and he contrasts them in terms of ethical behavior. The former identifies one who is crafty, bitter, disrespectful of holy men, argumentative, and self-praising; it refers to the person who reneges on promises, betrays friends, and creates enmity with the guru. The latter, who keeps virtuous company, eschews worldly affairs, accepts what is preordained by *dehaprārabdha*, fears misdeeds, speaks the truth, and repents for past infractions, is the true practitioner (*sādhak*).<sup>38</sup>

Gone in these and other<sup>39</sup> representations of Sai Baba handling metaphysical subjects is the saint who lectures about the aspirant who is *sādhanacatuṣṭayasampanna*,

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“Colonialism, Nationalism, and Colonized Women: The Contest in India,” *American Ethnologist* 16, no. 4 (1989): 622-633.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 33:69-134. Furthermore, Sai Baba says that other means, such as image worship (*mūrti pūjā*) and reading spiritual texts (*adhyātma granthāvalokan*), are useful for advancing the practitioner on the path toward liberation, but the saint says that self-knowledge (*ātmavidyā*) is liberation’s trigger. Acting in accordance with what has been prescribed, Sai Baba says, enables the practitioner to be fully aware at the moment of death, the time when one concentrates on his/her preferred deity (*ārādhyā daivat*) and draws near liberation (*samīpatā mukti*). The conversation concludes with Chandorkar and the other devotees gathered in Shirdi, satisfied with the feast (*mejevānī*) offered by their guru, the dishes of which are the knowledge of dispassion (*jñānavairāgya*) and devotion (*bhakti*). At the end, Das Ganu says that one reading of this chapter confers the benefit of performing one hundred *aśwamedha yajñas*.

<sup>39</sup> Ashok Bhushan’s 1977 Hindi film *Shirdi ke Sai Baba* features a scene of dialogue with the same question that begins Das Ganu’s *Santakathāmr̥t*:

Devotee:	Where is God?
Sai Baba:	Where isn’t he?
D:	Why can’t we see him?
SB:	Is there butter in milk?
D:	Yes.
SB:	But do you see it?
D:	No.
SB:	When do you see it?
D:	You only see it after churning.
SB:	So, God is only seen by churning the soul.

In lieu of a basis in the hagiographic tradition, the filmmakers created this conversation as part of the film’s mission to introduce Shirdi Sai Baba to new audiences (i.e., the broader, translocal film public). Here, in this exchange, Sai Baba addresses the devotee’s question more like Socrates, and less like Shankaracharya. He also repurposes the Hindu myth of the ocean’s churning (*samudra manthan*) to describe the aspirant’s “churning the soul” (*ātma taṭolne se*) as the means of finding God. This is the filmmaker Bhushan’s

defines the nature of *caitanya*, and uses metaphors to explain its difference from the illusoriness of *māyā*. The “philosophizing Sai Baba” who appears in the Das Ganu’s *Santakathāmṛt* teaches quite differently vis-à-vis other hagiographic works, and this discursive image of the saint recedes into the background as the hagiographic tradition develops. Instead, the more prolific representation in hagiographic texts like the *Bhaktalīlāmṛt* and the *Satcarita* is that of “Sai Baba the ethicist” who gives devotees a non-technical form of spiritual knowledge leading to liberation.

### **Shirdi Sai Baba’s Interpretation of *Bhagavad Gītā* 4:34**

In the Shirdi Sai Baba hagiographic tradition, the only other major appearance of the “philosophizing Sai Baba” occurs in Chapter 39 of G.R. Dabholkar’s *Śrī Sāi Satcarita*. This is yet another conversation between Sai Baba and N.G. Chandorkar, and it takes place one day in the mosque when the saint asks what the devotee is quietly reciting. (Chandorkar’s son says that this episode took place sometime between 1900 and 1902).<sup>40</sup> Chandorkar – whom Dabholkar describes as well-learned in the *Bhagavad Gītā* and its commentaries (*gītābhāṣyapāraṅgat*) – says that it is verse 4:34 of the *Gītā*: “Recognize that by complete surrender, by questioning, by serving, the wise seers of truth will show wisdom to you” (*tad viddhi praṇipātena / paripraśnena sevayā / updeksyanti te jñānam / jñāninas tattva darśinaḥ*).<sup>41</sup> Sai Baba then probes Chandorkar about the verse’s meaning. When Chandorkar offers an interpretation similar to the one provided above in English,

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creative license to depict Sai Baba handling philosophical subjects in a more accessible way vis-à-vis the heady philosophical discourse in the *Santakathāmṛt*.

<sup>40</sup> Narasimhaswami, *Devotees’ Experiences*, 249.

<sup>41</sup> *The Bhagavad Gita*, trans. Laurie Patton (New York: Penguin, 2008), 58.

Sai Baba suggests that the devotee revisit the verse's second half. In the *Satcarita*, Sai Baba is reported to have said:

[Baba] said, “Nana, look again at the third line and know that there is an elision mark (*avagraha*) behind the word ‘knowledge’ (*jñāna*). That’ll provide the meaning.

Don’t think that what I’m saying is contrarian or nonsensical. The meanings in the previous commentaries [on the *Gītā*] – How can they be incorrect?

The enlightened soul (*jñānī*), the one who perceives reality (*tattvadarśī*), so you say, will teach you that knowledge. But if you take the word ‘nescience’ (*ajñāna*) [in lieu of knowledge/*jñāna*] then you will gain true knowledge.”<sup>42</sup>

By adding a mark of elision, an *avagraha*, to change the Sanskrit in the third line from “*upadekṣyanti te jñānam*” to “*upadekṣyanti te ajñānam*,” Sai Baba offers an alternative interpretation of *Gītā* 4:34 that is both grammatically possible in terms of vowel *sandhi* and also retains the verse’s *anuṣṭubh* meter. Because knowledge/*jñāna* is “something to be realized” (*jñāna hī vastu jāñāvayācī*), it is “not a topic of instruction” (*navhe tī viṣay upadeśācī*).<sup>43</sup> However, nescience/*ajñāna* is a subject of speech. It covers up knowledge and can be removed through the guru’s grace. If knowledge/*jñāna* cannot be the subject of verbal discourse because it transcends verbal discourse, then the guru’s teachings are actually a form of nescience/*ajñāna*. Just as an optician uses an instrument to remove the cataract from a patient’s eye, so too does the guru give teachings, which emerge from nescience, for the eradication of nescience in the devotee. Citing a well-known metaphor used in *advaita* (non-dual) philosophy, Sai Baba concludes his verbal exegesis: “To

<sup>42</sup> Dabholkar, *ŚSSC*, 39:54-56 *nānā tṛtīya caraṇ / punśca lakṣānt gheīm pūrṇa / jñān śabdāmāgīl jāṇ / avagraha āṇ arthās // hem mī kāy karitoṃ anartha / asaṭya kāy pūrvīl bhāṣyārtha / aiseṃhī nirartha nā mānīm // jñānī āṇi tattvadarśī / jñān upadeśītī aiseṃ jem mhaṇasī / tetheṃ ajñān pad jāim ghesī / yathārtha ghesīl prabodh.*

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 39:67.

perceive that a rope is a snake is the result of one's nescience about the rope's true form. To learn of its true form is to remove nescience and what remains is the knowledge that it is a rope."<sup>44</sup>

In comparison to the *Santakathāmṛt*, the portrayal of Sai Baba interpreting the *Gītā* verse contributes specific symbolic capital to the saint's legacy as a holy man well-versed in Hindu traditions. It enables devotees, many of whom are Brahmins, to make extrapolated claims in later literature, such as Sai Baba "knew Sanskrit" and "taught the Gita."<sup>45</sup> It also complicates the aforementioned statement from the contemporary hagiographer S.P. Ruhela that Sai Baba "never gave discourses on Veda, Upanishad, Bhagavad Gita, etc." This gives us another apparent "contradiction" between hagiographic sources, which, to reiterate, is only a contradiction if one chooses to privilege certain source(s).

There is one constant in the examples of Sai Baba handling metaphysical subjects in Chapter 57 of the *Santakathāmṛt*, Chapters 32 and 33 of the *Bhaktalīlāmṛt*, and Chapter 39 of the *Satcarita*: N.G. Chandorkar, the interlocutor who is inclined toward philosophical discourse. Sai Baba does not speak at length about *caitanya* and *māyā* with

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 39:72 *dorāpoṣīm sarpā janān / hem tom śuddhaswarūpājñān / swarūpopadeśem nirase ajñān / ure tem jñān dorācem*. Dabholkar revisits the topic of Sai Baba and the *Bhagavad Gītā* in Chapter 50 of the *Satcarita*, defending the saint's interpretation of the verse and the notion that *jñāna* is self-luminous (*swayamprakāś*). The purpose of that chapter, Dabholkar says, is to refute others who either doubt Chandorkar's reliability or argue that the addition of the *avagraha* is unnecessary and incorrect. He specifically mentions the objections from readers of the *Sai Leela*, the monthly magazine of the Sansthan and Trust. Dabholkar first published the chapters of the *Satcarita* serially in *Sai Leela* in the 1920s. Narasimhaswami reiterates Dabholkar's position that Sai Baba's interpretation is valid. See Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba*, 283.

<sup>45</sup> In *Devotees' Experiences*, the devotional testimonies of Mukunda Shashtri Lele (219) and B.V. Deo (261-267) maintain that the conversation with Chandorkar demonstrated that Sai Baba knew Sanskrit. Chandorkar's daughter Minatai Ganesh Kulvalekar (215-216) and son Bapu Rao N. Chandorkar (249-251) express the same view in their testimonies. Perhaps not incidentally, all of the adherents to the idea that Sai Baba knew Sanskrit are Brahmins. These claims are reiterated in contemporary literature, too. See S.P. Ruhela, *Sri Shirdi Sai Baba: The Unique Prophet of Integration* (New Delhi: Diamond Pocket Books, 2000), 58.



just anyone; it is always Chandorkar who poses the questions and receives the instruction.

Later hagiographers are also aware of Chandorkar's capacity to participate in philosophical discourse with Sai Baba. Narasimhaswami's interpretation of the Chandorkar-Sai Baba relationship is instructive:

Baba was never concerned with maintaining philosophical conclusions, never debating various conflicting philosophical theories. He was a Guru intent on practical guidance of those who sought him for guidance. So when he talked about Maya to Chandorkar, he made it clear that what he said related to the sadhana to be adopted by Chandorkar for purposes of God-realization and self-realization. It was not an attempt to make Chandorkar accept one intellectual conclusion about the Maya theory to be kept along with a number of theories and hypotheses and rules for guidance in worldly affairs. The whole mischief arises only if the latter course is adopted.<sup>46</sup>

In other words, Narasimhaswami takes the conversation in the *Santakathāmṛta* as an example of the guru Sai Baba responding accordingly to Chandorkar's request for knowledge of the Lord. It is as if the saint adjusts his interactions with petitioners to match their dispositions and proclivities, and it is this ability of the saint to meet people "on their own terms" is what the hagiographers emphasize in their interpretation of these events.

This calibration is evident in other stories, too. Confronted by villagers upset by the noisiness of a particular Rohilla's nightly recitations, Sai Baba dialogues with villagers not on the topics of *caitanya* and *māyā* but rather teaches them that religious singing of any sort, whether from a Brahmin or a Pathan, is a devotional practice pleasing to God.<sup>47</sup> When he meets with devotees who are gravely ill, Sai Baba does not offer discourses on the fleetingness of health but instead produces miraculous cures through

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<sup>46</sup> Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba*, 192.

<sup>47</sup> For more on the story of Sai Baba and the Rohilla, see Chapter 3.

various means like his glance, his words, and the ash (*udī*) from the wood-fire in his mosque.<sup>48</sup> The website of the Sansthan and Trust likewise adopts the view that “Baba’s way is to cater directly to the needs of each individual” and that “as a result of Baba’s grace, devotees experience self-generated conviction and faith that whatever their desires and aspirations are, they will never go unnoticed by Baba.”<sup>49</sup>

Moreover, this notion that Sai Baba deals in contextualized settings, not in absolutes, is found in the language of the hagiographic works themselves. When Chandorkar instigates the conversation in Chapter 33 of the *Bhaktalīlāmṛt*, he does so by asking Sai Baba for a talk (*kathan*) specifically for him: “Baba, please let your next talk be for me.”<sup>50</sup> The saint’s response, as we have seen, matches the devotee’s capability to participate in philosophical discourse. This calibration leads to the first conclusion about the curious case of the “philosophizing Sai Baba.” Wherever one finds him, Chandorkar (or someone like him) is sure to be his conversation partner.

However, Chandorkar never transcribed his conversations with Sai Baba. In the hagiographic tradition, he is a well-known part of the story but not one of the storytellers. To deepen the investigation into the “philosophizing Sai Baba” in the *Santakathāmṛt* requires the additional consideration of its composer’s life and history with the saint as recorded in *Devotees’ Experiences* (1940), the first anthology of first-person devotional testimonies about Sai Baba, which were collected by B.V. Narasimhaswami in the mid-1930s. The story of Das Ganu’s transformation from ordinary police constable to hagiographer is no less remarkable than his body of work extolling the glories of his

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<sup>48</sup> For a further look at Sai Baba miracle stories about healing and illness, see Chapter 6.

<sup>49</sup> “Personality,” Shri Saibaba Sansthan and Trust, [https://www.shrisaibabasansthan.org/new\\_eng%20template\\_shirdi/miscellaneous/personality.html](https://www.shrisaibabasansthan.org/new_eng%20template_shirdi/miscellaneous/personality.html), accessed December 27, 2015.

<sup>50</sup> Das Ganu, *BLA*, 33:5 *bābā ātā pūḍhīl kathan / majalāgīm kathan karā*.

guru, Sai Baba. Because this transformation took place at the same time as the composition of the *Santakathāmṛt*, I suggest that Das Ganu’s devotional testimony is a resource for understanding the circumstances that brought about the “philosophizing Sai Baba.”

### **The Transformation of G.D. Sahasrabuddhe into Das Ganu**

One of Sai Baba’s more well-known miracles – one often recounted throughout devotional literature, as well as films like *Shirdi ke Sai Baba* and *Naam Ek, Roop Anek* – happens to Das Ganu. In Narasimhaswami’s text *Devotees’ Experiences*, Das Ganu mentions that he wanted to “bathe in the Ganga” (*gaṅgāsnān*), the holiest of holy rivers in India, the regional manifestation of which in Maharashtra is the Godavari River.

However, Sai Baba did not allow him to leave Shirdi because the Ganga flows from his (Sai Baba’s) feet. Das Ganu narrates what he subsequently experienced:

Baba knew my mentality and asked me to approach his feet and hold my palm near the feet. The water began to flow from both his feet. It was not a few drops like perspiration. It was rather a slow and thin current. In a short time, say in a few minutes, I had collected a palmful of that water. Here was Ganga and I was delighted.<sup>51</sup>

After the miraculous sight of the Ganga flowing from Shirdi Sai Baba’s feet, Das Ganu spontaneously composed a fourteen-verse hymnody in praise of the saint. In this

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<sup>51</sup> Narasimhaswami, *Devotees’ Experiences*, 134. A different version of events occurs in Ashok Bhushan’s hagiographic film *Shirdi ke Sai Baba*. Bhushan’s film depicts the supervising officer in the police department dispatching Das Ganu to investigate whether or not Sai Baba has been troubling the British government by uniting Hindus and Muslims. Das Ganu’s plan is to entice Sai Baba with a dancing girl. If the saint responds, it will expose him as a hypocrite. The woman enters the mosque and asks for Sai Baba to bless her dancing, and Sai Baba says, “If my blessing is what you want, you shall get it” (*agar āśīrvād cāhiye to milegā*). As the woman dances, her anklets break, and she hears her conscience (*antarātmā*) wondering how to remove the stains (*dāg*) on her moral character. Sai Baba tells the woman that she is not at fault, but the one who is at fault is watching secretly. He calls Das Ganu into the mosque and asks him why he works a job that makes him do bad things (*galat kām*), and then tells the policeman to write about what he believes, the Vitthal form of Krishna in Pandharpur. At the startling revelation of this information, Das Ganu falls at the saint’s feet, where the streams of water miraculously emerge and Das Ganu’s well-known devotional song, “Shirdi Is My Pandharpur,” plays in the background.

composition, Das Ganu highlights Sai Baba's semiotic flexibility, as the poet describes how the saint resembles different Hindu deities at different times, evading onlookers' attempts to categorize him. The poet says that Sai Baba sometimes speaks with the knowledge of Ultimate Reality (*brahman*), while, at other times, he takes the "form of Rudra" to inspire fear in devotees. There is also the side of Sai Baba who performs miraculous *līlās*, which reminds one of Krishna performing the pranks of his childhood. He resembles Kamalavar (Vishnu) at the time of *āratī* during congregational worship, and he becomes like Shiva (Madanadahan) when seated in front of the *dhunī*. And the setting for all of these similes where Sai Baba appears "as" or "like" other religious figures is the mosque – one of the pieces of evidence in Das Ganu's hymnody, as well as the *Satcarita*, that marks Sai Baba's Muslim-ness.<sup>52</sup>

The miraculous experience described above is part of the well-documented relationship between Shirdi Sai Baba and Ganapatrao Dattatreya Sahasrabuddhe, the Brahmin police officer who left his job, became the hagiographer and *kīrtankār* Das Ganu, and spread Sai Baba's fame throughout the Bombay Presidency in the early twentieth century. Das Ganu's devotional testimony, like the nearly eighty others in *Devotees' Experiences*, is an amalgam of genres; his words are as hagiographical about the greatness of Sai Baba as a true teacher, or *sadguru*, as they are autobiographical about the impact of the saint on the direction of his life. To be clear, in this section, when I cite the content of Das Ganu's devotional testimony, I am simply citing the source. To echo the point made in this dissertation's introduction, I do not find it fruitful to scrutinize such truth claims made in *Devotees' Experiences* to determine if they "actually" happened. It

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<sup>52</sup> See this chapter's Appendix B for my translation of Das Ganu's fourteen-verse hymnody.

is more interesting and productive, I argue, to see how this hagiographic literature imagines, constructs, and transforms the life and legacy of Shirdi Sai Baba. I am neither reading Das Ganu’s devotional testimony with an eye to debunk it nor accepting it at “face value” but rather examining it for insights into how he understands his relationship with Sai Baba and his transformation from policeman to hagiographer, which indubitably influenced his composition of the *Santakathāmṛt*.

Das Ganu’s testimony in *Devotees’ Experiences*, which is based on his interview with B.V. Narasimhaswami in 1936, gives us a lot of information about when and how he met Sai Baba and what he learned at the saint’s side. In the early 1890s, the soon-to-be Das Ganu was a sergeant (*havāladār*) in the service of Deputy Collector N. G. Chandorkar. His first visit to Shirdi – which occurred at Chandorkar’s suggestion in either 1890 or 1892<sup>53</sup> – was not with the explicit intention to visit its resident saint but rather, he says, “to ingratiate myself with N.G.C.”<sup>54</sup> Das Ganu also says that his pre-Sai Baba life was driven by a desire to be promoted to the rank of criminal magistrate (*faujdār*) and an affinity for acting in village plays (*tamāsas*) and writing love songs (*lāvaṇī*), but he adds: “Even from the outset, Sai Baba foresaw my future and wanted to save me from my own ways and choice of profession and pastime.”<sup>55</sup> Thus, Das Ganu’s story is about how a man entrenched in the world of secular work and pleasure first struggled with and then heeded the call of Sai Baba to take up a life of nobler pursuits.

Das Ganu was born to a Brahmin family in 1867 in Akolner (15km from Ahmednagar). When he did not show much aptitude for schooling, one of his relatives

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<sup>53</sup> Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba*, 316.

<sup>54</sup> Narasimhaswami, *Devotees’ Experiences*, 140.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 127 and 132.

enrolled the stout youth in the police force. Before meeting Sai Baba for the first time in the early 1890s, Das Ganu had met a Brahmin spiritual adept (and graduate of Madras University) named Vaman Shastri Islampurkar. He found Islampurkar to be devout and learned, so much so that he asked for and received an initiatory *mantra* (i.e. *mantropades*). Das Ganu's connection to Islampurkar is also important in that Islampurkar had previously visited Shirdi and met Sai Baba. That his guru approved of Sai Baba gave Das Ganu an additional nudge toward the mendicant in Shirdi.<sup>56</sup>

In his devotional testimony, Das Ganu says that he had no difficulty in quitting village plays and erotic poetry, but he remained attached to his job in the police department. He mentions a series of three incidents where he was put in ever-increasing danger and interprets these incidents as obstacles orchestrated by Sai Baba to convince him to adopt a more spiritual life. First, he speaks of the time when his religious sensibility almost resulted in termination from his job. One day, while on duty, Das Ganu crossed over the Godavari River to visit a shrine. In doing so, he left the Bombay Presidency and entered the Nizam's territory. Before he managed to return, he saw some of his jealous coworkers waiting to bust him for leaving his post. Das Ganu picked up some water from the Godavari and prayed: "Baba, let me escape this time. I shall certainly give up my police service." Suddenly, he met a village magistrate (*munsaf*) who asked for his help immediately with some nearby thieves. Das Ganu arrested them and crossed the river back into the Bombay Presidency, thereby enabling him to present his capture as the legitimate reason for having been away. However, Das Ganu did not resign

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 140.

from the service. This incident gave him more confidence about his chances to obtain the promotion to *faujdār*.<sup>57</sup>

Second, Das Ganu's life was in danger between 1898 and 1899 during his pursuit of Kana (or Khana) Bhil, a notorious dacoit who was causing trouble throughout the Ahmednagar and Bid districts of Bombay Presidency. Das Ganu and three officers were on the case, and Bhil had disposed of all but Das Ganu. Disguising himself as someone belonging to the Ramdasi sect and performing *kīrtans* in a local Ram temple, Das Ganu went undercover to learn of Bhil's movements. One day, Bhil caught Das Ganu in disguise and resolved to shoot him. Das Ganu fled to a nearby temple and fell at the feet of a consecrated image of the god Ram, praying to Sai Baba again, "Save me. Save me. I will give up all my police efforts."<sup>58</sup> The plea, according to Das Ganu, softened the Bhil's heart such that the dacoit let him off with a warning not to meddle in his affairs again. The ambitious Das Ganu was undeterred. He returned to the area of Bhil's encampment with a police force armed with carbines and surrounded the hillside, but Bhil escaped after a fierce battle. Terrified that his enemy was on the loose, Das Ganu went to his old friend, Deputy Collector Chandorkar, and secured a medical certificate that relieved him of police fieldwork. Narasimhaswami and other hagiographers interpret this episode as the second time that Sai Baba protected the stubborn Das Ganu, who still refused to leave the police force.<sup>59</sup>

In the third and final incident, Das Ganu was caught in a misunderstanding that made him appear guilty of embezzlement. Das Ganu was the officer-in-charge at his

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<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 132. See also Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba*, 308-309.

<sup>58</sup> Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba*, 310.

<sup>59</sup> Narasimhaswami, *Devotees' Experiences*, 131-132. See also Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba*, 309-310.

station when a village magistrate's messenger delivered the payment for a 32-rupee fine. The messenger gave the money to another constable, who did not write a receipt and instead took the money for himself. Later, the station's commanding officer sent a warrant to the same village magistrate to collect payment, but the magistrate's reply stated that the fine had already been paid. In this confusion, Das Ganu – the officer-in-charge – bore the responsibility for the missing amount. He realized not only that his promotion to *faujdār* was doomed but that he was going to be fired and charged with a crime. He paid the 32 rupees out of pocket and finally resigned from the police department. This happened in 1903 at the age of 36. "I have now left my service," Das Ganu purportedly told Sai Baba. "I and my wife have to stand in the streets, as we have no property or income." Sai Baba assuaged Das Ganu's anxiety – "I shall provide for you and your family"<sup>60</sup> – and Das Ganu, tradition says, never struggled with money while under Sai Baba's care.<sup>61</sup>

In recounting this final incident in *Life of Sai Baba*, Narasimhaswami adds some hagiographical flourish to Das Ganu's account: "Thus Baba succeeded in making Ganpat Rao quit that service, a service, which would prevent Ganpat Rao from becoming the high spiritual personage that he was subsequently to develop into."<sup>62</sup> As the story of Das Ganu enters the hagiographic tradition, its leitmotif becomes the personal and professional transformation of the former through the agency of the latter.

Narasimhaswami describes Das Ganu's elevation from lower to higher natures and from

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<sup>60</sup> Narasimhaswami, *Devotees' Experiences*, 132-133. In *Life of Sai Baba*, Narasimhaswami makes a comparison between Sai Baba's promise to provide for the livelihood of Das Ganu with Krishna's words to Arjuna in *Bhagavad Gītā* 9:22, viz. *yoga kṣemam vahāmyāham*. See Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba*, 311.

<sup>61</sup> Das Ganu says that he made a living off of plots of cultivatable land given to him by acquaintances but never collected money as a *kīrtankār*. See Narasimhaswami, *Devotees' Experiences*, 133.

<sup>62</sup> Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba*, 310-311.



secular to spiritual vocations as an example of Sai Baba as a “spiritual alchemist that turns baser nature into the gold of saintliness, that could turn a petty minded lewd constable into the moulder of spiritual destinies of tens of thousands.”<sup>63</sup>

Another episode narrated by Das Ganu emphasizes both the importance of Sai Baba as the giver of the knowledge that distinguishes perception from reality and also highlights the saint’s penchant for instructing individuals in individually-specific ways. Das Ganu had the desire to write a Marathi commentary on the *Īśa Upaniṣad*.<sup>64</sup> When he found its esoteric teachings in Sanskrit difficult to understand, he sought advice from the saint in Shirdi. Sai Baba told him to go to H.S. Dixit’s house in Bombay and prophesied that a “cooly girl” (*molkarīṇ*) would resolve his doubts. For a Brahmin to receive help from a low-caste maidservant seemed a bit strange to Das Ganu, but he obeyed the saint’s command. On the first morning in Dixit’s home, he saw and heard a young girl outside who was happily singing about a beautiful silk sari. Her clothes were old and ragged, and Das Ganu took pity on her and had a sari sent over to the girl. She wore it only for a day and then went back to wearing rags. In this moment, Das Ganu finally understood that the key phrase in the first verse of the *Īśa Upaniṣad*: “by rejecting that” (*tena tyaktena*), which he took to mean that happiness is not found in the externals but in giving them up. In other words, it is unwise to take pleasure in materiality, as beautiful saris will turn eventually to ragged clothes. Giving up the world of temporary pleasure is to find true happiness. Per Narasimhaswami, the significance of Sai Baba using a low-caste servant girl as the means to teach the aspiring Brahmin commentator Das Ganu about the

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 327.

<sup>64</sup> Das Ganu’s commentary was published as the *Īśavāsyā Bhāvārtha Bodhinī*.

difference between lower and higher types of happiness is to show that “Baba’s ways of teaching were and are peculiar and different in the case of different individuals.”<sup>65</sup>

After retirement, Das Ganu relocated to Nanded, a small town in the Nizam’s territory, where he lived until his death in October 1962 at the age of 95. He dedicated the rest of his life to writing hagiographic texts, including the *Santakathāmṛt* (which was started contemporaneously with his retirement), the *Bhaktalīlāmṛt*, and other compositions on Sai Baba and other saints.<sup>66</sup> Just as significant as his literary legacy is his role as a travelling *kīrtankār*. His public performances, which prominently displayed a framed photo of Sai Baba, attracted large audiences; Narasimhaswami attests that Das Ganu could hold two thousand people spellbound for six to eight hours.<sup>67</sup> The performative genre of *kīrtan* – a combination, in Maharashtra, of a moral lecture with music and song – enabled the creative performer to make connections between a modern-day holy man and the saints of centuries past. In *Devotees’ Experiences*, R.B. Purandare, a low-ranking civil servant, says that he first heard about Sai Baba during one of Das Ganu’s *kīrtans*: “[Das Ganu] would say, ‘Here is Tukaram’s great love and greatness in surrendering to God and getting the most marvelous benefits. If you wish to know if there is any such person now in the flesh who can give you the same benefit, then I will tell you, Here is this Sai Baba.’”<sup>68</sup> Selections from these *kīrtans* remain an important part of contemporary Sai Baba worship, and one of the more popular pieces that is part of noonday worship (*madhyāna āratī*) at Sai Baba temples is “Shirdi Is My Pandharpur

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<sup>65</sup> Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba*, 312-313. This story is also told in Chapter 20 of Dabholkar’s *Śrī Sāi Satcarita*.

<sup>66</sup> Das Ganu also composed the *Śrī Gajanan Vijay*, an account of the Maharashtrian saint Gajanan Maharaj (d. 1910) of Shegaon (approx. 300km from Shirdi).

<sup>67</sup> Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba*, 311. From 1914 onwards, Das Ganu delivered the annual *harikathā* performance during the Ramnavami festival in Shirdi.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 476.

(*śirḍī mājhe paṇḍārpur*), a statement equating Shirdi with one of the oldest and most visited pilgrimage sites in the Deccan region.<sup>69</sup>

As the first project in his newfound career as hagiographer, Das Ganu says that he wrote the *Santakathāmṛt* “bit by bit when I was in service i.e. before 1903, both the portions about Baba and the others. But it was printed in 1903. Baba blessed the effort. None of my books was read to Baba. Nor was Baba asked beforehand to give the information for writing the books... [But] Baba said about each book when placed in his hand, ‘That is alright.’”<sup>70</sup> Elsewhere in his testimony, Das Ganu says that the three chapters about Sai Baba in the *Bhaktalīlāmṛt* – his second hagiographic work, published in 1906 – actually were read aloud in the mosque in Shirdi. When N.G. Chandorkar gave Sai Baba a copy of the manuscript, the saint declared: “It is alright.”<sup>71</sup> The saint’s matter-of-fact approval of Das Ganu’s hagiography is something that we learn only from Das Ganu’s testimony in *Devotees’ Experiences*. There is nothing in the *Santakathāmṛt* itself (or in the other works of Das Ganu) that broaches the relationship between hagiographer and hagiographic subject. By comparison, in the *Satcarita*, G.R. Dabholkar explicitly discusses how he received the saint’s verbal permission to document the saint’s life and teachings. The saintly sanction underwriting the *Satcarita* is an important factor in its status as the central scripture of the Sai Baba movement. Comparatively, Das Ganu’s texts, including the *Santakathāmṛt*, have been imbued with a weaker form of approval from Sai Baba.

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<sup>69</sup> The lyrics of Das Ganu’s *āratī* are: “Shirdi is my Pandharpur and the God there is Sai Baba / Pure devotion is like the Chandrabhaga river; sincere faith is like the Pundalik temple / Come, come, everyone! Bow in reverence to Sai Baba / Ganu says, oh Sai Baba, run up to me, mother” (*śirḍī mājhe paṇḍārpur, sātī bābā ramāvāra / śuddha bhakti candrabhāgā, bhāv puṇḍalik jāgā / yā ho yā ho avaghe jana, karā bābāmsī vandana / gaṇū mhaṇe bābā sātī, dhāmv pāv mājhe āī*).

<sup>70</sup> Narasimhaswami, *Devotees’ Experiences*, 138.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

Another statement by Das Ganu in *Devotees' Experiences* nudges the study of the *Santakathāmṛt* in an interesting direction. In a reference to the philosophical conversation between Sai Baba and Chandorkar in the *Santakathāmṛt*, Das Ganu states:

The instruction given to N.G. Chandorkar by Baba was mentioned to me by N.G.C. I expanded it with my own learning and gave it its present shape. But the kernel of it was given by N.G.C. Baba has several times talked Advaitic philosophy in my presence. "I am God." "You are God." "All are God." He has said this many times. There is nothing Baba did not know."<sup>72</sup>

This statement both reflects the autobiographical tone of devotional testimonies in the Shirdi Sai Baba hagiographic tradition and offers a glimpse into how the text was produced. The first stage is that of the conversation between Sai Baba and Chandorkar, which presumably took place in Shirdi sometime in the late nineteenth century, and the second stage is the reproduction of the conversation through Das Ganu's hagiography-writing hand, which expands the "kernel" into a detailed explication of topics like *brahmajñāna*, *caitanya*, and *māyā*. This stage, I suggest, is also shaped by Das Ganu's experience of Shirdi Sai Baba. The "philosophizing Sai Baba" in the *Santakathāmṛt* emerges from the convergence of three contributing elements: saint, devotee, and hagiographer/devotee. In other words, we can understand Das Ganu's work as the "emplotment" – to use Hayden White's terminology<sup>73</sup> – of historical figures (Shirdi Sai

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid. In this text, Das Ganu wavers back in the other direction, saying that "Baba's treatment of Advaitism is not easy to make out" because the saint "never expressly dealt with it" (141). Not only do different devotees apparently contradict each other regarding what Sai Baba did and said, an individual devotee – in this case, Das Ganu – offers different statements that say different things. To point out the variance in devotional testimonies reveals the particularly enigmatic character of Shirdi Sai Baba, a saint whose legacy is built through personalized remembrances of individual devotees/hagiographers. Devotees attuned to Hindu philosophy and desirous of a guru knowledgeable of non-dualism (*advaita*) will get the "philosophizing Sai Baba." Others who are less interested in technical metaphysics will focus on his ethical teachings, egalitarian philosophy, and miraculous blessings.

<sup>73</sup> See Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973).

Baba and N.G. Chandorkar) and historical events (their conversations) into an archetypal genre that is very familiar and very prevalent in the history of hagiography in South Asia: the discursive exchange between teacher (*guru*) and student (*śiṣya*), which, in this case, turns on concepts and definitions used in non-dual, that is, *advaita* philosophy.

A cursory glance at some of the other chapters in the *Santakathāmṛt* shows that Das Ganu quite clearly sticks to this manner of focusing on a saint in conversation with a devotee on philosophical subjects. A short chapter of seventy-one verses on Manik Prabhu (d. 1865) focuses almost entirely on the saint’s conversation with a Komati woman named Venkamma about the metaphysical principles of yoga. The Manik Prabhu hagiographic tradition (e.g., the *Māṇik Prabhu Caritra*) is full of the saint’s miraculous deeds, as well as his promotion of an egalitarian philosophy of religious truth – the *sakalamata-sampraday*, which might be translated in English as the “sect that accepts the truth in every religion.” However, in Chapter 40 of the *Santakathāmṛt*, what we learn about Manik Prabhu is how he determines that Venkamma is fit (*yogyā*) to receive instruction in yoga (*yogopadeś*). He teaches her the foundational principles of yogic practice (e.g., non-violence, forgiveness, compassion), as well as the essences of the paths of ritual action (*karma*), devotion (*bhakti*), and physical discipline (*yoga*), the latter of which highlights the knowledge of the subtle channels (*naḍī*) flowing throughout the body. After being educated about various postures (*āsana*) and breath control (*prāṇāyama*), Vyakamma becomes a yogini and sits wrapped in contemplation as one of Manik Prabhu’s most prominent devotees.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> See Das Ganu, *SKA*, 40:10-39. This chapter on the saint Manik Prabhu and his devotee Vyakamma ends on an interesting note about caste. With her heart full of desire to be in her guru’s presence, Vyakamma makes the following request: “After I die, please, Maharaja, do not let a *śūdra* touch me” (*SKA* 40:44 *marañottar majprat / śūdrācā na lāgo hāt / hec mājhe priya satya / kele pāhije mahārājā*). Manik Prabhu

The rather short chapter on the Bengali mystic Ramakrishna (d. 1886) provides some basic details of the saint and his life and practices, such as his birth in Kamerpur village in Bengal and his habits of meditating on the mantra, “Rama Krishna” day and night and calling out, “Mother, mother! Kali, Kali!” in front of an image of the goddess. But the narrative focus of this chapter is a brief telling of Ramakrishna’s intention to give up his life in the Janvhi River out of frustration at not having received a vision – or *darśan* – from Kali Ma. Upon hearing his words, Kali reveals herself to Ramakrishna, outstretches her arms, and says that she will never forsake her child. The goddess then offers her child, Ramakrishna, the entirety of the three worlds (*trailokya*). Ramakrishna turns this offer down, demonstrating his discriminating wisdom that the accumulation of all manner of worldly wealth, even family and offspring, is tantamount to spiritual bondage. Consequently, Ramakrishna earns Kali’s blessing and becomes “one possessed with the highest spiritual knowledge” (*brahmavette*).<sup>75</sup>

It thus seems that the “philosophizing Sai Baba” fits a pattern of the representation of saints in the *Santakathāmṛt*. But the availability of knowledge about Das Ganu’s relationship with Shirdi Sai Baba enables us to delve deeper into the questions pertaining to why we have Sai Baba speaking in a way that other people said he

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laughs, accepts the request, and says that she will ascend to heaven very soon. Vyakamma is so overjoyed that she spends nine days in constant devotional singing until she dies on the tenth day. Other people from her Komati caste come to collect her body, but they hear the words call out: “Nobody touch me” (*malā na śivā koṇī*). Manik Prabhu then speaks up and arranges to have a Brahmin named Ramachandra Bua perform the necessary rites (bathing, wrapping it in a white shroud, applying *vibhūti* to the limbs, etc.). Consequently, Vyankamma had her funeral done at the hands of a Brahmin – through Manik Prabhu’s agency – and she went to heaven (*vaikunṭha*). See Das Ganu, *SKA*, 40:40-60.

<sup>75</sup> Das Ganu, *SKA*, 58:46-59. It is noteworthy that Ramakrishna is one of the few non-Maharashtrian saints to feature in the *Santakathāmṛt*. His inclusion is an indication of his far-reaching popularity across India in the latter half of the nineteenth century. For more on Ramakrishna, see Jeffrey Kripal, *Kali’s Child: The Mystical and the Erotic in the Life and Teachings of Ramakrishna* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); Narasingha P. Sil, “Vivekānanda’s Rāmākṛṣṇa: An Untold Story of Mythmaking and Propaganda,” *Numen* 40, no. 1 (Jan 1993); Narasingha P. Sil, *Ramakrishna Revisited: A New Biography* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1998).

never did. From reading the text, we know that the “philosophizing Sai Baba” is a mouthpiece dispensing the knowledge necessary to separate conventional (or illusory) reality from ultimate reality and that this is the leitmotif in Das Ganu’s transformation from policeman to hagiographer. We also know that Das Ganu aspired to write about Hindu philosophy inasmuch as he wrote a commentary on the *Īśa Upaniṣad*. The hagiographer also says that the stories, or *goṣṭī*, told by Sai Baba helped him in writing a Marathi commentary on Jnaneshwar’s *Amṛtānubhava*.<sup>76</sup>

To these observations, we might draw from Sudhir Kakar’s work on the psychological facets of the inextricably close relationship between gurus and devotees in Indian religious traditions. In this relationship, the devotee/disciple “incorporates idealized images of the guru which he feels as genuine and valuable additions to his own personality.”<sup>77</sup> Modern psychoanalysis, Kakar says, will point out that the devotee’s obsession with such idealized images of the guru reveals a persistent fear of separation. Idealization also implies that the devotee can never fully replicate the guru’s greatness but only imitate certain aspects of the idealized figure. I would suggest that we have idealization taking place in the relationship between Das Ganu and Shirdi Sai Baba in the *Santakathāmṛt*.

That being the case, we should approach the *Santakathāmṛt* with the awareness that its composer Das Ganu idealizes Shirdi Sai Baba as an erudite Hindu philosopher but

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<sup>76</sup> Narasimhaswami, *Devotees’ Experiences*, 143. In this text, Das Ganu gives an example of a story from Sai Baba that assisted his composition of the *Amṛtānubhava Bhāvārtha Mañjirī*. Sai Baba once asked Das Ganu if he had been given a portion of sweet pudding (*śirā*). Das Ganu said that he was not on good terms with someone – a person named in the devotional testimony only with the letter ‘B’ – and that he had not had any pudding. Sai Baba then instructed Das Ganu: “Who gives what to whom? What is this *śirā*? Who eats it? Do not say of anyone that he is inimical. Who is whose enemy? Do not entertain any ill feelings towards anyone. All are one and the same.”

<sup>77</sup> Sudhir Kakar, *Shamans, Mystics, and Doctors: A Psychological Inquiry into India and Its Healing Traditions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 277.

also with the additional nuance that this idealization exemplifies the “spiritual alchemy” capable of being engineered by the saint. The *Santakathāmṛt* is a record of how Sai Baba metaphorically spoke to an audience with a proclivity for philosophical conversation, and in doing so, it captures for posterity the Sai Baba who resonated with Das Ganu, the hagiographer who memorialized this conversation at the very start of his hagiographic career.

### Conclusion

In the fifty-seventh chapter of Das Ganu’s *Santakathāmṛt*, we find Shirdi Sai Baba speaking like a Vedanta-espousing Hindu guru in conversation with N.G. Chandorkar, the devotee who often served as the saint’s philosophical interlocutor. Notably, we have no mention in this account that Shirdi Sai Baba is a saint who evades socio-religious categorization (i.e., being “neither Hindu nor Muslim”), and we have no stories about Sai Baba as a saint who performs miracles (*camatkār*) and unfathomable deeds (*agādh līlā*). As other scholars have noted, these two characteristics are central to Sai Baba’s rapid popularization in modern India.<sup>78</sup> The saint’s capability to define and explain philosophical concepts such as *caitanya* and *māyā*, however, is not one of these characteristics. The question driving this chapter has been: How do we understand the limited appearance of the “philosophizing Sai Baba” in the hagiographic tradition – and the *Santakathāmṛt*, the first entry in this tradition, in particular – given that there are

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<sup>78</sup> Karline McLain cites the three reasons posited by Marianne Warren for Sai Baba’s incredible popularization in less than a century: the guarantee of material results obtained through prayer; the great number of books and films about him; and Sathya Sai Baba’s claim to be his reincarnation. To these three reasons, McLain adds a fourth: Shirdi Sai Baba’s embodiment and message of India’s “composite culture.” See McLain, “Be United, Be Virtuous,” 21-22.



many other sources maintaining that Sai Baba never spoke on metaphysics exclusively and at length?

Again, this is not the only instantiation of claim and counterclaim in the Shirdi Sai Baba hagiographic tradition. Another question that has different answers from different sources is whether or not Sai Baba performed the daily Islamic prayers. In *Devotees' Experiences*, Das Ganu reports that Sai Baba never said even one of the daily prayers, while Imambai Chota Khan says that he saw and heard the saint praying but “without however bending the whole body on knees as others did.”<sup>79</sup> That a Hindu like Das Ganu would not want to report the saint performing a non-Hindu ritual practice – or that he would be oblivious to its performance – is not unexpected. Likewise, it is not surprising that Imambai Chota Khan would report having witnessed Sai Baba doing *namāz*. In this way, to study the hagiographic literature and films that memorialize a saint who speaks to individuals – and not to a specific caste, community, nation, or religious tradition – is to reveal the many perspectives refracting the legacy of Sai Baba in a variety of directions. The many claims and counterclaims in the hagiographic tradition point to an important facet of Shirdi Sai Baba's sainthood: his semiotic flexibility that enables him to be remembered by Hindus as doing “Hindu” things and by Muslims as doing “Muslim” things.

That the hagiographer's hand molds a saint's life story to match a particular sentiment or experience, or even agenda, is nothing new to scholars of South Asian

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<sup>79</sup> Narasimhaswami, *Devotees' Experiences*, 131 and 307. Given Sai Baba's habit of hybridizing religious practices, it is perhaps unsurprising that a Muslim devotee reports on Sai Baba's doing *namāz*, and a Hindu devotee saying the opposite. Yet we also have Bayyaji Apaji Patel's devotional testimony in the same volume: “Baba himself recited the Namaz sometimes. That was only on Saturdays” (169). Devotional testimonies, while their content certainly owes to the religious identity of the devotee giving the testimony, thus seem much more individualistic in terms of what an individual personally saw and heard what Sai Baba did and said.

religious traditions. Robin Rinehart has written about the multiple identities assigned to the poet-saint Baba Bulleh Shah (d. 1758) by his different audiences. It is the egalitarian character of Baba Bulleh Shah's theology, Rinehart argues, that makes him "portable" across multiple contexts and enables Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs to remember the same historical figure in various ways (e.g., as a Sufi mystic, a Hindu saint, a Vedantic Sufi, a Vaishnava Vedantic Sufi).<sup>80</sup> Elsewhere, Rinehart has documented the phases in the mythicization of Swami Rama Tirtha (d. 1906) as it takes place over the twentieth century. The first-generation of hagiographic texts were written by people who knew the anti-nationalist swami when he was alive and stressed his spiritual accomplishments. Later, in the 1950s and 1960s, the next generation of hagiographers tweaked Swami Rama Tirtha's life story, portraying him as a patriotic hero and putting him in the family of freedom fighters whose efforts contributed to Indian Independence.<sup>81</sup>

Another illuminating example of sainthood (re)made in the hagiographer's image occurs in the context of the nineteenth-century Bengali mystic Ramakrishna. In one of his earlier essays on the subject, Narasingha Sil argues that Ramakrishna's disciple Swami Vivekananda deliberately endeavored "to present his spiritual master to the world in a new light – not as the divinely mad devotee of Kālī and Kṛṣṇa but as a Vedāntin, the inspiration behind Vivekānanda's grand plan for Hindu missionary enterprise."<sup>82</sup> In the collection of Vivekananda's public lectures and personal correspondences, Sil observes that the swami downplayed the mention of Ramakrishna's miracles, "scary spiritual exercises," and playful childlike behavior in lieu of the master who is "the concentrated

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<sup>80</sup> Robin Rinehart, "The Portable Bullhe Shah: Biography, Categorization, and Authorship in the Study of Punjabi Sufi Poetry," *Numen* 46, no. 1 (1999): 53-87.

<sup>81</sup> See Robin Rinehart's *One Lifetime, Many Lives* (1999).

<sup>82</sup> Sil, "Vivekānanda's Rāmakṛṣṇa," 45-46.

embodiment of knowledge, love, renunciation, catholicity, and the desire to save mankind.”<sup>83</sup> However, there is one crucial aspect of this work that deserves attention. Sil refers to “Vivekananda’s Ramakrishna” as the product of mythmaking and propaganda, with verbiage indicative of the perception that many academics still have of the hagiographic genre as the uncritical and disingenuous manipulation of a life story. In my examination of Das Ganu’s “philosophizing Sai Baba,” I have sought to move beyond this negative view of hagiography by following a statement from Mark Juergensmeyer on Gandhi’s posthumous elevation to sainthood. Juergensmeyer opines that “saintliness, like beauty, largely exists in the eye of the beholder, and the point of view is as interesting as the object of attention.”<sup>84</sup> Taking the hagiographic text as a window into the hagiographer’s eye allows us to see the “philosophizing Sai Baba,” who instructs a worthy devotee in the attainment of *brahmajñāna* and the difference between perception and reality, in a new light. It is neither an aberration nor a contradiction of later sources but a unique crystallization resulting from the saint’s impact on the life and work of the hagiographer Das Ganu.

This chapter has accomplished three objectives in the study of the Shirdi Sai Baba hagiographic tradition. First, it demonstrates the necessity of reading all statements about a saint does or say against the hagiographic grain to find exceptions to generalizations. Second, in doing so, it expands the repertoire of possible ways that devotees can imagine and construct their experience of what a saint said and did. Third, it gives us an entry into

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 49 n. 69. See also Walter G. Neevel, “The Transformation of Sri Ramakrishna,” in *Hinduism: New Essays in the History of Religion*, ed. Bardwell L. Smith (Leiden: Brill, 1976). Neevel argues that Ramakrishna was, basically, a *tāntrika*.

<sup>84</sup> Mark Juergensmeyer, “Saint Gandhi,” in *Saints and Virtues*, ed. J.S. Hawley (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 188.

a critical engagement with hagiography not as a genre coterminous with “fiction” and “fabrication” but as an expression of the personalized relationship experienced between saint and devotee.

In the next chapter, we will further explore one of the significant but subtle evolutions in Shirdi Sai Baba’s life and legacy: from being described as “neither Hindu nor Muslim” in Marathi poetry in the early twentieth century to becoming (re)described as “both Hindu and Muslim” in the mid-century works of B.V. Narasimhaswami. We will begin to examine how hagiographically constructed sainthood can function as an adaptive response to modernity. As the hagiographic tradition grows and evolves, we will also notice that the “philosophizing Sai Baba” – the one who unambiguously uses the conceptual vocabulary of Hindu philosophical traditions – recedes to the tradition’s margins. It is for this reason that the study of the *Santakathāmṛt* not only contributes to a more holistic study of the hagiographic tradition but also shows us comparatively which portrayals of Sai Baba become predominant over the twentieth century and which fall out of circulation.

**Appendix A: Table of Contents in Das Ganu's *Santakathāṃṛt***

<b>Chapter (<i>adhyāy</i>)</b>	<b>Saint</b>
1	Invocation ( <i>naman</i> )
2	Sri Guru Govind Singh
3	Sri Guru Teg Bahadur
4	Sri Guru Govind Singh
5	Sri Guru Govind Singh
6	Sri Guru Govind Singh
7	Sri Guru Govind Singh
8	Sri Ainath Sadhu of Umbarkhed
9	“
10	Sri Sadhu Maharaj of Kankhade
11	“
12	“
13	Sri Shukananda Nath of Bhalki Chidguppi
14	“
15	“
16	Sri Madhavacharya of Lavhral
17	Sri Santacharya of Lavhral
18	Sri Rukmananda, Yashvant Bua of Kandhar
19	Sri Deshikendranath Maharaj
20	Sri Appa, Manohar, Sakharam Banvas
21	Sridhar Maharaj Kandakurti
22	“
23	Sri Sakharam Bua of Amalner
24	Sri Govind Maharaj of Utran
25	Sri Chinmayananda of Umbarkhed
26	Sri Balatmaja of Pedgaon
27	Sri Nagendra Bharati of Panbhoshi
28	Sri Gaibi Bua of Bhoshi
29	Sri Sakharam Maharaj of Loni
30	“
31	“
32	Sri Gochar Swami Lakhbapatare
33	Sri Ramachandra Maharaj of Shevala
34	Sri Tukaram Maharaj of Yelegaon
35	Sri Gunda Maharaj of Deglur
36	“
37	“
38	Sri Namdev Sadhu of Umbraj
39	Sri Janabai of Jambhulbhet
40	Sri Manik Prabhu of Humnabad
41	Sri Thakur Bua of Daithan

42	Sri Gundabhat of Kahala
43	“
44	“
45	Sri Gangaji Patil of Pimpalgaon
46	Sri Narayan Swami of Nanded
47	Sri Limbaji of Nanded; Sri Mahadaji of Jalna; Sri Govindaji of Wanjarwada
48	Sri Narasingaji Maharaj of Akot
49	Sri Sitaram Maharaj of Mangalwedha
50	Sri Lakshman Bua of Vakhari
51	Sri Balakrishna Maharaj of Bawara
52	Sri Baba Dikshit
53	Sri Shah Saheb
54	Sri Daji Maharaj of Takali
55	“
56	“
57	Sri Saibaba of Shirdi
58	Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa
59	Sri Gangadhar Damodar Dev
60	Sri Vasudevananda Saraswati
61	Concluding chapter ( <i>kaḷasādhya</i> )

### Appendix B: Das Ganu's 14-Verse Hymnody

After the miraculous sight of the Ganga flowing from Shirdi Sai Baba's feet, Das Ganu spontaneously composed a fourteen-verse hymnody in praise of the saint. This composition, which is inserted between verses 107 and 108 in Chapter 4 of Dabholkar's *Śrī Sāi Satcarita*, highlights Sai Baba's semiotic flexibility, as the poet describes how the saint resembles different Hindu deities and evades different types of categorization.

- // Chorus //     Your unfathomable power and unprecedented miracles, O Majestic Guru!  
You are the boat, O Compassionate One, that takes us over the ocean of  
existence.
- // 1 //            You, like the One with Braided Hair [Krishna], turned your feet into  
Prayag  
And showed the Ganga and Yamuna flow from your toes.
- // 2 //            As you walk the earth, you have become the trivalent divine image –  
Brahma (Kamalodbhav), Vishnu (Kamalavar), and Shiva (Shiva-Har).
- // 3 //            Sometimes, you speak with knowledge that is like the Ultimate Reality  
[Brahman].  
Other times, you take the form of the 'Howler' [Rudra] and show  
fearsomeness.
- // 4 //            Sometimes, you are like Krishna performing the prankish acts of his  
childhood  
And you are the tender goose glued to devotees' hearts.
- // 5 //            If some call you a Muslim, you like the application of sandalwood paste.  
If some call you a Hindu, you always make the mosque your happy abode.
- // 6 //            If some say you're a wealthy man, you wander about begging.  
If some say you're a mendicant, your generosity disgraces the rich man  
Kuber.
- // 7 //            If they say, the mosque is your abode, the fire Vahani is there  
In the constantly burning wood-fire, the ashes of which you give to  
people.
- // 8 //            The devoted masses worship you from dawn  
And into the afternoon, until the sun sets, so continues your *ārtīs*.
- // 9 //            On all four sides, devotees, like an assembled audience, stand in wait  
Holding the whisk to wave over you.

- // 10 // Amidst the cacophonous sounds of the *śiṅg*, *kaḍyāḷem*, *sanayyā*, and *ghaṇṭā*  
The mace-bearer [*copdār*] with his fancy belt sings your praises at your  
doorstep.
- // 11 // During *ārtī*, you look like Kamalavar [Vishnu] sitting on your divine seat.  
At twilight, you are Madanadahan [Shiva] sitting in front of the wood-fire.
- // 12 // Such actions give us the realization daily that  
In you resides the *trimurti* [Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva], O Baba Sai.
- // 13 // Still, my heart-mind (*man*) roams and wanders about.  
Now, my request to you is to please make it steady.
- // 14 // I'm the lowest of the low, a great sinner, taking refuge at your feet.  
I've come to you. Ward off Das Ganu's threefold afflictions, O Majestic  
Guru!
- // dhru // *agādh śakti aghaṭit līlā tava sadgururāyā*  
*jadajīvāteṁ bhaviṁ tārāyā tūṁ naukā sadayā*
- // 1 // *veṇīmādhav āpaṇ hoṁni prayāg pad kelem*  
*gaṅgā yamunā dvay aṅguṣṭhīm pravāh dākhavile*
- // 2 // *kamalodbhav kamalāvar śivahar triguṇātmak mūrtī*  
*tūñci hounī sāisamarthā vicarasī bhūvaratī*
- // 3 // *prahar dilāsā brahmāsam teṁ jñān mukhem vadasī*  
*tamoguṇālā dharuni rudrarupa kadhiṁ kadhiṁ dākhavisī*
- // 4 // *kadhīm kadhīm śrīkrṣṇāsam tyā balalilā karisī*  
*bhaktamanāsī saras karunī marāḷ tuṁ banasī*
- // 5 // *yavana mhaṇāveṁ tarī thevisī gandhāvar premā*  
*hindu mhaṇūṁ tari sadaiva vasasī maśidint sukhadhāmā*
- // 6 // *dhanik mhaṇāveṁ jarī tulā tari bhikṣāṭaṇ karisī*  
*fakīr mhaṇāveṁ tarī kuberā dānem lājavisī*
- // 7 // *tavaukasāteṁ maśid mhaṇūṁ tari vanahī te ṭhāyā*  
*dhunīnt sadā prajvalīt rāhe udi lokām dyāyā*
- // 8 // *sakālapāsuni bhakta sābaḍe pūjan tava karitī*  
*mādhyanhīlā dinkar yetām hot ase ārtī*
- // 9 // *cahuṁ bājūnnā pārśadagaṇasam bhakta ubhe rāhatī*



*cauri cāmareṃ karīm dharunī tujavar dhālītī*

// 10 //

*śiṅ kaḍyāḷeṃ sūr sanayyā daṇḍaṇateṃ ghaṇṭā  
copdār lalakāratī dvārīm ghāluniyām paṭṭā*

// 11 //

*āratisamayīm divyāsaniṃ tūṃ kamalāvar disasī  
pradoṣakālīm basuni dhunipuḍheṃ madanadahan*

// 12 //

*aśā līlā tyā trayadevāñcyā pratyahiṃ tava ṭhāyī  
pracītīs yetātī amucyā he bābā sāī*

// 13 //

*aiseṃ asatām ugīc manman bhaṭakat heṃ phirteṃ  
ātām vinantī hīc tulā bā sthir karīm tyāteṃ*

// 14 //

*adhamādham mī mahāpātakī śaraṇ tujhyā pāyām  
āloṃ nivārā dāsgaṇūce tritāp gururāyā*

### Chapter 3

#### **From Neither/Nor to Both/And: Reconfiguring Shirdi Sai Baba in Hagiography<sup>1</sup>**

Some call you a Muslim (*yavana*), some call you a Brahmin –  
Such a Krishna-like *līlā* have you performed!

Seeing Sri Krishna, people addressed him in various ways,  
Some called him the Jewel of King Yadu, some called him a cowherd.

Yashoda called him her delicate child, Kaunsa called him the Great Destroyer,  
Uddhav called him affectionately, Arjuna called him the wisest.

In that way, O Great Guru, according to what is in our hearts,  
We determine the appropriate ways to address you.<sup>2</sup>

- Das Ganu Maharaj, *Śrī Sāīnāth Stavanamañjarī*, 63-66

These verses are from the *Śrī Sāīnāth Stavanamañjarī*, a hymnody of 163 verses composed by the hagiographer Das Ganu Maharaj, who was the subject of the previous chapter. Das Ganu wrote the *Stavanamañjarī* just weeks after the death of Shirdi Sai Baba on Vijaya Dashami (October 15) in 1918. Das Ganu’s short *Stavanamañjarī* is contemporaneous with G.R. Dabholkar’s much longer *Śrī Sāī Satcarita*, and both texts evidence one of the characteristic features of early twentieth-century Marathi religious poetry about Shirdi Sai Baba – the description of the saint as confounding his categorization as “Hindu” or “Muslim” exclusively. In these verses, we see Das Ganu grappling with Sai Baba’s semiotic flexibility; this is the concept introduced in Chapter 2

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter is a derivative of an article already accepted for publication: Jonathan Loar, “From Neither/Nor to Both/And: Reconfiguring the Life and Legacy of Shirdi Sai Baba in Hagiography,” *International Journal of Hindu Studies* (forthcoming).

<sup>2</sup> Das Ganu, *ŚSSM*, 63-66 *koṇī āpaṇām mhaṇatī yavana / koṇī mhaṇatī brāhmaṇ / aisī kṣṇāsamān / līlā āpaṇ māṇḍilī // 63 // śrīkṣṇās pāhūn / nānā prakareṃ vadale jan / koṇī mhaṇale yadubhūṣaṇ / koṇī mhaṇale gurākhī // 64 // yaśodā mhaṇe sukumār bā! / kaṃs mhaṇe mahākā! / uddhav mhaṇe prema! / arjuna mhaṇe jñān jeṭhī // 65 // taiseṃ guruvarā āpaṇāmsī / jeṃ jyacyā mānasī / yogya vaṭel niścayemsī / teṃ teṃ tumhā mhaṇatase // 66. While Zarine Taraporevala and Indira Kher (1991) have prepared an English translation of Das Ganu’s *Stavanamañjarī*, all translations in this chapter – as with all translations in this dissertation – are my own.*

that refers to Sai Baba’s ability to mean different things to different people in different contexts. Here, Das Ganu references figures in Krishna’s mythology – his mother, his uncle/enemy, and two of his closest companions – to illustrate how a single divine figure plays multiple roles throughout his life. In the context of Sai Baba, it is the ordinary human onlooker – part of the “we” mentioned in the final verse quoted above – who finds an “appropriate” (*yogya*, the word also means “fitting”) description that matches how s/he sees the saint. For Das Ganu, the plurality of ways to describe the saint is ultimately a superficial difference (*vyāvahārik bheda*), a matter of interest only to pedantic people (*tārkik*), not the faithful (*bhāvik*) capable of looking past the surface.<sup>3</sup> If Sai Baba is like a mirror in whose reflection devotees see what they want to see, or sometimes what they need to see, then a study of the various reflections that appear in the history of the Shirdi Sai Baba hagiographic tradition can show us how this enigmatic saint has been imagined, constructed, and transformed by his devotees over the last century.

During his sixty-year tenure in Shirdi, Sai Baba became notable for two primary reasons: his model of religious synthesis that incorporated both Hindu and Islamic vocabulary and practices; and his reputation as an efficacious miracle-worker whose charisma brought about tangible results (children to childless couples, jobs to the jobless, cures for the sick, etc.). While we will say more about miracles later in this dissertation, this chapter explores the first of these two reasons and critically engages with the role of hagiography as the means through which the life and legacy of a saintly figure can be (re)shaped and (re)purposed over time. As indicated in the excerpt from Das Ganu’s *Stavanamañjarī* given above, Sai Baba has a special ability to be different things to

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 69 *pari he bheda vyāvahārik / yātem cāhatīl tārkik / pari jijñāsū bhāvik / tyām nā vāṭe mahatva yāñce.*

different people, depending on the perspective brought to bear on the saint by the onlooker. The first generation of hagiographers like Das Ganu and G.R. Dabholkar must have been quite perplexed when it came to describing Sai Baba in terms of a basic question: Was Sai Baba Hindu or Muslim?

The main content of this chapter is a comparative study of how two hagiographers –G.R. Dabholkar and B.V. Narasimhaswami – navigated the question of Shirdi Sai Baba’s ambiguous religious identity, a subject that inevitably takes us into the hagiographers’ understanding of the saint’s birth and earliest years. In this comparison, we will see a subtle yet significant shift in the description of Sai Baba in two hagiographic works: from being “neither Hindu nor Muslim” in the early twentieth-century poetic Marathi of Dabholkar’s *Satcarita* (1929) to becoming “both Hindu and Muslim” in Narasimhaswami’s text in English prose, *Life of Sai Baba* (1955). Whereas Dabholkar (like Das Ganu in the *Stavanamañjarī*) maintains that Sai Baba is a categorical conundrum about whom little was known before his arrival in Shirdi, Narasimhaswami draws from other hagiographic and devotional sources and builds a narrative of the saint’s origin, one that involves a birth to Brahmin parents, time spent under the care of a Muslim fakir, and initiation from a Brahmin guru named Venkusha. In doing so, Narasimhaswami uses this narrative of bi-religious upbringing to make the broader argument that Shirdi Sai Baba is a symbol of India’s religious future.

The two hagiographic texts under consideration, Dabholkar’s *Satcarita* and Narasimhaswami’s *Life of Sai Baba*, are quite different in terms of their respective languages, styles, and sociohistorical contexts of composition. However, the most notable difference between the two is that Dabholkar’s *Satcarita* is the central scripture of the Sai

Baba canon. This is the case for several reasons. First, the *Satcarita* is older than *Life of Sai Baba*, and it shows how the saint was understood by someone who knew and lived alongside him in his final years. Second, Dabholkar purportedly received Sai Baba’s verbal permission to write the *Satcarita*.<sup>4</sup> I say “purportedly” not to inquire whether or not the hagiographer actually received permission from Sai Baba, but rather to call attention to what this story of permission does for the authority that devotees invest in Dabholkar’s work. None of the other hagiographic works composed around the time of the *Satcarita* (e.g., Das Ganu’s *Santakathāmṛt*) or afterwards (e.g., Narasimhaswami’s *Life of Sai Baba*) lay claim to having received saintly sanction for their composition.<sup>5</sup> Third, Dabholkar wrote the 9,300-plus verses of the *Satcarita* in the form of the *ovī*, the poetic meter used in major works of Marathi religious literature like the *Jñāneśwarī* (late thirteenth century) and the *Guru Caritra* (mid-sixteenth century). Sai Baba devotees only recite the *Satcarita*, not *Life of Sai Baba* or other similar works, in ritual contexts such as festivals (e.g., Ram Navami, Guru Purnima) and week-long readings (*sāptāhik parāyana*). Relatedly, devotees believe that the ritualized reading/reciting of the *Satcarita* breaks the bonds of *karma*, destroys misdeeds, and invokes the saint’s protection in all activities – all of which Dabholkar mentions in his text.<sup>6</sup>

Comparatively, *Life of Sai Baba* is not used for ritual purposes. However, like Dabholkar, Narasimhaswami does claim that reading the life of Shirdi Sai Baba is a moral act, one that makes the reader a better person and contributes to the “general

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<sup>4</sup> This story is discussed later in this chapter.

<sup>5</sup> See Chapter 2 for a discussion of Das Ganu’s claim that Sai Baba approved of his hagiographic works, saying that they were “alright.” Das Ganu made this claim in *Devotees’ Experiences* (2008 [1940]), several decades after he first wrote about Sai Baba in Chapter 57 of the *Santakathāmṛt* (1903) and Chapters 31-33 of the *Bhaktalīlāmṛt* (1906).

<sup>6</sup> See Dabholkar, *SSSC*, 2:41, 3:3, and 3:12.

advancement of the temporal and spiritual interests of mankind.”<sup>7</sup> Narasimhaswami also states that reading about saints and sainthood has further benefits, all of which are common to hagiography in South Asia: “By the study of such lives, basic ignorance and illusions are dispelled. *Rajasic* and *Tamasic* qualities such as egotism, pride, hatred, and cruelty are checked or suppressed and noble virtues like humility, earnestness, love to all, service of saints, *Guru Bhakti*, and *Jnana* are developed. These in due course lead to the goal of God-realisation.”<sup>8</sup> For scholars, *Life of Sai Baba* is important because it marks a turning point in the history of the Shirdi Sai Baba hagiographic tradition. In the text’s preface, Narasimhaswami states that “the need for a complete biography [on Sai Baba] in English has been felt by the public and by this author over a dozen years.”<sup>9</sup> While, *Life of Sai Baba* is not the first English text about Shirdi Sai Baba, it is the first to take the saint’s story in a new direction.<sup>10</sup> Narasimhaswami wants to reach an audience beyond Marathi-reading audience of the *Satcarita* in the Deccan region of western India. That he opts to write *Life of Sai Baba* in English prose – a language and style of writing linked with modernity more than Marathi religious poetry – indicates that his audience belongs to society’s upper strata. And it is in this text aimed at this audience that we find a more deliberate effort – that is, more deliberate than what Dabholkar does in the *Satcarita* – to create the Sai Baba that we are familiar with today: a symbol of India’s “composite culture.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba*, 3.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> See “Preface to Part I” in Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba*, xx.

<sup>10</sup> For two earlier and shorter English publications on Sai Baba, see G.S. Khaparde, *Shirdi Diary of the Hon’ble Mr. G.S. Khaparde* (Shirdi: Shri Sai Baba Sansthan and Trust, 1918); M.W. Pradhan, *Sri Sai Baba of Shirdi: A Glimpse of Indian Spirituality*, ed. R.A. Tarkhad (Bombay: Bombay Vaibhav Press, 1933).

<sup>11</sup> See McLain, “Be United, Be Virtuous,” 21-22.

Telling the story of the evolution of Sai Baba's religious identity and its inextricable ties to the narrativization of his earliest years will also introduce us to several other notable hagiographic works. One is the first English adaptation of Dabholkar's *Satcarita*, which was produced by N.V. Gunaji in 1944. The fact that Gunaji's text is an adaptation (i.e., not a full translation) means that it warrants a close reading. Gunaji omits or glosses over several passages in the *Satcarita* that highlight Sai Baba's association with Islam and adds some new information that makes the saint seem more unambiguously Hindu. Some of these changes have been highlighted in Marianne Warren's monograph on Sai Baba, so the purpose here is to see how the Gunaji adaptation serves as a bridge between Dabholkar and Narasimhaswami, between the notions that Sai Baba is "neither Hindu nor Muslim" and that he is "both Hindu and Muslim." This is important because Sai Baba only becomes a symbol of Hindu-Muslim unity, as we will see, when the Hindu side of the equation becomes large enough to embrace – or contain, in a Foucauldian sense – his association with Islam.

Next, we will discuss Sathya Sai Baba (d. 2011), the self-professed reincarnation of Shirdi Sai Baba. From his ashram Prashanti Nilam in Puttaparthi in the south Indian state of Andhra Pradesh, Sathya Sai Baba adds much more detail to the story of his predecessor's origin. Revelations from Sathya Sai answer some of the narrative questions left hanging in Narasimhaswami's hagiographic work, including the divine circumstances surrounding Shirdi Sai's birth and how the saint, as an infant, passed from his Brahmin birth parents to a Muslim couple's foster care. Among other things, Sathya Sai tells us that Shirdi Sai is not only a Brahmin but also an incarnation of the Hindu god Shiva. This innovative version of the story fits into Sathya Sai's understanding of divinity and

incarnation, particularly the idea that the Sai incarnation appears in three forms: Shirdi Sai (Shiva), Sathya Sai (Shiva and Shakti), and Prema Sai (Shakti) – the latter being the forthcoming incarnation that has yet to be declared. The narrative density brought to the story in these revelations is an impactful way to see the transformations in Shirdi Sai’s story over the twentieth century: from the mysterious, nonconformist saint of the *Satcarita* to a symbol of unity and compositeness who becomes implicated in the issues of religion and caste that he purportedly transcended when he was alive.

This chapter contains four sections detailing important entries in the history of the Shirdi Sai Baba hagiographic tradition: Dabholkar’s *Satcarita*, Gunaji’s English adaptation of the *Satcarita*, Narasimhaswami’s *Life of Sai Baba*, and Sathya Sai’s revelations about Shirdi Sai’s life before settling in Shirdi. As such, this chapter has a forward trajectory that examines how the concept of a saint named Shirdi Sai Baba has been altered at different times, by different people, in different languages and styles, and with different purposes. Together with the previous chapter and its profile of the “philosophizing Sai Baba” in Das Ganu’s *Santakathāmṛt*, we will have, by the end of this chapter, a picture of a hagiographic tradition populated with many “Sai Babas.”

### **G.R. Dabholkar and the Śrī Sāī Satcarita (1929)**

This Sai is indestructible and very ancient  
 Neither Hindu nor Muslim (*nāhīm hindū nā yavana*)  
 Without caste, descent, family, and lineage  
 Know that his real form is self-realization.

- G.R. Dabholkar, *Śrī Sāī Satcarita* 5:24

#### **a. The Author and His Text**



Govindrao Raghunath Dabholkar was born in 1859 to a Gaud Saraswat Brahmin family in Mahim, Thane District. He married and had one son and five daughters; two of his sons-in-law, R.R. Samant and Y.J. Galwankar became prominent Sai Baba devotees.<sup>12</sup> Despite studying only up to the fifth standard, Dabholkar quickly advanced in the colonial bureaucracy, from village accountant, to revenue officer, and eventually to first-class magistrate in Bandra. He first heard about a holy man in Shirdi known as “Sai Baba” through two friends, the well-known solicitor in Bombay H.S. Dixit and N.G. Chandorkar, a deputy tax collector in Ahmednagar District and the devotee profiled in the previous chapter’s study of Das Ganu’s *Santakathāmṛt*. Dabholkar initially hesitated to make the trip to Shirdi. The child of his friend had died in the presence of the family’s guru, which convinced Dabholkar of the futility of recourse to saints to help others escape from the effects of accumulated actions (*karma*) that trap the soul in transmigratory existence (*samsāra*).

At Chandorkar’s insistence, Dabholkar finally decided to travel from his home in Bandra (near Bombay) to Shirdi in 1910. He paid the fare for a train from Bandra to Dadar with the intention of catching another train (the “Mail”) to Manmad, the railway hub for Shirdi. As the train started to pull away from the station, a Muslim (*yavana*) came aboard and started a conversation with Dabholkar. When the unnamed Muslim heard Dabholkar’s travel plans, he told him to go straight to Boribandar (aka Victoria Terminus) instead of Dadar, a move that Dabholkar, writing in the *Satcarita* a few years later, interprets as fortuitous: “Had this advice [from the Muslim passenger] not come in

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<sup>12</sup> For the devotional testimonies given by Galwankar and Samant, see Narasimhaswami, *Devotees’ Experiences*, 86-88 and 244-248. Galwankar served as a trustee of the Sansthan and Trust in Shirdi until his death in 1945.

time and had I not been able to catch the Mail at Dadar, who knows what kind of thoughts would've distracted me [from going to Shirdi].”<sup>13</sup> The first sight of the saint sitting in his mosque brought about a powerful experience for Dabholkar, which he later described in the *Satcarita*. His senses ceased to work, his awareness of thirst and hunger vanished, and his eyes filled with joy at feeling the start of a “fresh, new life” (*nūtan āyusya*) from the moment that he touched Sai Baba’s feet.<sup>14</sup>

Dabholkar retired in 1916, settled in Shirdi, and developed the desire to write about Sai Baba after witnessing one of his many *līlās*. These are the manipulations of the phenomenal world by a divine figure, and Sai Baba devotees use the term *līlā* synonymously with *camatkār* to describe Sai Baba’s “miracles.” One day, Dabholkar saw the saint grinding wheat in his mosque. Four women gathered around Sai Baba in the expectation that he would offer each of them a share. Instead, he instructed them to sprinkle the flour around the boundary of the village. While devotees have interpreted this action as Sai Baba’s method of protecting Shirdi from an outbreak of cholera, Dabholkar says in the *Satcarita* that it is nonetheless impossible to comprehend because it is *atarkya* (supra-logical, or that which is beyond logical reasoning): “What is the relationship here? What connection is there between the disease and wheat? Seeing the result, which is *atarkya*, I thought, I should write an account.”<sup>15</sup> Sai Baba responded in the affirmative:

Knowing the sincerity of my heart, [Baba] began to speak with a command, “Make a collection of stories, conversations, etc. drawn from experiences.

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<sup>13</sup> Dabholkar, *ŚSSC*, 2:129 *hotī na veḷīm hī sūcanā / mel dādarvar miḷatī nā / nakale mag yā cañcal manā / kāy kalpanā uṭhatyā teṃ*.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:140. See *Satcarita* Chapter 53 for a brief biographical sketch of Dabholkar and also the “two words” (*don śabda*) penned by N.A. Sawant in 1951, which was added as a preface to the text.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:138.

“It is good to keep a record (*daftar thevā bareṃ āhe*). He has my full support. However, he is only the instrument (*nimitta*). I’ll write it myself.

“I will write my story myself and I will fulfill my devotee’s wish. He should give up his egotistical side, and I will take care of him at my feet.”<sup>16</sup>

Here, Sai Baba asserts that he is the ultimate author of his story, while Dabholkar is the efficient cause for putting the story on the page. Dabholkar elaborates further: “It is Baba who makes my hand move (*bābāci giravitīl mājhā pāñī*)... I shape the letters (*akṣareṃ vaḷaṇīm vaḷavitom*).”<sup>17</sup> In this context, the voice of the hagiographer holding the pen is indistinguishable from the voice of the saint that causes the pen to move. These verses highlight the *modus operandi* of Sai Baba as a saint who establishes relationships with individuals, not communities, sects, or other social groups. This relationship manifests itself in the collaboration of two agents, the saint and the hagiographer, in the creation of the *Satcarita* as a product of the rapport between Dabholkar and Shirdi Sai Baba.

### **b. Sai Baba in the *Satcarita*: The Categorical Conundrum**

For Dabholkar, Shirdi Sai Baba must have been a difficult subject to write about.

Ordinary eyes would see some of the saint’s behaviors as erratic, ornery, and occasionally violent. For example, the *Satcarita* reports a time when devotees toiled by day to construct a portico (*sabhāmaṇḍap*) for the mosque and Sai Baba pulled out the portico’s columns by night. The saint’s temper flared to the point where he was tugging at a column with one hand and throttling a devotee named Tatyā with the other. He lit Tatyā’s turban on fire and threw it into the *dhunī*, and “showered onlookers with curses

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 2:75-77.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 2:44.

and verbal abuse.”<sup>18</sup> The raging Sai Baba also fought off those who tried to intervene, pouncing on the leper Bhagoji Shinde and throwing a brick at another devotee, Madhavrao Deshpande. Then, Sai Baba became inexplicably calm. No one knew why the incident had escalated so quickly or what, if anything, assuaged the saint’s anger. Dabholkar concludes his narration by acknowledging that Sai Baba was “sometimes peaceful and speaking lovely things, but sometimes, for no reason, agitated and restless.”<sup>19</sup> Sai Baba’s noncooperation during the renovation of his mosque further exemplifies what the hagiographer calls the “supra-logical (*atarkya*) ways of saints” whose “greatness is beyond words.”<sup>20</sup>

This is a quandary for a hagiographer. How does one describe a saint, who is – to cite the politician and Sai Baba devotee G.S. Khaparde in 1912 – “highly figurative and therefore difficult to understand?”<sup>21</sup> Dabholkar’s strategy is to write down what he saw and experienced in Shirdi, including the model of religious synthesis embodied and enacted by Shirdi Sai Baba. Consider a selection of verses from the seventh chapter of the *Satcarita*, in which Dabholkar portrays Sai Baba as “neither Hindu nor Muslim:”

While calling him a Hindu, he looked like a Muslim. While calling him a Muslim, he had the qualities of a Hindu. Such is this unusual incarnation (*avatār*). Who’s capable of describing him? (*ŚSSC* 7:4)

Was he Hindu or Muslim by birth? There wasn’t the slightest hint because his behavior with both groups was the same. (*ŚSSC* 7:5)

If you call him a Muslim, his ears were pierced. If you call him a Hindu, he was circumcised. Neither Hindu nor Muslim (*nā hindū nā yavana*). Such is the pure incarnation of Sai. (*ŚSSC* 7:13)

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 6:138.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 6:146.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 14:31.

<sup>21</sup> G.S. Khaparde, *Shirdi Diary*, entry dated December 29, 1911.

If you call him a Hindu, he always lived in the mosque. If you call him a Muslim, then there was the sacred fire (*hutāś*) burning day and night. (ŚSSC 7:14)

If you call him a Muslim (*mleñccha*),<sup>22</sup> the best of among Brahmins worshipped him and fire-ritual specialists (*agnihotrī*) prostrated before him, having abandoned their purity-mindedness. (ŚSSC 7:17)

As Michael Sells states in his study of mysticism across religious traditions, “apophatic language is a language of double propositions in which no single proposition can stand by itself as meaningful.”<sup>23</sup> The proposition that Sai Baba belongs to the category “Hindu” because of certain evidence (keeping a sacred fire, being worshipped by Brahmins, having pierced ears) is complicated by another proposition that the saint belongs to the category “Muslim,” which is supported by other evidence (living in a mosque, being circumcised). Dabholkar’s portrayal of the saint resembles Wittgenstein’s duck-rabbit, a single image that looks like a duck and a rabbit from different angles but cannot look like both at the same time from the same perspective. Sai Baba the religious bricoleur as presented in the *Satcarita* is a categorical conundrum described in apophatic language: he is “neither Hindu nor Muslim.” Although Dabholkar partly relies on the Hindu terminology familiar to him (e.g., *avatār*), he ultimately resists the impulse to categorize and creates an image of a saint practicing a form of religious synthesis that conflates the boundaries between traditions: “People would try to guess, some calling him a Brahmin

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<sup>22</sup> In the *Satcarita*, the Sanskrit term *mleñccha* – like *yavana* – refers to the perception that Sai Baba is a Muslim. *Mleñccha* has many more negative connotations: “a foreigner, barbarian, non-Aryan, man of an outcast race, any person who does not speak Sanskrit and does not conform to the usual Hindu institutions.” See M. Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary: Etymologically and Philologically Arranged with Special Reference to Cognate Indo-European Languages* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2005 [1872]), 848.

<sup>23</sup> Michael Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 178.

and others calling him a Muslim (*musalmān*),” Dabholkar writes. However, these attempts fail to define a saint who is “without caste” (*jñātivihīn*).<sup>24</sup>

The fact that Dabholkar was a Brahmin probably accounts for the preponderance of the Vedanta-esque philosophical commentary woven throughout the *Satcarita*.<sup>25</sup> Marianne Warren’s assessment of Dabholkar is that the hagiographer had to “rationalize sayings and events in conformity with his own religious background,” but Warren also notes that Dabholkar did the best he could and that he “faithfully recorded events bearing on [Sai Baba’s] Islamic practices.”<sup>26</sup> Dabholkar seems to challenge his audience to rethink how one could conceive of Sai Baba as a “Hindu” when he has “Allah *mālik*” (God is King) on his lips, or as a “Muslim” when the rest of his speech streamed forth with pure Vedanta.<sup>27</sup> Had Dabholkar intended to “Hinduize” a saint who exhibited a bricolage of religious traditions in his speech and practice, he could have simply omitted certain “Islamicizing” details from his account. (As we will see, this is what N.V. Gunaji does in his English adaptation of the *Satcarita*).

Some of the characteristics that make Sai Baba “neither Hindu nor Muslim” are handled differently beyond the *Satcarita*. Consider the report from Dabholkar that Sai Baba had pierced ears (*vindhī kān*). Traditionally, the ritual of ear-piercing (*karṇavedha*)

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<sup>24</sup> Dabholkar, *ŚSSC*, 38:117 *karūni kāmhīntarī anumān / koṇī sās mhaṇatī brāhmaṇ / koṇī tayā musalmān / jñātivihīn asatām to*.

<sup>25</sup> In many chapters in the *Satcarita*, Dabholkar writes with an orderly pattern: 1) praise of Sai Baba as a great teacher (*sadguru*); 2) a brief exposition on a philosophical matter; and 3) stories about Sai Baba’s interactions with devotees in Shirdi. For example, Chapters 16 and 17 focus on the difficulty of ordinary people obtaining the highest spiritual wisdom (*brahmajñāna*) and the need of a guru to impart that wisdom through his “kindness” (*kṛpā*), which is followed by the story of Sai Baba teaching a wealthy man that *brahmajñāna* is more valuable than worldly wealth. Chapter 22 opens with Dabholkar explaining how Sai Baba is both the creator of the illusoriness (i.e., the perception of a snake in the familiar Advaita metaphor) and the reality (the truth that the “snake” is only a rope), and then he narrates stories about how Sai Baba saved people from certain death.

<sup>26</sup> Warren, *Unravelling the Enigma*, 5.

<sup>27</sup> Dabholkar, *ŚSSC*, 7:30 *jivhes allāmālik akhaṇḍa*; 7:31 *vācā strave pūrṇa vedānta*.

is an early life-cycle rite (*samskāra*) that purifies and sanctifies a child of Hindu parentage. While ear-piercing is part of ancient literature about domestic rituals (i.e., the *Gr̥hyasūtras*), it is also an important feature of religious communities like the Nath Sampraday's yogis, who have “split-ears” (*kānphaṭa*), in which they wear large earrings. There is no indication whether Dabholkar intends to connect Sai Baba to the Nath, although scholars have identified many similarities in the practices of Sai Baba and Nath communities in premodern Maharashtra (See Chapter 1). What is clear is that Dabholkar uses Sai Baba's pierced ears as evidence of the saint being Hindu, which is paired in its verse with the fact of his evident circumcision, a physical marker of being Muslim.

Now consider a verse in Das Ganu's *Śrī Sāīnāth Stavanamañjarī*, a text written contemporaneously with Dabholkar's *Satcarita*. Das Ganu says that Sai Baba, in fact, did not have pierced ears: “You [i.e., Sai Baba] make the mosque your home, and you have unpierced ears. And seeing the way you read the *fātihā*, it seems necessary to call you a Muslim (*yavana*).”<sup>28</sup> The incongruity between Das Ganu's and Dabholkar's accounts about a rather simple question – Were Sai Baba's ears pierced or unpierced? – only serves to underscore the problem of using hagiography to pursue the “real” Sai Baba. It is important to note, however, that later sources tend to favor Dabholkar's *Satcarita* on this matter. In a Gujarati hagiography *Shri Sai Baba* (1946), Swami Sai Sharan Anand cites a Muslim devotee's observation that Sai Baba did indeed have pierced ears.<sup>29</sup> More recently, the hagiographer S.P. Ruhela takes further interest in Sai Baba's “syncretic

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<sup>28</sup> Das Ganu, *ŚSSM*, 67 *maśīd āpulem vasatisthān / vindhāvāñcun asatī kān / fātyācyā tarhā pāhūn / yavana mhanāṇe bhāg tumhām*.

<sup>29</sup> In a footnote, Swami Sai Sharan Anand translates a portion of the unpublished notebook kept by Sai Baba's Muslim devotee Abdul in which he notes that the saint's “ears were pricked” See Sai Sharan Anand, *Shri Sai Baba*, trans. V.B. Kher (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1997), 19 n.2.

message,” and in this case, the mention of Sai Baba’s pierced ears is part of what makes the saint “Hindu,” which complements and balances his “Muslim” aspects.<sup>30</sup> Even the later editions of the *Stavanamañjarī* rectify the content of the original text by footnoting the verse in which Das Ganu mentions Sai Baba’s unpierced ears with a reference to Swami Sai Sharan Anand’s counter-observation.<sup>31</sup>

For Dabholkar, the verifiability of each part of the argument – Were his ears pierced? Was he circumcised? – is less important than the ability to put them in contrasting pairs such that they play off one another, curtailing the onlooker’s confidence to place Sai Baba in either category exclusively. Referencing representative features of two different categories as a way to critique both groups and open up a new way of seeing the world beyond socially constructed categories is a common feature of religious literature in South Asia, especially in the works of Sufi and *bhakti* poet-saints. In the seventeenth century, Baba Bulleh Shah proclaimed that God is neither found in the formal ritualism of going on pilgrimage to Mathura and Mecca, nor in the reading of old, dusty texts like the *Vedas* and the *Qur’ān*, but in embracing the feeling of love that is ever-new and ever-fresh.<sup>32</sup> In the fifteenth century, a weaver named Kabir saved some of

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<sup>30</sup> Ruhela, *The Unique Prophet of Integration*, 42 and 206.

<sup>31</sup> As a preface to the thirty-third edition of the *Stavanamañjarī* published in 2012, there is a note of clarification about the verse in which Das Ganu claims Sai Baba did not have pierced ears. The note reads:

The above statement [about Baba’s pierced ears, etc.] cannot be accepted as fact. This is because the late Swami Sai Sharananand, who translated the *Stavanamañjarī* into Gujarati, commented on this line. The gist of his note is thus: ‘It seems that Das Ganu did not inspect Baba’s ears closely. Baba’s ears were pierced (*tocalele kān*) and he was uncircumcised (*tyāñcā suntā jhālā navhatā*). This has been seen directly (*pratyakṣa*) by the translator [i.e., Swami Sharananand]. Except during his afternoon meal (*naivedya*), if someone brought edible offerings (*prasād*) at another time and if Bade Fakir Baba or other Muslims were present, then Sai Baba would tell someone to read *surās* from the *Qur’ān* to consecrate the offerings. And he would help [in reciting the *surās*], too.

<sup>32</sup> Baba Bulleh Shah, “Love Springs Eternal,” in *Islamic Mystical Poetry: Sufi Verse from the Early Mystics to Rumi*, ed. Mahmood Jamal (New York: Penguin Classics, 2009), 305.



his roughest, most brutal invectives for the *paṇḍits* and the *qāzīs*, the hypocrites “who started this road,” which divides human beings into artificial categories like “Hindu” and “Muslim.”<sup>33</sup> The Sai Baba who comes to us in Dabholkar’s *Satcarita* offers a similar spirit of protest against thinking exclusively, but his personality – in the estimation of S.P. Ruhela<sup>34</sup> – makes him gentler and less confrontational vis-à-vis poet-saints like Baba Bulleh Shah and Kabir. Part of Sai Baba’s teachings about Hindu-Muslim comity is that Hindus and Muslims (and also virtually anybody of any other religious background) do not have to give up the rituals or beliefs that make them “Hindu” or “Muslim.” In other words, one of the key characteristics of Sai Baba’s sainthood is his interest in making people “better” Hindus and “better” Muslims, a notion of spiritual improvement that challenges one to look beyond the significance of religious identities without abandoning them altogether.

### c. Sai Baba and Interreligious Conflict Resolution in the *Satcarita*

Dabholkar wrote the *Satcarita* between his retirement in 1916 and his death in 1929, the same year that the *Satcarita* was first published as a complete text.<sup>35</sup> In other words, he wrote during this work the height of British rule in colonial India when “fuzzy” notions of what it meant to belong to a religious community began to give way to the pressures of identifying with a community in a categorical sense.<sup>36</sup> The rigidification of what it meant

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<sup>33</sup> Kabir, *The Bijak of Kabir*, trans. Shukdev Singh and Linda Hess, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 69-70.

<sup>34</sup> Ruhela characterizes Sai Baba as “an improved model of Kabir.” See S.P. Ruhela, *Shri Shirdi Sai Baba: The Universal Master* (New Delhi: Diamond Pocket Books, 2009), 28.

<sup>35</sup> Dabholkar completed the first couple of chapters of the *Satcarita* before Sai Baba’s *mahāsamādhī* in 1918. During the early and mid-1920s, he published the text serially in *Sai Leela*, the publication of the Shri Sai Baba Sansthan and Trust in Shirdi.

<sup>36</sup> See Sudipta Kaviraj, “The Imaginary Institution of India,” in *Subaltern Studies VII*, eds. Partha Chatterjee and Gyanendra Pandey (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992), 1-39.

to be “Hindu” or “Muslim came about through influences like the European social theories that informed colonial policies, the decennial census and its quantification of communities, aggressive nationalisms rooted in religion, and the discourse of communalism itself, expressed in through the notion that Hindus and Muslims are predisposed to conflict because of primordial hatreds.<sup>37</sup> In sum, Dabholkar wrote at a time when the terms “Hindu” and “Muslim,” as well as the idea that Hindus and Muslims have been enemies for a long time, had begun to have some purchase in public discourse.<sup>38</sup> He and his audience were no doubt familiar with the large-scale clashes between Hindus and Muslims in Bombay in 1893 and the exacerbation of communal animosities following B.G. Tilak’s use of the Ganapati festival to unite Hindus and discourage their participation in Muharram celebrations.<sup>39</sup> While reports of these events produced definitions and redefinitions of religious identities that circulated through newspapers, journals, public lectures, and other modern media, the *Satcarita* offered a saintly figure whose speech and actions evaded any sort of permanent placement in different “Hindu” and “Muslim” categories.

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<sup>37</sup> See Thomas Metcalf *Ideologies of the Raj* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Kenneth W. Jones, “Religious Identity and the Indian Census,” in *The Census of British India: New Perspectives*, ed. N. Gerald Barrier (Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1981), 73-101; Peter Van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); and Gyanendra Pandey, *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990).

<sup>38</sup> David Lorenzen has argued that Hindu self-consciousness came into focus with the arrival in South Asia of the Ghorids, Ghaznavids, and other Muslim peoples from west and central Asia. Lorenzen cites the poetry and songs of saints like Kabir and Eknath as examples of the idea that Hinduism and Islam were two mutually exclusive categories in medieval India. He concludes: “The evidence instead suggests that a Hindu religion theologically and devotionally grounded in texts such as the Bhagavad Gita, the Puranas, and philosophical commentaries on the six darsanas gradually acquired a much sharper self-conscious identity through the rivalry between Muslims and Hindus in the period between 1200 and 1500, and was firmly established long before 1800.” See David Lorenzen, “Who Invented Hinduism?” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 41, no. 4 (October 1999): 631.

<sup>39</sup> See Chapter 1 of Shabnum Tejani, *Indian Secularism: A Social and Intellectual History, 1890-1950* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008).

In this light, one might suggest that the Sai Baba in Dabholkar's *Satcarita* exemplifies a localized, or perhaps a "grassroots," opposition to social categorization based on caste (which the saint does not have) and religion (which the saint does not practice vis-à-vis early twentieth-century notions of what a "Hindu" and a "Muslim" should be). Dabholkar also imagines and constructs Sai Baba in the *Satcarita* as an alternative to the specter of interreligious conflicts in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, particularly the enmity that was growing between some Hindus and Muslims. Recall from Chapter 1 that Dabholkar understands Sai Baba's mission as one to break Hindu-Muslim enmity (*hindu-avindhīm duhī*) and unite the two sides in friendship (*bāndhā hindu-avindhāncā sāṅgaḍ*).<sup>40</sup> Das Ganu echoes this sentiment in the *Stavanamañjarī*, saying that the casteless Sai Baba has appeared at a specific historical moment with a specific mission: to replace Hindu-Muslim rivalry (*vipaṭ*) with comity (*tadaikya*).<sup>41</sup>

To support the argument that Sai Baba has come to engage in conflict resolution, Dabholkar's *Satcarita* memorializes the social acts of the saint, who sought to teach people that devotion to God swallows up all religious and caste-based differences. In the third chapter, one finds the story of Sai Baba coming to the support of a Rohilla – a term designating a Muslim of Afghan descent – who arrived in Shirdi and took up the peculiar habit of reciting *allāhu akbar* ("God is great") and passages from the *Qur'ān* in a loud, grating voice, day and night. The villagers, the majority of whom were Hindu, complained to Sai Baba, but the saint chastised them and professed his love for the Rohilla and his devotional, albeit unmelodious, practice. Sai Baba then offered the

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<sup>40</sup> Dabholkar, *ŚSSC*, 10:49 and 51.

<sup>41</sup> Das Ganu, *ŚSSM*, 70-71.

following explanation of the Rohilla's behavior to the villagers. The Rohilla had a wife who troubled him greatly because she had neither shame nor modesty and secretly wanted to run off with another man – perhaps even Sai Baba himself. The Rohilla's shouting prevented his wife from troubling him. The louder his voice got, the happier he became.

At this point, the hagiographer Dabholkar inserts his own voice into the frame to ask two rhetorical questions: How could the poor Rohilla who only eats coarse food and often fasts, have a wife, and why would Sai Baba suggest that he is desired by a woman in light of his lifelong celibacy? To answer these questions, Dabholkar intersperses into the story his conclusion that the part about the Rohilla's wife must have been “fictitious” (*māyik*), a narrative device employed by Sai Baba to make the villagers realize that he accepted devotion from anyone and everyone.<sup>42</sup> “Here were the wise words of the *kalmas* and there were the hollow complaints of the villagers,” writes Dabholkar at the conclusion of the story.<sup>43</sup> The hagiographer further opines that the lesson learned from this episode is about the democratizing power of devotion to God: “Whether Brahmin or Pathan, both are equal” (*to aso brāhman vā paṭhāṇ / samasamāṇ doghehī*).<sup>44</sup>

Other stories in the *Satcarita* focus on Sai Baba's encounters with Brahmins, some of whom are sincere devotees of the saint while others are more antagonistic. In the twelfth chapter, Sai Baba humbles proud, purity-minded Brahmins who struggled in cultivating devotion because of the saint's dress and behavior, which make him seem to be a Muslim. Sai Baba responds by appearing miraculously to the Brahmins in forms

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<sup>42</sup> Dabholkar, *ŚSSC*, 3:137.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 3:139.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 3:141.

more amenable to their religious sensibilities; that is, in the form of one Brahmin's guru and another Brahmin's *iṣṭadevatā*. In doing so, the saint imparts the lesson that his outward appearance as a fakir is only a veneer.<sup>45</sup> In a somewhat similar fashion, another story features Sai Baba acquiescing to a Brahmin devotee named Dr. Pandit who wants to put a Shaiva sectarian mark on the saint's forehead with sandalwood paste. Sai Baba had avoided previous attempts to worship his person, so he surprised everyone by allowing Dr. Pandit to proceed. When another Brahmin named Dada asked the reason why, Sai Baba responded:

Dada, [Dr. Pandit's] guru is also a Brahmin, while I am Muslim by birth. Even still, this devotee considered me the same when he worshipped me.

The doubt never entered his mind, "I'm a mighty Brahmin and this is an impure Muslim. How can I worship him?"<sup>46</sup>

The saint explains that Dr. Pandit's sincerity "tricked me" (*maj tyānem phasavalem*) into receiving a form of worship that he typically disregarded.<sup>47</sup> Here, Sai Baba's claim to Muslim identity – "I am Muslim by birth" (*mī jāṭicā musalmān*) – is crucial to understanding the moral of the story: worship of Sai Baba nullifies the sense of difference between "Hindu" and "Muslim." This is not the only time in the early hagiographic tradition that Sai Baba professes his Muslim birth in the context of speaking with a devotee, but it is the only time such a phrase appears in the *Satcarita*.<sup>48</sup> It should be noted

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<sup>45</sup> See this dissertation's Chapter 7 for further discussion of stories in the *Satcarita* about Brahmins who have miraculous visions of Sai Baba as Hindu religious figures.

<sup>46</sup> Dabholkar, *SSSC*, 11:62-63 *dādā tayācā guru bāman / mī jāṭicā musalmān / tarī mī toci aiseṁ mānūn / keleṁ gurupūjan tayānem / āpaṅ moṭhe pavitra brāhmaṅ / hā jāṭicā apavitra yavana / kaise karuṁ yācem pūjan / aiseṁ na tanman śaṅkalem*.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 11:64.

<sup>48</sup> For example, see Chapter 31 of Das Ganu's *Bhaktalīlāmṛt* (1906). Here, there is a story about Narayan Krishna Phense, who did not believe in Sai Baba although his wife did. Narayan tries to explain to his wife that the man in Shirdi is a "Muslim madman who sits there deceiving the world as a hypocrite" (*tethe ek musalmān / vedāpisā āhe jān / baḷec dhoṅg mājavūn / jag luṭyā baisalā*, 31:129). When Phense is brought to Shirdi on business, he brings his wife, who insists that they visit Sai Baba. When Narayan approaches

that such a statement does not “prove” that Sai Baba was born Muslim because his speech – or rather, the speech attributed to him throughout the hagiographic tradition – is highly metaphorical and allegorical. For example, it is recorded that Sai Baba once responded to incessant questions about his birth by saying that his parents were Hindu philosophical concepts: “*Brahman* is my father, *māyā* is my mother, and when they came together, I received this body.”<sup>49</sup> I would argue that the story of Dr. Pandit makes use of Sai Baba’s self-identification as a Muslim for a specific purpose. It is part of the saint’s pedagogy *in this story* to convey a theological truth *through a Brahmin* about the transcendent quality of devotion to one’s guru.

#### **N.V. Gunaji’s English Adaptation of the *Satcarita* (1944)**

The key phrase in the encounter between Sai Baba and Dr. Pandit – the one where Sai Baba says, “I am Muslim by birth” – does not appear in the first English adaptation of the *Satcarita*.<sup>50</sup> Fifteen years after the completion of Dabholkar’s work, N.V. Gunaji published *The Wonderful Life and Teachings of Shri Sai Baba, Adapted from the Original Marathi Book Shri Sai Satcharita by Govindrao Raghunath Dabholkar alias ‘Hemadpant’* (1944). As an adaptation but not a full translation, the text warrants close scrutiny. In the Dr. Pandit story, the omission of this self-identification lessens the impact of the original Marathi version of the story by making its moral more generic: Shirdi Sai

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the mosque, Sai Baba picks up a stone and shouts: “I am a lowly, mad Muslim by birth. You are a high-caste Brahmin. You will pollute yourself if you have *darśan* [of me]” (*mī jātīne āhe hīn / veḍā piṣā musalmān / tumhī uccavarṇa brāhmaṇ bāṭāl darśan ghetāci*, 31:140). Narayan then realizes that Sai Baba has just read his mind, intuiting what the Brahmin was afraid of. As a result, he takes *darśan* of the saint possessing *trikārajña*, or knowledge of the past, present, and future (31:141-143).

<sup>49</sup> Das Ganu, *BLA*, 31:20.

<sup>50</sup> N.V. Gunaji, *The Wonderful Life and Teachings of Shri Sai Baba, adapted from the Original Marathi Book Shri Sai Satcharita by Govindrao Raghunath Dabholkar alias ‘Hemadpant,’* 21<sup>st</sup> ed. (Shri Sai Baba Sansthan and Trust: Shirdi, 2007 [1944]), 64. This omission has been previously noted in scholarship. See Warren, *Unravelling the Enigma*, 350.

Baba accepts true devotion in any form. In this rendition, the exemplary form is high-caste and Hindu. Similarly, Gunaji leaves out the line about the “the wise words of the *kalmās*” in its telling of Sai Baba’s encounter with the loud Rohilla.<sup>51</sup> He also does not include a verse from the tenth chapter, in which Dabholkar says that Sai Baba is “neither Hindu nor Muslim” (*nā hindu nā yavana*) and does not belong to one of the four traditional stages of life or social classes, viz. *tayā nā āśram nā varṇa*.<sup>52</sup> Omitting these verses effectively erases the ambiguity assigned to the saint in Dabholkar’s *Satcarita*.

In her monograph *Unravelling the Enigma*, Marianne Warren has catalogued several many such differences between Dabholkar’s Marathi *Satcarita* and Gunaji’s English adaptation of the same. For example, as Dabholkar describes the *hāṇḍī* – the large metal pot in which Sai Baba cooked food for public distribution – he mentions that Sai Baba sometimes prepared sweet rice and rice with mutton and that he would send for a *mullah* to ensure that the goat was sacrificed according to Islamic custom.<sup>53</sup> Dabholkar also references Brahmins and meat-eating: “Desiring to attain heaven (*svārg*), Brahmins can kill animals as part of a ritual sacrifice and offer it into the sacred fire. This is called ‘killing according to scripture’ (*śaśāstra himsā*).”<sup>54</sup> Gunaji, however, redacts any mention of goat slaughter and Brahmins killing animals, reporting simply that Sai Baba sometimes made “Biryani with meat.”<sup>55</sup> Warren thus contends that Gunaji’s adaptation “has unwittingly had the effect of giving a further Hindu gloss to Sai Baba.”<sup>56</sup>

<sup>51</sup> Gunaji, *The Wonderful Life and Teachings of Shri Sai Baba*, 14.

<sup>52</sup> Dabholkar, *ŚSSC*, 10:119.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 38:26 and 30.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 38:29 *svārgādi bhuvanāciyā āśā / yajñārthī karavūniyām / brāhmaṇahī sevītī paroḍāśā / śaśāstra himsā hī mhaṇatī*.

<sup>55</sup> Gunaji, *The Wonderful Life and Teachings of Shri Sai Baba*, 202. Marianne Warren also identified this incongruity between Dabholkar and Gunaji’s versions of the story. See Warren, *Unravelling the Enigma*, 6.

<sup>56</sup> Warren, *Unravelling the Enigma*, 7.

For the purposes of charting the evolution of Sai Baba from being “neither Hindu nor Muslim” to becoming “both Hindu and Muslim,” there are several interesting things about what Gunaji does when he comes to the seventh chapter of Dabholkar’s *Satcarita*. Recall that this is the section of the text where Dabholkar marshals evidence to show how one cannot call Sai Baba a Hindu because of his Muslim characteristics, and vice versa. According to Dabholkar, one piece of evidence showing that Sai Baba is Muslim – or more accurately, that he is not Hindu – is his evident circumcision, viz. *suntām pramāṇ*. When Gunaji comes to this part of the text, he alters the original language to bypass make it seem that Sai Baba is telling others, presumably Muslims, to keep to this custom. Gunaji also inserts the testimony of a prominent Brahmin devotee – with proper citation of his source – into the flow of the text, thereby invalidating Dabholkar’s claim regarding Sai Baba’s circumcision. Gunaji’s adaptation reads:

If you think He was a Hindu, He advocated the practice of circumcision (though, according to Mr. Nanasaheb Chandorkar, who observed him closely, He was not Himself circumcised. Vide article in Sai Leela on “Baba Hindu ki Yavan,” by B.V. Dev, page 562).<sup>57</sup>

To reframe the question of Sai Baba’s identity even further, Gunaji inserts more new information into his English translation of the seventh chapter of the *Satcarita*. Gunaji’s adaptation begins by noting, per Dabholkar’s *Satcarita*, that “none could definitely decide whether Sai Baba was a Hindu or a Mohammeden” but it is only in Gunaji’s adaptation that these words are marked with an asterisk, which leads to a footnote at the bottom of the page:

Note – (1) Mhalsapati, an intimate Shirdi devotee of Baba, who always slept with Him in the Masjid and Chavadi, said that Sai Baba told him that

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<sup>57</sup> Gunaji, *The Wonderful Life and Teachings of Shri Sai Baba*, 39. Additionally, according to R.B. Purandare, Sai Baba was “not circumcised, so far as I could see.” See Narasimhaswami, *Devotees’ Experiences*, 82.



He was a Brahmin of Pathari, and was handed over to a Fakir in his infancy; and when He told this, some men from Pathari had come and Baba was enquiring about some men from that place, vide *Sai Leela*, 1924, page 179. (2) Mrs. Kashibai Kanitkar, the famous learned woman of Poona, says in the experience No. 8, publishing on page 79, *Sai Leela*, Vol. II, 1934 – “On hearing of Baba’s miracles, we were discussing according to our theosophic convention and fashion, whether Sai Baba belonged to Black or White Lodge. When, once I went to Shirdi, I was thinking seriously about this in my mind. As soon as I approached the steps of the Masjid, Baba came to the front and pointing to His chest and staring at me spoke rather vehemently – “This is a Brahmin, pure Brahmin. He has nothing to do with black things. No Mussalman can dare to step in here. He dare not.” Again pointing to His chest – “This Brahmin can bring lakhs of men on the white path and take them to their destination. This is a Brahmin’s Masjid and I won’t allow any black Mohammeden to cast his shadow here.”<sup>58</sup>

Several points are worth noticing in these statements, which, to reiterate, are unique to Gunaji’s adaptation and not part of the *Satcarita*. First, Sai Baba was known in different social circles in the decade following his death in 1918. Chandorkar was a deputy collector in Ahmednagar District, and his influence in spreading the word about Sai Baba among the colonial-era middle class of judges, revenue officers, and clerks in various departments, including the former magistrate Dabholkar, is an important part of his legacy in the early devotional community. Mhalsapati was the opposite: a poor man with much less formal education who worked as the caretaker of Shirdi’s Khandoba temple. The reference to Kashibai Kanitkar, as well as her discussion of Sai Baba in light of the teachings of Theosophy, positions Sai Baba’s fame inside the social circles well beyond rural Shirdi in the late colonial period. Second, we might also note that the manner of including this new information about Sai Baba resembles modern standards for making arguments in scholarship: naming authors, referencing exact sources and page numbers from the *Sai Leela* journal put out by the Shri Sai Baba Sansthan and Trust, and weaving

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<sup>58</sup> Gunaji, *The Wonderful Life and Teachings of Shri Sai Baba*, 40.

these citations into the body of the text with footnotes and parentheses. Third – and most obviously – we see the hagiographic effort to construct Sai Baba’s Brahminhood.

Whereas Dabholkar and Das Ganu maintain that no one knew Sai Baba’s origin, other sources began to emerge in the years following the *mahāsamādhī*, claiming that the saint did tell some people who he “actually” was. Both sources reporting that Sai Baba was a Brahmin stem from ethnographic research conducted among devotees in the 1930s by B.V. Narasimhaswami, the Brahmin hagiographer, who made the strongest case for Sai Baba’s Brahmin birth in his 1955 English prose text *Life of Sai Baba*. We will turn to Narasimhaswami and his work shortly.

Before proceeding, it is necessary to observe that the routinization of the “neither/nor” Shirdi Sai Baba occurs at a very early stage in the hagiographic tradition, particularly in Gunaji’s 1944 English adaptation of Dabholkar’s *Satcarita*. To perform hagiographic surgery on Sai Baba’s life and legacy, Gunaji’s tool is not the sledgehammer but the scalpel and suture, subtly omitting and adding certain parts of the saint’s story. Gunaji is thus at the forefront of the post-*Satcarita* generation of hagiography that reshapes Sai Baba into more of a Hindu and less of a Muslim. Warren rightly asserts that even though Gunaji understands his work to be an adaptation of Dabholkar’s original, it should be viewed as a “separate book which has wielded significant influence in its own right.”<sup>59</sup> I suggest that we look at Gunaji’s adaptation as the point in the hagiographic tradition where a Hindu hagiographer feels uneasy about Sai Baba’s Muslim characteristics and responds by creating a conceptual separation between the saint and the ways in which he embodied and performed his Muslim-ness.

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<sup>59</sup> Warren, *Unravelling the Enigma*, 7.

What is most interesting, however, is that Gunaji does not completely eliminate Sai Baba's association with Islam. One of Sai Baba's unique selling points – to borrow from marketing terminology – that sets him apart from the plethora of saints in South Asia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is that he occupies the liminal space between “Hindu” and “Muslim” categories. If the Muslim aspect of Sai Baba's ambiguous religious identity cannot be fully and finally erased, then his *Brahmin* hagiographers try to find another way to think about him as a figure who would be more Hindu and less Muslim.

**B.V. Narasimhaswami and *Life of Sai Baba* (1955)**

“So undoubtedly Baba was Brahmin and necessarily a Brahmin.”

- B.V. Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba*, p. 790

**a. The Author and His Campaign of *Sāi Pracār***

How enduring in modern India is the legacy of a saint with an ambiguous religious identity? With more specific reference to Shirdi Sai Baba, we might ask: How long does it take for a saint who is “neither/nor” to fall into the gravitational pull of communal categorization? In the case of Shirdi Sai Baba, the answer is that it does not take very long at all. This occurs in the next major telling of Sai Baba's story, and it comes from a Tamil Brahmin who never met the living saint but had a life-changing experience of his posthumous presence at the tomb in Shirdi in 1936.

The life of Narasimha Iyer (1874-1956) is detailed in G.R. Vijayakumar's *Sri Narasimha Swami: Apostle of Shirdi Sai Baba* (2009). Vijayakumar occasionally waxes hagiographic in describing the events of Iyer's life, thereby demonstrating how saintliness can flow from the saint to the hagiographer, who then becomes saint-like in

his own right. For example, Vijayakumar says that Iyer's birth took place "under most unusual circumstances" because the child emerged "with a suddenness and agility that is rare in such cases," which became "symbolic" of the future Narasimhaswami's energy.<sup>60</sup>

Iyer's parents were pious Brahmins in Bhavani, a town in Erode District in what is today the state of Tamil Nadu. His early life was exemplary. He took *brahmopadeśa*<sup>61</sup> at age eight. At sixteen years old, he married ten-year-old Seethalakshmi, and the couple eventually had five children. With his B.A. degree from Madras Christian College and L.L.B. from Madras Law College, Iyer settled in Salem in 1895, where he joined the bar and began a successful law career, while also serving on the town's municipal council and representing his district in the Madras Legislative Council from 1914 to 1920. He accompanied the theosophist Annie Besant on lecture tours in and around Madras and built a new bungalow, reportedly one of the few in Salem with electricity and a car.

In young adulthood, a number of tragedies struck Iyer in quick succession. His mother died in 1917, and his father in 1918. His youngest son and daughter both perished in an accident in 1921, and his wife passed away in 1922. After so much loss, Iyer began to rethink the course of his life. In 1925, he resigned from the bar, distributed his wealth among his married children, and left Salem, cutting off all ties with the world and becoming a renunciant known as Narasimhaswami. For the next decade, he travelled across the subcontinent's southern half in search of a true guru. He stayed at Ramana Maharshi's hermitage in Tiruvannamalai and Siddharuda Swami's hermitage in Hubli, and continued northward to the holy city of Pandharpur and other places associated with

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<sup>60</sup> G.R. Vijayakumar, *Sri Narasimha Swami: Apostle of Shridi Sai Baba* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 2009, 21-22.

<sup>61</sup> For "twice-born" (*dvija*) Hindus in the upper three societal classes (*varṇas*), *brahmopadeśa* is the ritual reception of Vedic knowledge after the "sacred thread ceremony" (*upanayana*).

saints in Maharashtra like Narayan Maharaj's Khedgaon, Meher Baba's Meherabad, and Upasani Maharaj's Sakori. Along the journey, Narasimhaswami kept hearing these saints tells him that his guru was elsewhere and that he should continue northward.

In August 1936, Narasimhaswami decided to leave Sakori and return to Tamil Nadu. Although he heard about the tomb of Sai Baba in a village just a few kilometers away, he had little interest in a saint no longer living. Fortuitously, Narasimhaswami encountered a Pathan (i.e., a Muslim man) who convinced him to visit Shirdi before departure. Vijayakumar's language best describes the magnitude of what happened next:

[Narasimhaswami] stood silently watching the samadhi. It was the happiest moment in his life... Sai Baba like a magnificent wave of fire engulfed each and every one of the millions of cells in Narasimha Swamiji's body and in lieu thereof granted him a new life. The old body of Narasimha Swamiji was no more and it became Sai-Swaroop Narasimha Swamiji.<sup>62</sup>

The experience at the tomb in Shirdi launched Narasimhaswami on a career of *Sāi pracār* – or what he called the evangelical-like mission of “Sai getting known.”<sup>63</sup> One of his first tasks was to interview people who knew Sai Baba when he was alive. With the translator's assistance of the Sai Baba devotee and judge from Gwalior P.R. Avasthi, Narasimhaswami interviewed seventy-nine other devotees and published their testimonies as *Devotees' Experiences of Sri Sai Baba* (1940) in English and Tamil. When talking with devotees, how did Narasimhaswami determine which statements and experiences were authentic and which were not? The answer, he says, is Sai Baba himself:

More than one devotee warned me against accepting bogus devotees and faked experiences and asked me how I, a stranger to the men, manners, and language of Maharashtra, hoped to ensure the purity and reliability of

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<sup>62</sup> Vijayakumar, *Sri Narasimha Swami*, 65.

<sup>63</sup> Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba*, 652.

the information I received. I knew one and only device. Sai Baba was my guide and he would not allow humbug to pass into my sacred collection.<sup>64</sup>

Seeing that the Shri Sai Baba Sansthan and Trust in Shirdi had neither the plans nor the ambition to propagate Sai Baba devotion beyond what is today the state of Maharashtra, Narasimhaswami returned to Madras in 1940 and founded the All India Sai Samaj along with its official publication *Sai Sudha*, a journal in English with some content in South Indian languages. He wrote a number of small publications, such as “Who is Sai Baba?” and “Wondrous Saint Sai Baba,” and sold them for a few *annas* each, and produced *Sri Sai Baba’s Charters and Sayings* (1939), a compendium of more than six hundred aphorisms and parables attributed to the saint.<sup>65</sup> As he turned seventy years old, Narasimhaswami maintained a rigorous travel schedule with lectures in Mumbai, Delhi, and Calcutta. He spoke at parks, clubs, and public auditoriums; visited branches of the AISS and people’s homes; and gave out free literature, like the *Sāī Aṣṭotram*, a text that he designed to standardize Sai Baba worship – in a very stylistically Hindu fashion, one might add. By 1956, Narasimhaswami’s *Sāī pracār* had resulted in some eighty Sai Baba temples and 400 branches (*upasamāj*) of the AISS throughout India, a figure indicating that the role of the “apostle” in popularizing Sai Baba on a national level cannot be underestimated.

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<sup>64</sup> Vijayakumar, *Sri Narasimha Swami*, 72.

<sup>65</sup> Narasimhaswami’s *Sri Sai Baba’s Charters and Sayings*, which first appeared in 1939, contains the same devotional testimonies that Gunaji weaves into the flow of his English adaptation of the *Satcarita*, which was published in 1944, that is, after *Charters and Sayings*. Recall that these are the devotional testimonies from Kashibai Kanitkar, who claims to have heard Sai Baba calling his mosque “a Brahmin’s masjid” and from Mhalsapati, who heard Sai Baba talk about being a Brahmin from Pathari. The history of the publication of these testimonies begins with their appearance in the monthly *Sai Lila* publication. Then, they get picked up in Narasimhaswami’s early works, become conflated with the original *Satcarita* in Gunaji’s adaptation, and ultimately become part of Narasimhaswami’s argument in *Life of Sai Baba* that Sai Baba had a Brahmin birth.

### b. Narasimhaswami's Brahmin-to-Muslim-to-Brahmin Narrative

Narasimhaswami's most ambitious literary project in his campaign of *Sāī pracār* was *Life of Sai Baba* (1955), a four-volume text in English prose that gives a new account of the saint. The first volume tells the life of Sai Baba, and the second volume summarizes the experiences of the most prominent devotees in the early devotional community (e.g., Mhalsapati, N.G. Chandorkar, Das Ganu Maharaj, H.S. Dixit, G.R. Dabholkar). The third volume has shorter profiles of other devotees, most of whom are Hindu alongside a few Muslim and Christian devotees. The fourth volume contains Narasimhaswami's commentaries on topics ranging from Sai Baba's miracle-working powers (*siddhīs*) and ideas about God to the saint's relevance to India and modernity in chapters like "Sai Baba and the Future of Religion" and "Sai Baba and National Unity."<sup>66</sup>

Narasimhaswami's *Life of Sai Baba* purports to contain the "correct knowledge" about the saint, as stated in the opening of the first volume:

Correct knowledge of any kind is good. But correct knowledge of facts connected with the lives of saints is not only good for the individual who knows them, but is beneficial to society as in the long run it promotes social unity and ethical, spiritual and religious study and endeavor.<sup>67</sup>

The dutiful hagiographer's task, the former lawyer says, is "to remove the grain from the chaff, to sift and arrange all the mass of evidence that exists and to present what, after enquiry and investigation, has to be accepted as true beyond reasonable doubt."<sup>68</sup> *Life of Sai Baba* is thus a hagiography in the guise of an empirical biography. Even though

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<sup>66</sup> Scholars and devotees give the date of the publication of Narasimhaswami's *Life of Sai Baba* as 1955, which is when the first volume was published. Other volumes were published later. The second volume followed shortly thereafter in 1956. The third and fourth volumes were published posthumously in 1957 and 1969, respectively.

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

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

Narasimhaswami presumes to give a “just-the-facts” presentation of his subject, the purpose for which he writes is hagiographical inasmuch as *Life of Sai Baba* is about a saint whose life story produces for the reader benefits beyond ordinary knowledge (e.g., “God realisation”). Furthermore, Narasimhaswami thought of his authorship of the text in the same way that Dabholkar viewed his instrumentality in composing the *Satcarita*, viz. the former’s acknowledgement in the preface that “the real producer of this book is Baba himself.”<sup>69</sup>

Before working on *Life of Sai Baba*, Narasimhaswami had already catalogued the different and “incorrect” ideas that people had about Sai Baba, some saying he was a madman, a communalist, a hypnotist, a black magician, or someone who insulted Hindus.<sup>70</sup> Another false view, says Narasimhaswami in the opening pages of his text is that the saint was “only a Mohammadan.”<sup>71</sup> Indeed, a few decades prior to Narasimhaswami’s *Life of Sai Baba*, a few hagiographic works about the Parsi mystic Meher Baba (who considered Sai Baba a “perfect master”) had referred to Sai Baba as a “Mohammeden” and a “Muslim by birth.”<sup>72</sup> In this light, one can see Narasimhaswami’s *Life of Sai Baba* as an editorial effort to weed out the many misunderstandings about the eponymous saint and create the standard, authoritative presentation of his life and legacy. The concern with “correct knowledge” inevitably leads Narasimhaswami to reevaluate Dabholkar’s description of Sai Baba as a casteless saint who is “neither Hindu nor Muslim.”

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., xvi. This is in the preface to Volume 1.

<sup>70</sup> See Narasimhaswami, *Charters and Sayings*, 180, 183, and 196.

<sup>71</sup> Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba*, 5.

<sup>72</sup> Purdom, *The Perfect Master*, 26; Munsiff, “Hazrat Sai Baba of Shirdi,” 47.



Narasimhaswami initially broaches the question of the saint's origin in a way that resembles the tact of Dabholkar and Das Ganu, namely, that "the birth and parentage of Sai Baba are wrapped in mystery."<sup>73</sup> However, Narasimhaswami proceeds in his text to unwrap this mystery. This is the most remarkable feature of *Life of Sai Baba*: the debut of a new and fully-fleshed out narrative of Sai Baba's pre-Shirdi years, which takes place in three phases: Brahmin birth, Islamic tutelage, and initiation from the Brahmin guru Venkusha. To build this narrative, Narasimhaswami looks broadly to the sources available in the mid-twentieth century about the saint. He relies on some of the devotional testimonies that we have seen previously in Gunaji's English adaptation of the *Satcarita*. For example, Narasimhaswami picks up on the "fairly indisputable testimony"<sup>74</sup> of Mhalsapati, the caretaker of Shirdi's Khandoba temple. Mhalsapati claims to have heard Sai Baba identify himself as a Brahmin from Pathari, a town 250 kilometers to the southeast of Shirdi. This testimony previously appeared in Narasimhaswami's earlier work, *Sri Sai Baba's Charters and Sayings*:

472A. Baba's references to his present birth (Mahlsapathy [sic] often said that Sai Baba told him explicitly), "I was a Brahmin of Patri. When I was young, my parents gave me away to a fakir" (and Sai Baba mentioned names of many people of Patri and made enquires about them).<sup>75</sup>

Narasimhaswami thus strives to balance the tradition of the *Satcarita*, which maintains the mystery of the saint, with this other information that sheds light on who the saint "actually" was. What results is a conflation of sociological and spiritualized notions of Brahminhood, as evidenced in the assertion that "Baba's caste cannot be peremptorily fixed as being this or that caste. Baba is to be treated

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<sup>73</sup> Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba*, 10.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Narasimhaswami, *Charters and Sayings*, 201.

as a Brahmin according to the definition given of that word in various scriptures.”<sup>76</sup> He rhetorically asks if the definition of a Brahmin is a question of parentage (which it is not, according to Narasimhaswami), or a matter of moral character and ethical conduct. To support this second position, he cites relevant verses from *The Laws of Manu* and the *Mahābhārata*,<sup>77</sup> as well as *Bhagavata Purāna* 7.11.35, which he translates: “Whatever qualities are said to be indicative of caste will, if found in any person, entitle that person to be considered of that caste.”<sup>78</sup> Because Sai Baba lived the life of a celibate and self-enlightened soul (*jñānī*), Narasimhaswami concludes that “undoubtedly Baba was Brahmin and necessarily a Brahmin.”<sup>79</sup> This explication of Sai Baba’s Brahminhood evidences what many other Brahmin hagiographers have done in their accounts of non-Brahmin saints: (re)make the non-Brahmin in their own image.<sup>80</sup> Kabir is an obvious example; twentieth-century hagiographers assign Brahmin birth parents to Kabir, which, as David Lorenzen has shown, reflects the communitarian desire to give the saint a more definitively Hindu religious identity.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba*, 115.

<sup>77</sup> In *Life of Sai Baba*, Narasimhaswami references the gist of *The Laws of Manu* 10:65: “The Sudra becomes a Brahmana and a Brahmana a Sudra (by conduct). Know this same (rule to apply) to him who is born of a Kshatriya or of a Vaisya” (790, Narasimhaswami’s translation). On the same page, his translation of *Mahābhārata Vana Parva* 313:108 reads: “It is not birth nor samskaras nor Vedic studies nor one’s kulam nor ancestry that form the cause or basis of one’s being a Brahmin or Dvija or twice-born.” He additionally cites *MhBh VP* 80:21-26, which establishes one’s identity as based on conduct.

<sup>78</sup> Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba*, 790-791.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 790.

<sup>80</sup> See, for example, Mark Juergensmeyer, *Religion as Social Vision: The Movement against Untouchability in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Punjab* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982); David Lorenzen, *Kabir Legends and Ananta-Das’s Kabir Parachai* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1991); Patton Burchett, “Bhakti Rhetoric in the Hagiography of ‘Untouchable’ Saints: Discerning *Bhakti*’s Ambivalence on Caste and Brahminhood,” *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 13, 2 (2009): 115-141.

<sup>81</sup> See Lorenzen, *Kabir Legends*, 44-46.

Spiritualized notions of Brahminhood notwithstanding, Narasimhaswami still needs to have Sai Baba born to Brahmin parents because the next phase of the narrative depends on the parents' decision to give their child to a Muslim couple. Exactly why the parents abandoned their child is not addressed in *Life of Sai Baba*. Narasimhaswami's narrative focuses on the significance of the transfer from Brahmin to Muslim upbringing:

Born of Brahmin parents of a very poor and pious sort and having been handed over to a fakir for his sustenance and care at the very early age of one year or so, Baba seems to have been fitted by Providence to overcome all differences, especially differences of race, religion, creed, etc.<sup>82</sup>

Upon the death of the fakir – who, Narasimhaswami theorizes, was “probably” a Sufi<sup>83</sup> – his widow turns the child over to a Brahmin guru named Venkusha in Selu, a town near Pathari. In this third phase of Sai Baba's origin, Narasimhaswami draws on the work of Das Ganu, a Marathi hagiographer and contemporary of Dabholkar, who chronicles the life of Venkusha in Chapter 26 of the *Bhaktisarāmṛit* (1925). According to Das Ganu's account, there once was a Brahmin *zamīndār* named Gopalrao Deshmukh who lived in Selu. One day, Gopalrao became so caught up in lust for a young *sūdra* woman that he went into his *pūjā* room and stabbed out his eyes with a long needle while praying to Venkatesa. Because of his devotion to the god, Gopalrao became known as Venkusha and began presenting himself as a holy man and performing miracles, especially ones that cured blindness.<sup>84</sup> At the end of a pilgrimage circuit of holy sites in the north, Venkusha

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<sup>82</sup> Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba*, xxvii-xxviii.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 10. This suggestion is in a footnote at the bottom of the page.

<sup>84</sup> There is considerable speculation in the hagiographic tradition regarding the identity of Sai Baba's guru. V.B. Kher, a former trustee of the Sansthan and Trust, investigated Das Ganu's theory that Venkusha was the *zamīndār* Gopalrao Deshmukh. Interviews with Deshmukh's descendants in Selu revealed that Deshmukh lived from 1715 to 1802, a timeframe that makes it impossible for him to have been Sai Baba's guru. Kher concluded that Das Ganu's theory positing that Deshmukh was Venkusha is “too fanciful to be believed.” See Kamath and Kher, *Sai Baba of Shirdi*, 27.

stopped in Ahmedabad at the tomb of Suwag Shah, a Muslim saint. The tomb began to perspire and speak, and it told Venkusha that he was the reincarnation of the medieval saint Ramanand, adding: “Five *kos* from Selu in a town called Manwath, the child of a fakir will come to you as your disciple Kabir.”<sup>85</sup> Upon returning to Selu, Venkusha met a woman, clad in rags and carrying a patched-up beggar’s bag, and with a small child strapped to her back. Venkusha immediately recognized her and her child: “Kabir’s mother has brought Kabir with her.”<sup>86</sup> The widow died soon thereafter, and the boy moved into the hermitage. A group of the guru’s other students were jealous of the newcomer and planned to kill the young Sai Baba in the forest by throwing a brick at him. Instead, the brick struck Venkusha in the head and fatally wounded him. As he lay dying, Venkusha instructed the young Sai Baba to collect and drink milk from a cowherd’s barren cow, as the guru’s miraculous words made the cow’s teats gush milk from an inner udder. After this act of spiritual investiture, the guru told the boy to go westward, far from Selu. And the teenager who would become the Sai Baba of Shirdi soon reached the village that would become his lifelong residence.

For Narasimhaswami, the third of the three phases of Sai Baba’s origin story assumes greater importance because it is the period of time that contextualizes and historicizes the maturation of Sai Baba’s spiritual knowledge. He writes:

Therefore this long period of ten or twelve years at Selu sufficed, we may presume, to complete the course of training which Baba had to undergo for reaching perfection of sainthood or Godhead to fit him for his life’s work of transforming all that came into contact with him or that would

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<sup>85</sup> Das Ganu, *BSA*, 26:135. In this text, Das Ganu implies that Sai Baba has Muslim parentage, stating that “this Kabir will come to you as your disciple from a fakir’s womb” (*tethem fakīrācī udarīm / yeñār kabīr śiṣya tumcā*).

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 26:161.

come into contact with him decade after decade, and it may even be century after century, into the model of his soul or his own likeness.<sup>87</sup>

While the positing of two teachers steeped in two traditions works in the narrative to establish Sai Baba's bi-religious upbringing, Narasimhaswami concomitantly subordinates the notion of religious difference in viewing the transfer from Muslim to Brahmin care as natural and uncomplicated. Moreover, he presumes that both the Sufi fakir and the Brahmin guru mutually respected the truth of the aphorism "the teacher is divine" – and Narasimhaswami glosses the aphorism with the Sanskrit phrase, *ācārya devo bhava* – as the "sheet anchor" in their tutelage of the young saint.<sup>88</sup> Consequently, Narasimhaswami can state that "the change from the Fakir to Venkusa did not involve any serious change in Baba's method of progress."<sup>89</sup> Notably, Dabholkar makes no mention of Brahmins in Pathari or Muslims in Manwath. While the *Satcarita* does have Sai Baba speaking about his guru, the text is vague in the details of names and places, as if to make the point that the mysterious nature of the teacher-student relationship amplifies the enigmatic life of Shirdi Sai Baba.<sup>90</sup> Narasimhaswami is less interested in such ambiguity. His task in *Life of Sai Baba* is to draw together the information provided by Mhalsapati and Das Ganu, and weave a unified hagiographic tapestry that, for the first time, tells the story of where Sai Baba came from.

Another notable feature about *Life of Sai Baba* is that issues pertaining to the saint's physical body hold less importance for Narasimhaswami. Recall that a difference

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<sup>87</sup> Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba*, 132.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 596.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>90</sup> In Dabholkar's *Satcarita*, Sai Baba directs villagers to the "place of his guru" (*gurusthān*) buried beneath a neem tree in Shirdi, but the text does not identify the location as belonging to anyone by name. In Das Ganu's *Bhaktisārāmrt*, Sai Baba says that his *gurusthān* marks the burial in Shirdi of a portion of Kabir's remains, viz. the flowers that appeared when he died.

of opinion developed after the saint's death as to whether or not he was circumcised. In the *Satcarita*, Dabhlkar says that he was circumcised. In Gunaji's English adaptation of the *Satcarita*, there is a parenthetical citation with another devotee's testimony that reports that he was not. What does Narasimhaswami think? "Having been brought up in his earliest years by a Muslim fakir, the probabilities will distinctly favour circumcision."<sup>91</sup> However, he immediately glosses over the significance of this statement, drawing the reader's attention away from this "perfectly irrelevant and insignificant" matter and toward the saint's "spirit," which is not different from "Ishwara or Allah."<sup>92</sup> In a small, posthumously published work titled "Significance of Baba's Mahasamadhi," Narasimhaswami further emphasizes the importance of the saint's spiritual, not physical, body because the spiritual body engenders the dawning of "a new era in Sai Bhakthi... that the entire people of India if not the whole world would be drawn to."<sup>93</sup> As for the issue of Sai Baba's ears, Narasimhaswami adopts the stance of everyone other than Das Ganu, stating that his pierced ears are indicative "that he had a Hindu birth."<sup>94</sup>

Narasimhaswami's Brahmin-to-Muslim-to-Brahmin narrative certainly subjects Sai Baba to Brahminization – a process of remaking someone that is low-caste and/or non-Brahmin in a way that is either unquestionably Brahmin or compatible with the Brahminical worldview. But why would he do this? Is it simply because Sai Baba is an easily Brahminizable saint, one who purportedly spoke vaguely and promised devotees to appear to them as they want or need to see him? As far back as the *Satcarita*, we read

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<sup>91</sup> Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba*, 714.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> B.V. Narasimhaswami, "Significance of Baba's Mahasamadhi," n.p. This tract and other works of Shirdi Sai Baba hagiography are available online: [www.saileelas.org/books.htm](http://www.saileelas.org/books.htm).

<sup>94</sup> Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba*, 593.

about instances where Sai Baba said that he is not limited by his physical body: “I have taken this form to clear up the confusion of the people who think that I am just these three-and-a-half arm-lengths (*auṭ hāt*) of a body.”<sup>95</sup> The abstract entity known to devotees when he was alive as “Shirdi Sai Baba” becomes a multivalent symbol after his death, and it is the hagiographer who must create an account of that abstract entity’s life that will define his identity for him. Perhaps, then, we should not be surprised that Sai Baba – a saint with an ambiguous religious identity – undergoes so much hagiographic reconstruction.

### c. Shirdi Sai Baba: The “Living Emblem of Hindu-Muslim Unity”

We should see that Narasimhaswami’s Brahmin-to-Muslim-to-Brahmin narrative in *Life of Sai Baba* does three things. First, it eliminates the “neither/nor” language of the *Satcarita* by placing the saint in a definite spiritual lineage. Second, it recasts Sai Baba as originally and essentially a Brahmin and assures the audience (especially high-caste Hindus) that the mosque-dwelling saint has a high-caste pedigree. Third, this tripartite narrative of bi-religious upbringing is used by Narasimhaswami to make the broader argument that Sai Baba is a composite figure who is “both Hindu and Muslim.” On this latter point, he writes in *Life of Sai Baba*: “Here we see Baba’s destiny. From Hindu parentage [Baba] passed to Muslim hands and from Muslim care again to a Hindu saint’s care. The fusion of Hindu and Muslim had to be perfected first in his own person before he could affect any fusion of the Hindu-Muslim elements in society.”<sup>96</sup> Elsewhere in the text, Narasimhaswami describes Sai Baba as the “living emblem of Hindu-Muslim unity,” whose appearance has a “perfect blending of [Hindu-Muslim] features” and

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<sup>95</sup> Dabholkar, *SSC*, 19:213.

<sup>96</sup> Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba*, 595.

whose life reflects the “fusion of Hinduism with Islam.” The saint’s mission is “to unify Hindus and Muslims into one compact mass with common religious, spiritual, and worldly interests,”<sup>97</sup> and to give “the hope that Islam and Hinduism might one day combine and produce a blend that will satisfy the really earnest among the adherents of both religions and form the foundation of India’s main religion of the future.”<sup>98</sup> This is significant, says Narasimhaswami, because the two representative religions of this fusion – Hinduism and Islam – seem so different as to be incompatible. He writes: “The predominant note in Islam is [the] unity of God and the predominant feature of Hinduism is [the] multiplicity of Gods... The Hindu revels in all the mythology connected with all these forms, and the puja is full of reference to all the peculiarities and the mythological stories about all these, whereas to a Muslim mind, all such mythology, all such differentiation is anathema.”<sup>99</sup>

To further convey this point of difference, Narasimhaswami mentions the nineteenth-century German Indologist Max Müller’s concept of kathenotheism, or what some scholars call the idea of “serial monotheism,” according to which Hindus venerate deities, parents, and religious teachers as supreme in succession, depending on the context or aims of veneration. This flexibility, says Narasimhaswami, is what the “Muslim mind” cannot grasp because it is steeped in the Islamic profession of faith of God’s uncompromised oneness.<sup>100</sup> The reference to Muller is thus Narasimhaswami’s

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 701.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 595.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid. Here, after describing the Islamic theological concept of God’s oneness, Narasimhaswami writes: “On the contrary, in Hinduism the tendency is to look upon one entity after another as God. Max Muller coined the word ‘Henotheism’ to denote this tendency, that is, everything is God by turns... This is something which non-Hindus cannot understand.” He adds that “to a Muslim mind, all such mythology, all such differentiation, is anathema.” To be clear, “henotheism” refers to the monotheistic acceptance of other deities, while “kathenotheism” is the serial monotheism to which Narasimhaswami wants to refer.



way of differentiating the two traditions that Sai Baba miraculously brought together. It is also indicative that his audience – the people buying, reading, and perhaps sharing *Life of Sai Baba* – will know Max Müller and his contributions to Indology. The invocation of Müller is a bridge-building device, connecting the discussion of a country preacher from rural Maharashtra with a towering figure of nineteenth-century European Indology.<sup>101</sup>

With this language of fusion and unity, Narasimhaswami does something similar with Sai Baba to what V. Raghavan, the famed Sanskritist at the University of Madras, did in the Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel Memorial Lectures in New Delhi in 1964. Raghavan was commissioned by Indira Gandhi – the Indian government’s Minister of Information and Broadcasting at the time – to develop a lecture series on the topic of India’s poet-saints as the “great integrators” in the history of religion in India. These lectures subsequently reached the whole country, as they were broadcast on All India Radio and collected into a book that was published in 1966. As Hawley demonstrates, Raghavan’s lectures turn on the idea that a litany of poet-saints representing India’s diversity – Tamil and Marathi, Hindu and Muslim, Brahmin and Shudra – belonged to a pan-subcontinental movement that developed and promoted what could be understood as India’s true religion, *bhakti*: religious devotion to God expressed in poetry, love, and song, which oftentimes opposed various forms of social discrimination and oppression. To Raghavan, *bhakti* is a “democratic doctrine which consolidates all people without distinction of

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<sup>101</sup> Partha Chatterjee finds a similar reference to Max Müller in Mahendranath Gupta’s *Rāmkr̥ṣṇa Kathāmṛta*, a five volume hagiography of the Bengali mystic Ramakrishna. Chatterjee notes that this early twentieth-century text’s bilingual nature (Bengali prose with occasional English footnotes and translations of philosophical terms) creates the sense that “the wisdom of an ancient speculative tradition of the East, sustained for centuries not only in philosophical texts composed by the learned but through debates and disquisitions among preachers and mystics, is being made available to minds shaped by the modes of European speculative philosophy.” See Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 53.

caste, community, nationality, or sex.”<sup>102</sup> The organization of topics in the lecture series also energizes the idea of the *bhakti* movement as a type of progressive religion marching forward through time and space. Raghavan first spoke about the poets of the South (Tamil *aḷvars* and *nayanmars*), then moved to the West (Marathi singers like Namdev and Tukaram), to the North (the Avadhi poet Tulsidas), and finally to the East (the ecstatic Chaitanya) – a structure that completed a geographic circumambulation (*pradakṣiṇā*) of the subcontinent, spanning India’s long medieval period from the sixth to eighteenth centuries.<sup>103</sup>

Raghavan does not include Shirdi Sai Baba in his lectures and writings on India’s “great integrators,” a fact that suggests that Sai Baba’s popularity was in the process of expanding in the mid-twentieth century but had not yet reached the radar of prominent Indian scholars like Raghavan. It is also noteworthy that Raghavan’s idea of the *bhakti* movement does not include any saintly figures who lived after the early eighteenth century. Besides Sai Baba, the most striking absence is the Bengali mystic Ramakrishna (d. 1886) who became the proponent of a Vedanta-inspired form of religious pluralism in the hands of his disciple and hagiographer Swami Vivekananda.<sup>104</sup> Perhaps these omissions are due to Raghavan’s inclination toward thinking about the *bhakti* movement as a medieval phenomenon that laid the foundation for the secular, inclusive ethos of national integration in modern India but not necessarily a phenomenon that extended into modernity itself. Nonetheless, Raghavan and Narasimhaswami were working on projects

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<sup>102</sup> V. Raghavan, *The Great Integrators: The Saint-Singers of India* (New Delhi: Publications Division of Ministry Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1966), 32.

<sup>103</sup> For a detailed study of Raghavan’s lecture series, including the full list of poet-saints who comprise his history of India’s “great integrators,” see John S. Hawley, *A Storm of Songs: India and the Idea of the Bhakti Movement* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 19-37.

<sup>104</sup> See Sil’s “Vivekānanda’s Rāmakṛṣṇa” (1993).

with similar themes, albeit with different catalysts. The former was sponsored by the government of India in its desire to promote examples of the Nehruvian secularist spirit in the history of religion in India, while the latter was inspired by an evangelical-like zeal to introduce the whole country to a saint who embodied a future of interreligious harmony. Both engaged sainthood as an indigenously Indian resource in the nation's search for a common heritage and integrative ethos that bring together all of the different religions and peoples in India.

Narasimhaswami wrote *Life of Sai Baba* in the shadow of South Asia's Partition, or what Ayesha Jalal calls "a defining moment... that continues to influence how the peoples and states of postcolonial South Asia envisage their past, present, and future."<sup>105</sup> On February 20, 1947, British Prime Minister Clement Atlee declared that the termination of British rule in India would happen before June 1948. In June 1947, Lord Louis Mountbatten, the last Viceroy of British India, abruptly moved up the date of the transfer of power to August 15, 1947. With barely two months before the creation of the Republic of India and the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, borders were hastily drawn between the two new states. Hindus and Sikhs ran for India; Muslims fled to West or East Pakistan. Estimates are that fourteen million people were uprooted and migrated from one place to another, and as many as two million perished in the violence accompanying the birth of the two countries.<sup>106</sup>

While working with the All India Sai Samaj based in the southern city of Madras, Narasimhaswami was quite far from the worst atrocities in Punjab and Bengal. However,

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<sup>105</sup> Ayesha Jalal, *The Pity of Partition: Manto's Life, Times, and Work across the India-Pakistan Divide* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 4.

<sup>106</sup> For a recent study of Partition combining ethnographic and archival research, see Vazira Zamindar, *The Long Partition and the Making of Modern South Asia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

the divisiveness of Partition, as well as the first war between India and Pakistan in 1948, loomed in the background of his late literary career. One of the most pertinent questions facing the new Republic of India was as much political as theological: How can all these distinct, tightly-packaged, and mutually exclusive “religions”<sup>107</sup> fit together in the national fabric of a secular republic, which stands in contradistinction with its neighbor Pakistan, a state founded on the idea of a unified Islamic heritage? I argue that the chapters in the fourth volume of *Life of Sai Baba* like “Sai Baba and the Future of Religion” and “Sai Baba and National Unity” convey Narasimhaswami’s understanding of sainthood as an adaptive response to crises wrought by the transition from colonial to postcolonial modernity. For Narasimhaswami, Sai Baba was the forerunner of Hindu-Muslim unity when it was most needed.

Additionally, even though he makes no mention of Hindu nationalism or its proponents, Narasimhaswami was a historical contemporary of V.D. Savarkar, whose religio-nationalist ideology held the idea of India as coterminous with the concept of a singular Hindu tradition. What did not fit inside this Hindu tradition were Christianity and Islam, the quintessential “others” in Hindutva historiography. In particular, Savarkar and his ideological successors positioned Islam as the enemy of all things Hindu, a foreign element from West and Central Asia that “took India by surprise... [and] century after century, the ghastly conflict continued.”<sup>108</sup> Clearly, Narasimhaswami shows some trepidation with regard to Sai Baba’s proximity to Islam. As A.K. Ramanujan famously

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<sup>107</sup> In putting the term in quotes, I am referring to the twentieth-century *zeitgeist* that follows from the “invention of world religions” (Masuzawa 2005) and the modern social and political discourses that portray a “religion” as an internally coherent system of unique salvific knowledge and practice. This approach undergirds Narasimhaswami’s reconfiguration of Shirdi Sai Baba as “both Hindu and Muslim” inasmuch as the hagiographer portrays the saint as bringing two different and, in his estimation, irreconcilable religions together.

<sup>108</sup> V.D. Savarkar, *Hindutva: Who Is a Hindu?* (Bombay: Veer Savarkar Prakashan, 1969), 44.

suggested in an article of the same name, the core of the “Indian way of thinking” is hierarchy.<sup>109</sup> Even though a saint who can unite India’s two largest religious categories seems like an example of modern ecumenicism, there are indeed strong political overtones in *Life of Sai Baba*’s treatment of its subject. After all, one of the reasons Narasimhaswami wrote the text was to correct, as he says, the misunderstanding still percolating in the mid-twentieth century that Sai Baba was “only a Mohammedan.”<sup>110</sup> However, he is most definitely not ideological kin with the rightwing groups striving to mould India into a Hindu nation. Narasimhaswami wanted to persuade his readership that his guru Shirdi Sai Baba could be a symbol of national unity, not of Hindu nationalism. As we have seen, Narasimhaswami employs the discourse of syncretism – verbiage like “unity,” “fusion,” and “blending” – to make his saint into a figure of Hindu-Muslim compositeness who is “both/and” instead of “neither/nor.” Narasimhaswami’s reconfiguration of Sai Baba is significant because it makes the saint into an alternative to the hardline, religiously-oriented chauvinism of the post-Savarkar strand of Hindutva, and it is the “pro-syncretistic or composite understanding of Shirdi Sai Baba and his message,” Karline McLain has argued, that has made the saint popular in cosmopolitan cities like New Delhi and Bombay.<sup>111</sup>

However, it remains necessary to add some nuance to McLain’s argument about Sai Baba’s cultural compositeness. One issue raised in this chapter is that the compositeness assigned to Sai Baba by Narasimhaswami in *Life of Sai Baba* is not one of equal parts “Hindu” and “Muslim” but rather something like a religious identity

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<sup>109</sup> See A.K. Ramanujan, “Is There an Indian Way of Thinking? An Informal Essay,” *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 23, 1 (1989): 41-58.

<sup>110</sup> Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba*, 5.

<sup>111</sup> McLain, “Praying for Peace and Amity,” 192. See also McLain’s “Be United, Be Virtuous” (2011).

sandwich, in which Sai Baba's connection to Islam is sandwiched between his Brahmin birth and his initiation from a Brahmin guru. This Brahmin/Hindu embrace imbues the "emblem of Hindu-Muslim unity" with an element of Hindu-ness that overshadows but never fully eclipses his Muslim identity.

#### **d. The Sai Baba Remix**

In highlighting the reconfiguration of Sai Baba from "neither Hindu nor Muslim" to "both Hindu and Muslim," it is important to note that Narasimhaswami was not writing directly against Dabholkar or other early hagiographers. He makes no explicit attack on the *Satcarita* for "getting the story wrong." While scholars like Shepherd and Warren have taken Narasimhaswami to task for denigrating Sai Baba's legacy as a Muslim saint, I propose that we see Narasimhaswami as less of a malevolent manipulator of hagiographic "facts" and more of an arranger or a producer, as in the recording industry. *Life of Sai Baba* is Narasimhaswami's "remix" of an "original track," or Dabholkar's *Satcarita*, with a "new beat" (English prose) and some "new lyrics" (the Brahmin-to-Muslim-to-Brahmin narrative). By comparison, I am thinking of examples like Puff Daddy's 1997 remix of The Police's "Roxanne" and Lauryn Hill's 1999 version of Bob Marley's "Turn Your Lights Down Low." Like these artists, Narasimhaswami brings his own creativity to bear on an existing work and produces something similar to the previous works but with new and substantial changes. Because this dissertation is about how the life and legacy of Sai Baba evolves and acquires new significances over time, we might think of Narasimhaswami as a semiotic producer – someone who finds new meanings and relevancies for a colonial-era saint from rural Maharashtra in post-Partition India.

One way that Narasimhaswami does this is by making new connections between Sai Baba and precedents in ancient Sanskrit literature (e.g., the *Bhagavad Gītā*, the *Upaniṣads*, the *Bhāgavata Purāna*, as well as Western poetry. For example, he uses quotes from Tennyson (“Thou seemest human and divine”)<sup>112</sup> and Pope (“Oh! Grave, where is thy victory?”)<sup>113</sup> to emphasize the saint’s enigmatic personality and the promise to be active beyond the tomb, respectively. As with the reference to the Indologist Max Müller, peppering *Life of Sai Baba* with English poetry reveals something about the class and level of education of the *Life of Sai Baba*’s intended audience – people (like the hagiographer), who went to post-secondary English-medium schools and colleges in late colonial and early postcolonial India. Narasimhaswami’s incorporation of English poetry is similar to the technique in the recording industry of bringing the works of other well-known artists into remixed tracks in supporting roles. Quoting from Tennyson, Pope, William Wordsworth,<sup>114</sup> Thomas Gray,<sup>115</sup> and Coventry Patmore<sup>116</sup> expands Sai Baba’s relevance beyond the history of religion in Maharashtra and its tradition of poet-saints and puts the illiterate, charismatic saint from Shirdi on the same level as the West’s most elite literary figures.

It is not only excerpts from English poetry that get woven into the texture of *Life of Sai Baba*. Narasimhaswami also demonstrates the breadth of his knowledge of Hindu

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<sup>112</sup> Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba*, 723.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 215.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 19. The gist of Sai Baba’s instruction to the shopkeepers who denied him oil is that it is wrong to find joy in others’ suffering, per Wordsworth: “[We should] never blend our pleasure or our pride, with sorrow of the meanest thing that feels.”

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 199. In describing the quiescent atmosphere of Shirdi, Narasimhaswami quotes Thomas Gray: “Along the cool sequestered vale of life / They kept the noiseless tenor of their way.”

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 214. To bring a flourish of comparison to his words on the nature of “fleeting sakshatkara [direct, unmediated encounter with the divine],” Narasimhaswami includes a longer passage from *The Angel in the House* (Book 1, Canto 7) of Coventry Patmore, an English poet known for his use of mystical imagery.

religious literature by finding vocabulary and passages that remind him of something that Sai Baba either said or did. The following passage in the preface of *Life of Sai Baba* links the type of knowledge that Sai Baba possessed as a modern guru to the precedent set much earlier in the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad*, which Patrick Olivelle dates to the last few centuries BCE:

In the Mundaka Upanishad, II (10), we find the root of what has been expanded later in the Bhagavata [Purana]. That Upanishad says that a Self Realiser (Atmajnani) or person of God realisation can achieve anything and be in any world that he thinks of. *Yam yam lokam manasa samvibhati. Viscuddha satwah kamayate yamscha Kaman. Tamtam lokam jayate, taamscha Kaman, tasmāt atmajnanam hyarchayet bhutikamah.* The Upanishad adds: ‘Therefore, those who are anxious about their own welfare must resort to such an Atmajnani.’ That was evidently the feeling of Mhalsapathy though perhaps he might never have heard of the Mundaka Upanishad. Baba’s ‘Maim Allah hum’ or ‘I am Laxmi Narain’ (B.C.S. 58) is Atmajnana.”<sup>117</sup>

From this passage, the reader learns that Sai Baba was a God-realized soul of the same type described in the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad*. Here, to support his claim, Narasimhaswami provides a transliteration of a portion of the Sanskrit text, as well as another passage in English translation, which he compares with two quotes attributed to Shirdi Sai Baba. These quotes, which originate in Narasimhaswami’s *Charters and Sayings* text, further reinforce the saint’s compositeness, as one evidences the Arabic term for God and the other is the saint’s self-identification as a Hindu deity. In bringing these quotes from *Charters and Sayings* and inserting them into *Life of Sai Baba*, Narasimhaswami has repurposed them for the argument that the saint’s self-knowledge (*ātmajñāna*) derives from his bi-religious upbringing.

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid., xiv-xv.



Elsewhere in *Life of Sai Baba*, Narasimhaswami references two other cornerstones of classical Sanskrit literature: the *Bhagavad Gītā* and the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. The idea that Sai Baba appears to people as they expect to see him – a concept I have described in this dissertation as the saint’s semiotic flexibility – relates to Krishna’s statement in *Gītā* 4:11: “I devote myself to those who resort to me; in just the same way, people follow my path in all places.”<sup>118</sup> When giving a biographical sketch of the Marathi hagiographer Das Ganu, Narasimhaswami uses another *Gītā* verse to suggest the comparison of relationships between Sai Baba-Das Ganu and Krishna-Arjuna:

When Ganpat Rao came and said, ‘I have now left my service; I and my wife have to stand in the streets, as we have no property or income.’ Baba said, ‘Ganu, I shall provide for you and your family.’ (Compare Krishna’s promise “*Yoga kshemam vahami aham*” BG IX 22).<sup>119</sup>

Relatedly, Narasimhaswami cross-references the compassionate temperament of Sai Baba with the wandering monk in the *Bhikṣu Gītā*, a portion of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*.<sup>120</sup> Other references to the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* highlight the precedents for the saint’s practices and ethics, such as contemplating solely on God to the exclusion of food and sleep<sup>121</sup> and giving away everything obtained through begging in a spirit of generosity.<sup>122</sup>

By contrast, there are only a few scant connections in Narasimhaswami’s text between Sai Baba and the poet-saints who hail from his cultural and regional background in Maharashtra. This marks another point of departure between Narasimhaswami’s *Life of*

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<sup>118</sup> *The Bhagavad Gīta*, trans. Patton, 52.

<sup>119</sup> Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba*, 311.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>121</sup> On page 28 of *Life of Sai Baba*, Narasimhaswami cites *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 11.7.39: “*praana vrittyaiva santushyet munir naivendriya priyaih jnaanam yatha na naschyeta naavakiryeta vaangmanah* (transliteration as in original).”

<sup>122</sup> On page 36 of *Life of Sai Baba*, Narasimhaswami cites *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 11.8.2: “*saayantam swastanam van a sangrunheeta bhikshitam paani paatro udharaamatro makshika iva na sangrahee* (transliteration as in original).”

*Sai Baba* and earlier hagiographic works in poetic Marathi. In the *Satcarita*, Dabholkar emphasizes the connection between saints and the places that they call home – Eknath in Paithan, Tukaram in Dehu, Narasimha Saraswati in Alandi, Ramdas in Parali, Swami Samartha in Akkalkot, Manik Prabhu in Humnabad, and, of course, Sai Baba in Shirdi.<sup>123</sup> All of these saints and their locations are in the Maharashtrian region. Similarly, in the *Stavanamañjarī*, Das Ganu identifies Sai Baba as not different from saints who have large and longstanding followings in Maharashtra: “You [Sai Baba] are Macchinder Nath, you are Jalandhar Nath, you are Nivriddhi Nath and Jnaneshwar, and Kabir, Sheikh Muhammad, and Eknath are [the same as] you! You are Mankoji Bodhale and Savata Mali, you are Ramdas, you are Tukaram, and you are Sakharam Maharaj and Manik Prabhu!”<sup>124</sup>

In lieu of sacred figures known in Maharashtra, Narasimhaswami prolifically uses ancient Sanskrit works to do, I suggest, two things. First, this brings the life of Sai Baba into the tradition of Hindu religious literature in Sanskrit, a reservoir of works that are both older and more recognizable to the pan-Indian, English-reading audience of *Life of Sai Baba* than, for example, Jnaneshwar’s *Jñāneśvarī*. Second, it dislocates Sai Baba from being specifically rooted in Shirdi (as Dabholkar emphasizes in the *Satcarita*) and as part of a regional lineage of saints (as Das Ganu constructs in the *Stavanamañjarī*). This enables Sai Baba to be resituated in the context of the newly-independent nation and remade as a syncretic figure.

Furthermore, Narasimhaswami’s references to Sanskrit literature in his narrative of Sai Baba’s life effectively traffics the saint closer to Brahminical Hinduism. These

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<sup>123</sup> Dabholkar, *ŚSSC*, 43:70-71.

<sup>124</sup> Das Ganu, *ŚSSM*, 60-61.

references can impact the interpretation of Sai Baba's earliest years. For example, take the reference – obvious for Hindu readers – to *R̥g Veda* 1.164.46 on page 53 of *Life of Sai Baba*. Narasimhaswami weaves this Sanskrit work into the flow of his Brahmin-to-Muslim-to-Brahmin narrative for Sai Baba without naming the work explicitly:

Baba naturally developed the feeling that the one God (or Allah) that he knew in his earliest years under the fakir was the same as Venkatesa whom his Guru at Selu worshipped, and that other gods or god-forms that were incidentally brought to Selu or were visited by his master were all forms of the same God, i.e., the “Ekam Sat, Vipra bahuda vadanti,” which means, “The Real is one. The wise call it variously.”<sup>125</sup>

Although Narasimhaswami gives Sai Baba an explicitly composite religious identity, one cannot overlook the rhetorical effect of referencing many Hindu texts and no Islamic texts. The quote from the *R̥g Veda* glosses over the transition from one spiritual master to another, perhaps suggesting that the hagiographer does not intend to dwell on the saint's contact with his unnamed, enigmatic Muslim teacher. To theologize in a Hindu fashion what Sai Baba learned from a Sufi fakir, Narasimhaswami punctuates this part of his narrative with the Sanskrit of *Bhagavad Gītā* 7:19: “The impress of that fakir on Baba is to further purify, and deify the pre-existing elements which may be supposed to be inherent in him, as a result of age-long growth (*Bahunam Janmanam ante, Jnanavan mam Prapadyate*).”<sup>126</sup> For Narasimhaswami, Sai Baba's relationship with the fakir is narratively necessary for the argument that he was “both Hindu and Muslim” because it transformed – or “deified,” to keep with Narasimhaswami's language – the saint into an authentically Hindu and an authentically Muslim holy man. Having Muslim

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<sup>125</sup> Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba*, 53.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, xxviii. This is part of the preface to the text's second volume. Laurie Patton translates this part of *Gītā* 7:19 thus – “At the end of many births // The one with wisdom takes refuge in me.” See *The Bhagavad Gita*, trans. Patton, 89.

foster parents both balances Sai Baba's Brahmin mother and father, and also keeps Sai Baba's biological parentage "Hindu/Brahmin" at the same time.

*Life of Sai Baba's* language, style, and structure reflect the voice of a well-educated, politically conscious lawyer-turned-renouncer. Narasimhaswami's Madras Christian College education, meteoric rise in the legal profession, and association with anticolonial activists like Annie Besant shine through in his hopeful approach to Sai Baba as the harbinger of a bright future for India and its Hindus and Muslims. In this regard, I suggest that we view *Life of Sai Baba* as part of Narasimhaswami's marketing strategy to rebrand Sai Baba as a figure of Hindu-Muslim compositeness. The language of marketing and rebranding is not meant to reduce the text to a type of self-serving, capitalistic motivation (which has been suggested in other scholarship).<sup>127</sup> Rather, this interpretation derives from Narasimhaswami's understanding of *Life of Sai Baba* as a component of *Sāī pracār*, an explicitly propagandistic campaign. Narasimhaswami holds that "Sai prachar and propaganda are exactly the same."<sup>128</sup> To make this point, he differentiates propaganda into its politically-motivated form, which is false and hurtful, and its present form in his text: "But the original sense of [propaganda] ought to be restored and everyone must feel that he has a duty to propagate and publish all useful and inspiring facts such as those that have been already set forth about Baba herein and may be set out in the later portion of this book."<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Kevin Shepherd has argued that Narasimhaswami used Sai Baba to increase his own fame and make himself into a guru. Given that Narasimhaswami had been rejected as a devotee/disciple by Meher Baba, he built his literary career around Sai Baba, Shepherd suggests, as a way to "offset his former error." See Shepherd, *Gurus Rediscovered*, 3-4. Marianne Warren is similarly critical of Narasimhaswami for erasing Sai Baba's identity as a Muslim saint.

<sup>128</sup> Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba*, 652.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 152-153.

Another way to look at Narasimhaswami is as an entrepreneurial figure, one of a great many in the market of spiritual wares in postcolonial India and a forerunner of what Meera Nanda refers to as modern India's "god market."<sup>130</sup> Some scholars, like Nanda, have tended to view this market as something that has emerged only as recently as the liberalization of the Indian economy in the early 1990s. But what were the gurus of the *Upaniṣads* offering individuals disinterested in worldly life in ancient India other than an esoteric (re)interpretation of Vedic ritualism, one that eschewed ritual observance in favor of novel spiritual technologies for acquiring self-knowledge and liberating the soul from *saṃsāra*? I suggest that Narasimhaswami, like Yajñavalkya and other sages, aims to alert people to the existence of a new and powerful form of divinity. His *Life of Sai Baba* is the means to spread the word.

Narasimhaswami's *Life of Sai Baba*, or what I call the "Sai Baba remix," rebrands the saint into a spokesperson for national integration. Whereas the non-conformist saint who is "neither/nor" points out the flawed logic of social categorization, it is the integration-oriented saint – the saint who is "both/and" – that can be the salve for the wounds caused when categories collide. Taking on this role results in Shirdi Sai Baba becoming enmeshed in the categories of religion and caste that he purportedly transcended when he was alive.

## **Sathya Sai Baba and the Revelations about Shirdi Sai Baba's Origin**

### **a. The Reincarnation and the Triple Sai Incarnation**

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<sup>130</sup> See Meera Nanda, *The God Market: How Globalization Is Making India More Hindu* (Delhi: Random House Publishers India, 2009).

According to Dabholkar's *Satcarita*, Shirdi Sai Baba prophesied that he would return again after his death: "I will manifest again, as an eight-year-old child, among my devotees."<sup>131</sup> The Sathya Sai Baba hagiographic tradition privileges a certain devotional testimony about Shirdi Sai Baba in which Shirdi Sai once told a close devotee (Abdul) that he would return "in the name of Sathya, [so named] for upholding Truth."<sup>132</sup> For many people, this reincarnation came to be known and worshipped as Sathya Sai Baba. Many devotees of Shirdi Sai Baba, however, do not accept Sathya Sai Baba as the second coming of their saint. For the present study, Sathya Sai Baba is an important figure in the history of the Shirdi Sai Baba hagiographic tradition because the self-purported reincarnation extends his predecessor's life story, including the circumstances surrounding his birth, into mythological time.

On November 23, 1926, Sathanarayana Raju was born in Puttaparthi, a small village in what is today the state of Andhra Pradesh, southern India.<sup>133</sup> His parents, Peddavenkama Raju Ratnakaram and Meesaraganda Easwaramma, belonged to a poor, agricultural caste, and hagiographic accounts note that his family were known for their piety, religious patronage, and penchant for dramatic arts. These accounts also report that musical instruments miraculously sounded when the baby was born and that a cobra once crawled underneath the baby's blankets without biting him. In youth, the boy was a natural leader and showed compassion with animals and people of lower status; he never

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<sup>131</sup> Dabholkar, *SSSC*, 43:139 *āṭhā varṣācā bāḷ janīm / prakāṣ hoīm mī māgutenī / aiseim mahārāj bhaktāñlāgunī / āhetī sāngunī rāhilo*.

<sup>132</sup> Sathya Sai Baba, "Revelations about the *Sai Avatar*," in *Sathya Sai Speaks* Vol. 23 (Puttaparthi: Sri Sathya Sai Books and Publications Trust, 1990). This text is available online: <http://www.ssbpt.info/ssspeaks/volume23/sss23-28.pdf>, accessed December 28, 2015.

<sup>133</sup> For this section's summary of Sathanarayana Raju and his transformation into Sathya Sai Baba, I draw from the works of Smriti Srinivas (2008) and Tulasi Srinivas (2010), who, in turn, draw from hagiographic sources like the multiple volumes of N. Kasturi's *Sathyam Shivam Sundaram* (1962, 1968, 1972, 1980), the official biography of Sathya Sai.

got angry or tired when playing; and he could pull candies and toys out of an empty bag for his friends, an early form of the miracles of manifestation that he would perform prolifically the rest of his life.

One day when he was thirteen, Sathyanarayana shrieked, clutched his foot, and collapsed on the ground. His family feared that he had been stung by a scorpion or had fallen into an episode of hysteria. Over the next few days, he drifted between periods of depression and elation, between unconsciousness and trance-like states in which he chanted passages from Sanskrit texts, of which he had no prior knowledge. His mother and father took their son to exorcists, thinking that he was possessed by a ghost or spirit, but nothing changed in the boy's condition. Suddenly, in May 1940, two months after the ordeal began, Sathyanarayana gathered people around him and began manifesting candy and fruit in front of the stupefied crowd. His father angrily confronted the boy and demanded to know, "Who are you?" The boy calmly replied: "I am Sai Baba. I belong to Apastamba Sutra, the school of sage Apastam and am of the spiritual lineage of Bharadwaja; I am Sai Baba, I have come to ward off all your troubles and keep your houses clean and pure."<sup>134</sup> With this statement, Sathyanarayana – or Sathya Sai Baba, as he later came to be known – declared himself to be the reincarnation of the mendicant of Shirdi who had died eight years before his birth. It is also significant that his declaration included a claim to Brahminhood, for Bharadwaj was a Vedic seers (*ṛṣī*) and founder of an eponymous lineage of Brahmins. Despite his non-Brahmin biological birth in the Raju caste, Sathya Sai Baba spiritually Brahminized himself, a move that predates the

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<sup>134</sup> S. Srinivas, *In the Presence of Sai Baba*, 53. For the original quote, see Narayan Kasturi, *Sathyam Shivam Sundaram: The Life of Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba* (Managlore: Sanathana Sarathi, 1962), 39.

Brahminizing narrative of Shirdi Sai Baba in Narasimhaswami's *Life of Sai Baba* by a decade and a half.

In the 1960s, Sathya Sai Baba turned his attention to developing a universalistic, globalized message of religious love and harmony, and subsequently, he became one of the most popular – and most controversial<sup>135</sup> – miracle-working spiritual teachers of Indian origin in recent history. While it is notoriously difficult to quantify in numbers the popularity of a religious figure or movement for various reasons, Tulsi Srinivas has noted that one million people celebrated Sathya Sai's seventieth birthday in Puttaparthi in 1995 and that two million people from 175 countries attended his eightieth birthday in 2005.<sup>136</sup> The trademark characteristic of his divinity was the materialization of objects of various sorts: locket, watches, pendants, and other small objects, usually bearing his name or likeness.<sup>137</sup> According to a well-known testimony in devotional literature, Dr. S. Bhagavantham, a director of the All India Institute of Sciences, claims that he witnessed Sathya Sai Baba produce a copy of the *Bhagavad Gītā* from a handful of sand.<sup>138</sup> Like his predecessor in Shirdi, the godman of Puttaparthi also used sacred ash, or *vibhūti*, to cure

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<sup>135</sup> It suffices to say that before his death in 2011 at age 84, Sathya Sai Baba's popularity in India and around the world was also mired in several controversies, some involving allegations of murder and sexual abuse, as well as corruption and fiscal mismanagement. See Chapter 5 of Tulasi Srinivas, *Winged Faith: Rethinking Globalization and Religious Pluralism through the Sathya Sai Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010). Furthermore, organizations committed to promoting scientific rationalism in India like the Committee to Eradicate Superstition, which is active throughout villages in Maharashtra, routinely stage demonstrations to expose the secrets of the "magic tricks" behind Sathya Sai Baba's miracles, especially those involving the miraculous manifestation of objects like locket and watches. See Johannes Quack, *Disenchanting India: Organized Rationalism and Criticism of Religion in India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 96 and 120.

<sup>136</sup> T. Srinivas, *Winged Faith*, 348 n. 9.

<sup>137</sup> For academic studies of Sathya Sai Baba's miraculous powers and what they mean for devotees, see D.A. Swallow, "Myth, Rite, and Miracle in an Indian God-Man's Cult," *Modern Asian Studies* 16, no. 1 (1982): 123-158; Lawrence A. Babb, *Redemptive Encounters: Three Modern Styles in the Hindu Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986); and Lawrence A. Babb, "Sathya Sai Baba's Magic," *Anthropological Quarterly* 56, no. 3 (July 1983): 116-124.

<sup>138</sup> Babb, "Sathya Sai Baba's Magic," 118. For the original source of this devotional testimony, see S. Bhagavantham, "Lord of Miracles," in *Sai Baba and His Message: A Challenge to Behavioural Sciences*, eds. S.P. Ruhela and D. Robinson (Delhi: Vikas, 1976), 233.



diseases and bless devotees. This ash not only spontaneously flowed from Sathya Sai's hands during public audiences but also effused from pictures of him. Also like Shirdi Sai, Sathya Sai's blessings are believed to have resurrected the deceased. In the early 1970s, an American devotee had a heart attack in Puttaparthi, and while medical doctors pronounced him dead, Sathya Sai Baba brought him back to life.<sup>139</sup>

Sathya Sai had told his devotees that he would "leave this body" at the age of 92, but he died – or rather, entered full and final *samādhī*, as devotees would say – in 2011 when he was 84. Earlier, devotees had feared for the health of their guru when Sathya Sai had a stroke on July 6, 1963 (i.e., Gurupurnima, the day of special reverence for one's teachers). According to tradition, he displayed his divine power by curing himself of the stroke's effects, including the paralysis of his left side. This event also prompted him to make another claim about his divinity and its future, generating the idea of three Sai Babas incarnating in successive fashion:

Siva said that They [Shiva and Shakti] would take Human Form and be born in the Bharadwaja lineage or Gothra thrice: Shiva alone as Shirdi Sai Baba, Siva and Sakthi together at Puttaparthi as Sathya Sai Baba and Sakthi alone as Prema Sai, later.<sup>140</sup>

Why would the tripartite Sai Baba incarnation be rooted in Shaiva mythology? D.A. Swallow argues that Sathya Sai Baba, whose birth caste was more Vaishnava than Shaiva in religious orientation, chose to identify himself and the triple Sai incarnation with Shiva and Shakti because it enabled the exploration of conflicting polarities: asceticism and

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<sup>139</sup> Swallow, "Myth, Rite, and Miracle," 130. According to Swallow, this story first appeared in the *Sanāthana Sarāthi* (the monthly publication of the Sathya Sai Seva Organization in Puttaparthi) in early 1973.

<sup>140</sup> S. Srinivas, *In the Presence of Sai Baba*, 61.

eroticism, creation and destruction, activity and passivity.<sup>141</sup> In other words, Swallow sees Sathya Sai Baba as using the liminality imbued in Shaiva mythology to become a “cultural broker between traditional answers and contemporary problems.”<sup>142</sup> As Swallow and many others have observed, Sathya Sai Baba has a strong following in India in urban, cosmopolitan settings, where the lives of many devotees are fully involved with the challenges of modernity.<sup>143</sup> They have jobs that make it difficult to observe traditional rituals and customs, and they have families with children whose cultural freedom challenges traditional social structures (e.g., wearing Western clothes, going unsupervised on dates). As a remedy for these and all other sorts of hardships (or “tensions”), Sathya Sai Baba presented himself as a resource for navigating modernity, with teachings for devotees in very simple language: “love all, serve all,” and hold onto the principles of *dharma*, a term which, in this context, assumes a more general sense of righteousness and moral behavior. Additionally, Swallow notes that Sathya Sai Baba reinforced his stature as a resource for those feeling the pressures of modern life by relying on the Occidentalist dichotomy of the “materialistic West” and the “spiritual East,” and pointing to his many Western devotees to illustrate the superiority of Eastern spirituality and its ability to awaken the West from its decadence.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> For a study of the importance of Mahashivaratri in Sathya Sai Baba’s ritual repertoire, see Swallow, “Myth, Rite, and Miracle,” 146-152. During this festival, Sathya Sai manifests a lingam in his mouth, which becomes the focus of ritual worship during the night of Mahashivaratri. Swallow suggests that the celebration of this central Shaiva festival taps into the spirit of Shaiva mythology and its playfulness with categories. For example, on Mahashivaratri, Sathya Sai produces massive amounts of sacred ash (*vibhūti*), a substance that symbolizes the inevitability of death but also conveys the power to bless with fertility and cure diseases. Moreover, the enjoyment or use of one’s powers (*siddhis*) in South Asian religious traditions is fraught with danger, either a weakening of one’s being or becoming sidetracked on the way to deeper wisdom. Sathya Sai, however, instead prolifically uses his powers to manifest sacred ash and other objects as a means to attract devotees.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 154.

<sup>143</sup> In addition to Swallow’s “Myth, Rite, and Miracle” (1982), see S. Srinivas’s *In the Presence of Sai Baba* (2008), as well as Babb’s *Redemptive Encounters* (1986).

<sup>144</sup> Swallow, “Myth, Rite, and Miracle,” 134.

Sathya Sai's 1963 declaration laid the groundwork for some interesting developments in the mythologization of Shirdi Sai's role in the tripartite Sai incarnation. For example, Narasimhaswami tells us in *Life of Sai Baba* that Shirdi Sai was born to Brahmin parents, but he does not give the family's lineage, or *gotra*. Sathya Sai supplies this information, viz. the lineage of the Vedic sage Bharadwaja. Other works in the Shirdi Sai Baba hagiographic tradition connect the saint to a variety of other religious figures like the Hindu god Dattatreya<sup>145</sup> and Kabir.<sup>146</sup> But the idea that Shirdi Sai was an incarnation of the Hindu god Shiva and also a member of a tripartite scheme of incarnation is totally original to Sathya Sai Baba. As we will see, the self-professed reincarnation Sathya Sai provides much more narrative density to Shirdi Sai's origin story, thereby connecting two threads: the Brahminhood of the Sai incarnation and its connection to Shaiva mythology.

#### **b. Sathya Sai Baba's Revelations**

In 1974, Sathya Sai Baba added many details to Shirdi Sai Baba's origin story in a revelation recorded by Dr. V.K. Gokak and published in the foreword of TS Anantha Murthy's *Life and Teachings of Sai Baba* (1974).<sup>147</sup> Three subsequent discourses followed in September 1990, and in September and October 1992, which were published in the corresponding monthly issues of the *Sanāthana Sarāthi* magazine. Recall that Narasimhaswami wove multiple hagiographic sources together to create the narrative about Sai Baba's Brahmin birth, time spent under the care of a Muslim fakir, and

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<sup>145</sup> A.Y. Dhond strongly argues that Sai Baba is an *avatār* of Dattatreya based, in part, on the similarities between Sai Baba and contemporaneous nineteenth-century Maharashtrian saints also believed to be *datta-avatārs* like Gajanan Maharaj, Manik Prabhu, and Swami Samarth. See A.Y. Dhond, *Sāi Bābā: Avatār va kārya*, 9<sup>th</sup> ed. (Shirdi: Shirdi Sai Baba Sansthan and Trust, 1986 [1955]), 53-63.

<sup>146</sup> Narasimhaswami, *Charters and Sayings*, 207. According to this text, Sai Baba once said: "I was Kabir and used to spin yarn."

<sup>147</sup> S.P. Ruhela, *What Researchers Say on Sri Shirdi Sai Baba* (New Delhi: M.D. Publications, 1994), 54.

initiation from a Brahmin guru named Venkusha. This narrative produces some new questions. Why did the young Sai's Brahmin parents give their newborn son to a Muslim couple? What exactly led to the Muslim widow's decision to give the boy to Venkusha? Sathya Sai fills in these narrative gaps in his revelation and links the story's details to his previous declaration regarding the triple Sai incarnation.

Because the new narrative supplied by Sathya Sai Baba is long and the details abundant, I will present a synopsis of events provided in the revelations that took place between 1974 and 1992. This synopsis highlights the most significant innovations to the story regarding the Shirdi Sai Baba's pre-Shirdi years. According to Sathya Sai Baba:

Shirdi Sai Baba's parents were a poor Brahmin couple named Ganga Bhavadia and Devagiriamma. They lived in the village of Pathari in the Parbhani area of Marathwada in the far east of Maharashtra. Ganga Bhavadia, who worked as a boatman ferrying people across a nearby river, was a devout worshipper of Shiva. His wife worshipped Shiva's consort Parvati. They were a pious couple but unfortunately childless.

At home one night, Ganga Bhavadia saw storm clouds gathering in the distance. He ran to the river to secure his boats to their ties. While he was gone, an old man came to the house where Devagiriamma was alone. He knocked on the door, and asked for food and shelter from the storm, which Devagiriamma provided. The old man then asked for a leg massage. Devagiriamma was startled by the frankness of the request but nonetheless she visited the houses of local courtesans who could provide this service. Unable to find such a woman, Devagiriamma returned home, crying and praying to Parvati for help so as to not disappoint her guest.

Just then, she heard another knock on the door. She opened the door, and to her surprise, she saw a woman offering to give the old man the massage he asked for. She brought the woman to the old man on the verandah of the house, went back inside, and locked the door behind her. She heard yet another knock. She opened the door, and to her complete astonishment, she saw the divine couple Shiva and Parvati standing in front of her. Parvati said, "Let us bless her." Parvati blessed her with two children, while Shiva offered another reward by announcing that he would take birth as her third child. The divine couple then disappeared.

When the storm cleared, Ganga Bhavadia returned home. Devagiramma told her husband all that happened, but he did not believe her. Nonetheless, the formerly childless couple had two children – and then Devagiramma became pregnant with their third child. Around this time, Ganga Bhavadia grew disinterested in worldly affairs and resolved to leave his home and family behind. Devagiramma tried to persuade him to stay, saying that he would get to see God face-to-face when their son is born. However, Ganga Bhavadia wanted a direct experience of God. He left home, and Devagiramma felt she had no recourse but to follow her husband into the forest. She fell behind when she started to feel the pangs of labor. There, in the forest, she had her child – the future Shirdi Sai – and covered him with banyan leaves, before running to catch up to Ganga Bhavadia.

Just as Devagiramma left, a Muslim fakir and his wife – the Patils – were returning to their village. Their carriage stopped for Mrs. Patil to alight and go into the forest to use the bathroom. She discovered the abandoned child under the banyan leaves, and called out to her husband. The two of them looked around for the child's parents. Seeing nobody around, the Patils, who were also childless, decided to take the boy home. They named the boy Babu.

A short time later, Mr. Patil died and Mrs. Patil had to take care of the foster boy Babu by herself. The young boy proved to be a challenge because his actions greatly concerned her. Among other things, the boy installed a stone *liṅgam* in a mosque, upsetting the Muslims in the village. He also recited the *Qur'ān* in Hindu temples, angering the village's Hindus. At another time, Babu was playing marbles with a friend who was the son of a moneylender [*sāhukār*]. This friend had lost all of his marbles to Babu, and he went home to search for something else to wager. In his mother's *pūjā* room, he found a sacred black *śāliḡrām* stone. He staked it in another round with Babu, and Babu won the *śāliḡrām*, too. The friend accused Babu of cheating and demanded it back, but Babu refused by putting it in his mouth. When the friend's mother found out what happened, she confronted Babu. But Babu refused to give it back. She forced him to open his mouth so she could retrieve the stone, but in place of the *śāliḡrām* she saw the same form of the universe [*viśvarūp*] that Yashoda saw in the mouth of Lord Krishna. Babu closed his mouth and told the woman that she would find the *śāliḡrām* stone safe in her *pūjā* room, where it had miraculously returned back to its proper place. From that day onward, Babu's friend's mother came to worship Babu every day by touching his feet – until people from the village harassed her and made her stop worshipping him. So, she started worshipping Babu in her mind.

All of these events greatly concerned Mrs. Patil. She knew about a hermitage where there lived a guru named Venkusha, a saint who took

orphans into his care. So, she decided to make the trip to Selu and put Babu in Venkusha's care. In Selu, Venkusha had a dream the night before he was to meet Babu. In that dream, Shiva told him that He [Shiva] would visit him tomorrow morning. When Mrs. Patil brought Babu to the hermitage the next morning, Venkusha immediately knew that the boy was Shiva who had come to him as promised. Seeing that Venkusha was happy to accept her foster son, Mrs. Patil returned to her village.<sup>148</sup>

At this point, Sathya Sai's account regarding the adolescent Shirdi Sai's time with his guru Venkusha merges with the account given by Das Ganu in the *Bhaktisārāmṛt* seventy years earlier: the accidental collision between the Venkusha's head and a brick intended to injure the young Shirdi Sai Baba, the guru giving to his disciple the brick now stained with the guru's blood, and the Sai Baba travelling west toward Shirdi. There is one significant difference between Sathya Sai's and Das Ganu's versions of the story.

According to Das Ganu, Venkusha's dream informs him that the boy coming to the hermitage is the reincarnation of Kabir because the talking tomb of Suwag Shah told him that he (Venkusha) was the reincarnation of Ramanand, Kabir's guru. In contrast, Sathya Sai substitutes "Shiva" for "Ramanand," thereby adding new narrative content to Shirdi Sai's relationship with his guru Venkusha in a way that buttresses the 1963 declaration of the Shaiva-inflected idea of the triple Sai incarnation.

Aside from this subtle yet significant change, one indubitably notices the narrative density added to Sai Baba's pre-Shirdi years in these revelatory discourses from Sathya Sai. The appearance of Shiva and Parvati at the door of Sai Baba's Brahmin mother situates the future birth of Shirdi Sai Baba as a full and complete incarnation of Shiva, a result of the boon promised by the deity to Devagiriamma for her piety. In addition, Sathya Sai inserts an interesting Krishna-inspired story of Sai Baba, the *śāligrām* (an

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<sup>148</sup> For more detailed coverage of Sathya Sai Baba's revelations, see Ruhela, *What Researchers Say*, 51ff; Rigopolous, *The Life and Teachings*, 21-24.

iconic image of the god Vishnu), and the vision of the universe in the boy's mouth. This shows Sathya Sai Baba's capacity as an innovative and integrative mythologist. He brings an existing story into a new context and repurposes it to evidence how the young Shirdi Sai, the incarnation of Shiva, enacts one of the most memorable events in Krishna's childhood.

### **Other Contemporary Approaches to Shirdi Sai Baba's Origin**

How far into the Shirdi Sai Baba hagiographic tradition do these retellings of Sai Baba's origin reach? The scope of modern-day hagiographic and other devotional works is immense and includes numerous books, TV shows, and films, both animated and live-action. With a booming industry of authors and filmmakers, it should not be surprising that there are variations in how these sources deal with the subject of Sai Baba's birth. One strategy is simply to circumvent the issue by not addressing it, which is what happens, for example, in the Shirdi Sai Baba issue in the *Amar Chitra Katha* series of comic books. On the inside of the cover page, one finds the following preface:

Nobody knows for certain when Sai Baba was born or who his parents were, or what his real name was. He arrived one day in 1872 at Shirdi in Maharashtra. He was dressed like a fakir (Muslim ascetic) and lived in a dilapidated mosque – but spoke of a Hindu guru, whom he called *Venkusa*. He seemed to be well acquainted with the Hindu scriptures, but at the same time was heard to quote from the Quran.

The word *Sai* is a Perisan word meaning *saint*, and *Baba* is a Hindi word meaning *father*. As his name would indicate, Sai Baba had both Muslim and Hindu disciples. He did not approve of conversions and believed that everyone had a right to follow his own path to God. Everything that is known about his beliefs, however, is deduced from his actions. He was not given to theorising.

Sai Baba died in 1918. Even during his lifetime he had become famous, and now, after his death, Shirdi (where he had lived for almost half a

century) has become a place of pilgrimage where hundreds of devotees congregate every year.

The tales in this *Amar Chitra Katha* are based on reports from Sai Baba's devotees.<sup>149</sup>

Here, the opening line, which the mystery of the saint's origin, accords with the precedent set by the first-generation of Sai Baba hagiographers, Dabholkar and Das Ganu. Even though the *Amar Chitra Katha* team does not mention Sai Baba being born, we are still told that the saint's enduring legacy is his promotion of Hindu-Muslim unity, which is tied to the compositeness evidenced in his syncretic personality (e.g., dressing like a Muslim and having a Hindu guru, knowing both Hindu and Islamic scripture, having Hindu and Muslim disciples). In her study of the history and ideology underpinning the *Amar Chitra Katha* comic book series, Karline McLain finds that one of the factors motivating its editor Anant Pai is national integration.<sup>150</sup> Pai had the idea that short, colorful, exciting (re)tellings of the stories of historical and mythological figures would be a useful tool for finding unity amidst India's diverse religions, languages, and regional traditions. That the comic books are based on authentically "Indian" source material – from the *Mahābhārata* to the life of Mughal emperor Akbar to the massacre at Jallianwala Bagh in 1919, a pivotal moment that brought Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs together against the British – legitimizes their ability to promote distinctly "Indian values" such as tolerance, multiculturalism, and interreligious comity. To do so, Pai and the staff of *Amar Chitra Katha* aim to reach as large an audience as possible, cutting across the divide separating Brahmin and non-Brahmin readerships. Accordingly, some

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<sup>149</sup> See the inside of the cover page of *Tales of Sai Baba*, ed. Anant Pai (Mumbai: India Book House, 1980).

<sup>150</sup> Karline McLain, *India's Immortal Comic Books: Gods, Kings, and Other Heroes* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 5-6.



issues reflect editorial decisions pertaining to difficult or controversial topics, like the Marathi chieftain Shivaji's relationship with the seventeenth-century saint Ramdas.<sup>151</sup> In the Shirdi Sai Baba issue, the preface stresses, per Narasimhaswami, that the saint symbolizes Hindu-Muslim unity, but it also refrains from any engagement with the saint's birth and Brahminhood, which, for Narasimhaswami, is an essential part of the story.

Another approach to the issue of Sai Baba's birth is to follow the lead of Sathya Sai Baba who – as we have seen – answers many of the questions surrounding the saint's earliest years. The book *Sai Baba: The Divine Fakir* (2009), a publication of the children's division of Om Books International, is clearly inspired by Sathya Sai Baba's interpretation of Shirdi Sai Baba. Just as Narasimhaswami acknowledges in *Life of Sai Baba* that the saint's parentage is “wrapped in mystery” but then proceeds to unwrap the mystery, so too does *The Divine Fakir* state that there is “no clear indication on Baba's birth” while also declaring that the book “is an attempt to put together stories from the Sai Sacharita, Sai Leela, and other such resources.”<sup>152</sup> Below this sentence is a picture of Sai Baba in a crib surrounded by his parents, a “brahmin couple called Gangabhavadiya and Vedagiri Amma [from] Pathri village.”<sup>153</sup> The rest of the book follows closely with the revelations given by Sathya Sai about his predecessor's origin story: the arrival of Shiva in the guise of an old man at the Brahmin couple's house and the god's promise to take birth as the wife's third child, the Muslim couple's discovery of the newborn

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<sup>151</sup> Ibid., 133-134.

<sup>152</sup> *Sai Baba: The Divine Fakir* (Delhi: Om Books International, 2009) 5.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid., 5.

abandoned in the woods, and the Muslim widow's decision to send her mischievous boy to Venkusha's hermitage.<sup>154</sup>

This issue of Sai Baba's birth in contemporary hagiographic works becomes even more complex when considering the major films on the saint. Unquestionably, the most popular and beloved film about the saint is Ashok Bhushan's *Shirdi ke Sai Baba* (1977). This Hindi film begins a tradition followed in many other Sai Baba films of using a frame story about a family in present-day India. Typically, the father is either skeptical about or hostile to religion, especially the veneration of human beings known for working miracles. In Bhushan's film, a son's illness brings an unbelieving father and his religious wife to Shirdi in a last-ditch attempt to find a cure for their son, and the father learns the saint's life story while talking with a devotee, played by film superstar Manoj Kumar. As the devotee tells the story of Sai Baba and the film flashes back to Shirdi in the late nineteenth century, there is absolutely no reference made to the saint's birth, the time that he spent with his guru, or even the guru's name. Rather, Bhushan's film begins its hagiographic portion on Shirdi Sai Baba with his encounter with Chand Patil, which leads to the discovery of Patil's missing horse and the saint's arrival in Shirdi with the Patil wedding party (See Chapter 1).

Deepak Balraj Vij's Hindi film *Shirdi Saibaba* (2001) follows a somewhat similar structure. An atheist named Arjun is traveling from the United States to India and meets several people on his journey, who tell him stories about the greatness of Sai Baba and how he helped different people (Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, etc.) in Shirdi about a century ago. After a life-transforming and faith-inspiring experience in the Samadhi Mandir,

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid., 10-14.

Arjun sits down to read the *Satcarita*, at which point the film becomes a flashback to the saint's life story. In a departure from the chronology established in the *Satcarita*, Vij's film situates the saint's first appearance in Shirdi and first contact with its villagers during a severe windstorm. As the villagers suffer the unbearable gusts of wind, they come across a young boy with long black hair, wearing a white *kurtā* and sitting serenely under a tree. The boy stands up and tells the storm, "Be still (*śānti*)!" The people who see the boy bow at his feet and run back to the village to tell everyone else, but the boy has left before they return to the tree. Next, the film shows the young boy meeting his guru – an old, grey-haired, bearded man in saffron-colored robes with a vertical *tilak* on his forehead. At no time in the film is this figure identified as Venkusha; however, this is exactly who he is supposed to be. The unnamed guru says that he is going to take the boy into his care for twelve years, and this time together includes a tour of India's religious sites, a sort of *dvigvijaya* of Hindu temples, Sufi saints' tombs, and Christian churches, all of which are shown in the montage of the journey. At the end of their tour around India's sacred sites, the boy and his guru reach Parbhani District in eastern Maharashtra. Thus, Vij's film skips over the Brahmin birth and the Muslim foster parents by beginning the story of Sai Baba's earliest years with his relationship with his guru. Vij's film also depicts the guru giving the boy several objects before they part: the cloth for his headscarf, his walking stick, and the brick that he used as a pillow. At the conclusion of this gift-giving, the guru tells Sai Baba that he must leave, as he fades away into nothing. This version of Sai Baba's life story thus includes the character of Venkusha without naming him, but it also omits the circumstances leading to his accidental death and the

initiation given from teacher to student in the form of milk from a barren cow, which are found in the earlier hagiographic works of Das Ganu and Narasimhaswami.

Finally, there is Om Sai Prakash's Kannada film *Bhagwan Sri Sai Baba* (1993), which was dubbed into Hindi and renamed *Naam Ek, Roop Anek* (One Name, Many Forms). This film draws heavily from the revelations of Sathya Sai Baba. The film opens in mythological time, with the sage Bharadwaj, the progenitor of the Brahmin lineage into which Shirdi Sai will be born. Bharadwaj has been doing austerities (*tapasya*) for centuries in order to obtain wisdom (*jñāna*), but he only succeeds in summoning the god Indra, who tells him to worship the divine couple Shiva and Parvati if he wants to be blessed with wisdom. After travelling to Shiva's Himalayan abode Kailash, Bharadwaj demands and receives a boon from Shiva – the promise to take birth in his lineage in the fourth age, the *kaliyuga*. Shiva and Parvati together vow that they will incarnate three times in Bharadwaj's lineage. Shiva will come first as Shirdi Sai Baba; next, Shiva and Parvati will appear together as Sathya Sai Baba; and then, Parvati says that she will be the third incarnation, Prema Sai. The film transitions from mythological to historical time, with the Brahmin couple Ganga and Devagiramma in Pathari. What follows is a cinematic version of Shirdi Sai Baba's origin story according to Sathya Sai Baba:

Devagiramma meets Shiva and Parvati in a rainstorm during which a beam of pink light radiates from the divine couple into the woman's womb; Devagiramma abandons her newborn in the forest to catch up with her fleeing husband; and the Muslim couple finds the baby and takes him home. Prakash's film also includes Sathya Sai's story about Shirdi Sai the *śāligrām* and revealing the universe inside in his mouth, as well as several episodes evidencing the trouble caused by the young Sai among local Hindus and

Muslims. Each side says that he is corrupting the village's children by teaching them that God is one and the same for everyone. Consequently, the boy volunteers to go away from home so his parents will not be harassed by their neighbors. Here, Vij's film adds a new detail to the story, as the thought of his beloved foster son leaving the family breaks the father's heart and he dies from grief. Notably, this film does not show the Muslim foster parents teaching Sai Baba anything related to Islam or Sufism. This absence distinguishes Prakash's film from Narasimhaswami's Brahmin-to-Muslim-to-Brahmin origin story, in which the saint is said to have received instruction from both Sufi fakir and Brahmin guru.

Prakash's film then proceeds to show the young boy with his foster mother, but they are not together for long. On a walk outside the village, the two come across a guru sitting and meditating near a water tank. As with Vij's *Shirdi Saibaba*, Prakash's *Bhagwan Sri Sai Baba* does not identify this figure by name as "Venkusha." Rather, Prakash's film has the Muslim foster mother deciding that the guru is the best custodian for the boy, thereby completing the narrative arc from Muslim foster parents to the Hindu guru, who, in this film, teaches the boy how to properly chant, "Om." This is the extent to which Prakash's film covers the relationship between Sai Baba and his guru. After a montage of nature imagery, the next scene commences with the on-screen text, "Fifteen years later..." and then the film jumps to the encounter between Sai Baba and Chand Patil, as it is told in the *Satcarita* and other works.

Interestingly, Prakash's film ends as one would expect, given its particular source of inspiration and influence. Shirdi Sai Baba's last words are these: "Every incarnation comes to an end, and at the end of every incarnation, there is the beginning of another.

After I leave this incarnation, I'll remain with you in another incarnation. Oh God (*he rām*), Oh God, God is Lord (*allā mālik*), God is Lord!" These last words, which are original to this film vis-à-vis the other hagiographic works considered in this dissertation, mimic the bricolage of Hindu and Islamic vocabularies invoked by Mahatma Gandhi, who, some assert, uttered "*Rama! Rahim!*"<sup>155</sup> before he died. More importantly, these words legitimize the second coming of the Sai incarnation, something that the majority of Shirdi Sai Baba hagiographic films and texts do not.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has covered the major works in a century's worth of the Shirdi Sai Baba hagiographic tradition: texts in Marathi religious poetry and English prose, an adaptation of an earlier work that both adds and omits certain details with surgical precision, revelatory discourses from a divine figure that shed new light on old questions about a saint's mysterious provenance, and several films and illustrated books indubitably drawing from extant hagiographic sources but also exhibiting a *mélange* of approaches to portraying their subject's life story. We have seen Shirdi Sai Baba, the saint at the center of this hagiographic activity, described in the early Marathi sources as "neither Hindu nor Muslim" and then reconfigured into a composite figure who becomes "both Hindu and Muslim" in works written after Indian independence. He has had no known birth, then a Brahmin birth, and then a Brahmin birth while also being envisioned as an incarnation of the Hindu god Shiva. If we consider Dabholkar's *Satcarita* and its "neither/nor" Sai Baba as the antithesis of the increasingly rigid and antagonized "Hindu" and "Muslim"

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<sup>155</sup> There are several answers to the question, "What were Gandhi's last words?" See Mark Lindley, "Gandhi's Inaudible Last Words," 1999, [https://www.academia.edu/303908/Gandhis\\_inaudible\\_last\\_words](https://www.academia.edu/303908/Gandhis_inaudible_last_words), accessed December 28, 2015.

categories in late colonial India, then the “both/and” reconfiguration of the saint engineered by Narasimhaswami’s *Life of Sai Baba* reflects the routinization of a figure initially remembered as being ornery and anti-categorical. Sai Baba’s hagiographical transformation into possessing a Brahmin birth thus proceeds – to borrow the terminology of A.K. Ramanujan’s writing on *bhakti* communities – from anti-structure to counter-structure, from transcending categorization to becoming enmeshed within religious and caste-based categories.<sup>156</sup> This point follows on Rebecca Manring’s work on Advaita Acharya in understanding hagiography as a genre that is fundamentally political.<sup>157</sup>

The result of this investigation has been to further highlight Sai Baba’s semiotic flexibility, one of the characteristic features of his sainthood. Consequently, one must conclude that there is no single, unchanging “historical” Shirdi Sai Baba to be found in the hagiographic tradition.<sup>158</sup> There was a figure who lived and died in Shirdi in the early twentieth century, a figure who was photographed several times and whose photographs inform much of present-day Sai Baba iconography.<sup>159</sup> This chapter has shown that the memory of this figure has been imagined, constructed, and transformed variously over the course of the hagiographic tradition such that it only makes sense to talk about

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<sup>156</sup> A.K. Ramanujan, *Speaking of Śiva* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), 34-35.

<sup>157</sup> Manring, *The Fading Light*, 4.

<sup>158</sup> Of course, Shirdi Sai Baba is not the only religious figure to undergo such reinterpretation. For instance, the work of George Bond – and more recently, Donald Lopez – has shown that the Buddha who lived and taught in India some two thousand five hundred years ago is remarkably different from the more recent invention of what he calls the “Scientific Buddha” in the Western imagination. Also, Stephen Prothero has drawn attention to the adaptability of Jesus in various American contexts, from abolitionism and liberal Protestant traditions to Eastern spirituality and the entertainment industry. See George Bond, *The Buddhist Revival in Sri Lanka: Religious Tradition, Reinterpretation, and Response* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1988); Donald S. Lopez, *The Scientific Buddha: His Short and Happy Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012); Stephen Prothero, *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2003).

<sup>159</sup> See Elison’s “Sai Baba of Bombay” (2014).

“Shirdi Sai Babas,” in the plural. There is Dabholkar’s colonial-era Sai Baba in the *Satcarita* as the “neither/nor” saint; the Sai Baba who emerges as less of a Muslim, and consequently more of a Hindu in Gunaji’s adaptation of Dabholkar’s *Satcarita*; Narasimhaswami’s Sai Baba as an “emblem of Hindu-Muslim unity;” and Sathya Sai Baba’s reinvention of Shirdi Sai Baba in the triple Sai incarnation. To this list, we can also add the “philosophizing Sai Baba” in Das Ganu’s *Santakathāmṛt* (1903), who was the focus of the previous chapter, and also the different parties arguing that Sai Baba “actually” was a Muslim saint, an argument made for different reasons by Western scholars and conservative Hindu religious leaders alike (See Chapter 4). While Sathya Sai Baba might have innovated the idea of multiple Sai incarnations appearing on earth successively between the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries, it is evident that the Shirdi Sai Baba hagiographic tradition comfortably contains within it the room for many more Shirdi Sai Babas.



## Chapter 4

### **The Politics of Compositeness: Devotees and Detractors of Shirdi Sai Baba, a “Syncretistic” Saint in Modern India**

The previous chapter examined B.V. Narasimhaswami’s hagiographic reconstruction of Shirdi Sai Baba, including the argument put forth in *Life of Sai Baba* that the saint is an “emblem of Hindu-Muslim unity” and “the foundation of India’s main religion of the future.” This idea that Shirdi Sai Baba is a saintly spokesman for integration and peacebuilding in the Indian nation has become one of the defining characteristics of Shirdi Sai Baba’s legacy in the present day. In her 2012 book *In Good Faith*, Saba Naqvi, a political editor for the magazine *Outlook*, searches for the “several syncretic traditions that [still] survive in India,” which brings her to Shirdi, among other places.<sup>1</sup> In a 2014 article on *Outlook*’s website, Chetan Krishnaswamy – the country head for Google’s public policy wing in India – describes the “gentle charms of syncretism” that have attracted “Hindus, Muslims, and people of other faiths” to the tomb in Shirdi.<sup>2</sup>

The part of Shirdi Sai Baba’s legacy that I highlight in this chapter is that of the “syncretistic” saint in modern India. In the context of religious studies, syncretism refers to the cultural process in which there is a synthesis, blending, or bricolage of different religious forms. Putting the adjective in quotation marks is to signify that this is a highly contested term, one that comes with various meanings and applications in anthropological and religious studies scholarship. While scholars continue to debate the appropriateness of the term “syncretism” as indicative of the phenomenon of religious mixing, it is used by some hagiographers when describing the significance of Shirdi Sai Baba with regard

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<sup>1</sup> Naqvi, *In Good Faith*, 1.

<sup>2</sup> See Krishnaswamy’s “Gentle Charms of Syncretism” (2014).

to his “syncretic”<sup>3</sup> approach to Hindu and Islamic traditions and his “syncretic message” that makes him – in the words of one contemporary English-writing hagiographer – the “unique prophet of integration.”<sup>4</sup> The major mid-century hagiographer Narasimhaswami does not use words like “syncretism” or “syncretistic” in his works, but he certainly employs the discourse of syncretism when portraying Sai Baba’s approach to Hinduism and Islam as one of “fusion” and “unity.” It is also significant that scholarship on Shirdi Sai Baba has not shied away from the term “syncretism,” either.<sup>5</sup>

This chapter approaches the “syncretistic” saint Shirdi Sai Baba from two perspectives, those of his devotees and his detractors. As representative of the former, we will focus on the saint’s representation in two Hindi films released in 1977: Manmohan Desai’s blockbuster *Amar, Akbar, Anthony* and Ashok Bhushan’s hagiopic *Shirdi ke Sai Baba*. While both films represent Sai Baba as a saint who brings India’s religious communities together, we will further emphasize one of the points raised in Chapter 3, namely, that Shirdi Sai Baba’s compositeness bears its own internal politics. In film, portrayals of Sai Baba as a composite saint posit the Hindu element as the dominate side of his compositeness, the only side that is flexible and inclusive enough to embrace the non-Hindu elements.

Not everyone, however, is a fan of Shirdi Sai Baba and the idea of religions mixing together. Another section of this chapter will explore two recent sites of anti-Shirdi Sai Baba rhetoric. The first looks at the kerfuffle recorded in the Indian news

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<sup>3</sup> V.B. Kher, *Sai Baba: His Divine Glimpses* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 2012), 5.

<sup>4</sup> Ruhela, *The Unique Prophet of Integration*, 42.

<sup>5</sup> See J.J. Roy Burman, *Hindu-Muslim Syncretic Shrines and Communities* (New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 2002); Raymond L.M. Lee, “Sai Baba, Salvation, and Syncretism: Religious Change in a Hindu Movement in Urban Malaysia,” *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 16, no. 1 (1982). See also Rigopoulos, *The Life and Teachings*, 367 and 370-371; Warren, *Unravelling the Enigma*, 87.

media in the summer of 2014 between Sai Baba devotees and a Hindu religious leader named Swami Swaroopananda Saraswati. The second is a study of an anti-Shirdi Sai Baba page on Facebook aiming to expose the saint as “the greatest hypocrite in the history of India” (*bhārat ke itihās kā sabse baḍā pākhaṇḍ*). Both the swami and the admins of the Facebook pages allege that Shirdi Sai Baba is actually a Muslim and that the promotion of religious egalitarianism through the saint is “really” an Islamic ploy to defile Hinduism and trick gullible Hindus into worshipping a Muslim holy man. Here, we will see that the arguments made by Sai Baba’s detractors are a timely demonstration of the ways that a saint’s life and legacy can be constructed, deconstructed, and contested.

### **Definitions, Redefinitions, and Objections to “Syncretism”**

Before we delve into the representations of and debates about Shirdi Sai Baba as a “syncretistic” saint, we should have a foothold on what the term “syncretism” means and how it has been used by anthropologists and religious studies scholars, as well as the arguments for its retention or abandonment in the context of South Asian religious traditions.

In the 1960s, anthropologist Melville Herskovits’s scholarship on African-American religions popularized “syncretism” as an analytic category in the social sciences. Today, the problematic features of this early engagement with the term are well-known. As Andrew Apter has pointed out, Herskovits “essentialized tribal origins of Africa, perpetuated myths of cultural purity in the New World, overlooked class formation, and developed passive notions of acculturation and cultural resistance.”<sup>6</sup> But

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<sup>6</sup> Andrew Apter, “Herskovits’s Heritage: Rethinking Syncretism in the African Diaspora,” in *Syncretism in Religion: A Reader*, eds. Anita Leopold and Jeppe Jensen (New York: Routledge, 2005), 160.

Herskovits also changed the prevailing conversation on American and New World “Negro” religious forms. Sociological interpretations – like those of E. Franklin Frazier (1939) and Robert E. Park (1919) – had viewed African traditions in the western hemisphere as wholly new adaptations to socioeconomic and cultural settings, while Herskovits connected these traditions to their origins in African cultures. In *The New World Negro: Selected Papers in Afroamerican Studies* (1966), Herskovits defined the process that emerges from moments of contact as syncretism, or “the tendency to identify those elements in the new culture with similar elements in the old one, enabling the persons experiencing the contact to move from one to the other, and back again, with psychological ease.”<sup>7</sup> In a previously published article, Herskovits had highlighted this process of identification in the example of Africans who were brought as slaves to the Caribbean “New World.” According to Herskovits, African slaves experienced two things in their new setting: the fragmentation of their traditional African religious systems and the forceful imposition of the slave-masters’ Catholicism (e.g., forced baptisms). The contact between religious cultures – African and Catholic, old and new – produced a syncretic blend in which, for example, the African deity Damballa became identified as St. Patrick, Ogun Balandjo as St. Joseph, and so on.<sup>8</sup> For Herskovits, the study of syncretism was more about the production of new, hybridized forms and less on the political and social contexts in which these forms took shape. Part of the critique of the Herskovitsian understanding of syncretism, Apter notes, is that Herskovits had to make problematic assumptions regarding the existence of discrete, bounded African religious

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<sup>7</sup> Melville J. Herskovits and Frances S. Herskovits, *The New World Negro: Selected Papers in Afroamerican Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966), 57.

<sup>8</sup> Melville J. Herskovits, “African Gods and Catholic Saints in New World Negro Belief,” *American Anthropologist, New Series* 39, no. 4, part 1 (October-December 1937): 638, 641-642.

systems, such as “Yoruba” and “Fon,” which are necessary in his model of “pure” traditions coming into contact with one another.<sup>9</sup>

Apter further suggests a new way to engage with syncretism by illuminating the ways that the blurring of boundaries can function as an interpretive strategy of resistance. He turns to Haiti as “the clearest illustration that resistance waged through syncretic struggle... was more than symbolic wish fulfillment.”<sup>10</sup> Whereas Herskovits talked about the “psychological ease” with which Africans could navigate dichotomous cultural categories like African/colonial and indigenous/foreign, Apter observes that African slaves Africanized the religion of their masters as part of a “counter-hegemonic strategy” in which they “took possession of Catholicism and thereby repossessed themselves as active spiritual subjects.”<sup>11</sup> Identifying an African deity like Damballa with a Catholic saint like Patrick is more than a symbol of passive hybridization. It is, Apter argues, a subversive method of empowerment for an enslaved population.

Apter’s critique and revision of the Herskovitsian model of syncretism is only one example of the new approaches brought to this term in academic scholarship. Some scholars like James Titus Houk (1995) offer their own updated definitions. In his study of Odisha in Trinidad, Houk takes into account the tangible and intangible components of syncretism in thinking of the term as “the integrating or blending of selected meanings (ideology) and/or forms (material culture) from diverse sociocultural traditions, resulting in the creation of entirely new meanings (ideology) and/or forms (material culture).”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Apter, “Herskovits’s Heritage,” 168.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 178.

<sup>12</sup> James T. Houk, *Spirits, Blood, and Drums: The Orisha Religion in Trinidad* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), 180.

Others have explicitly turned away from the Herskovitsian interest in syncretic forms by focusing on the arenas of cultural practice and performance that show traditions in the making – traditions like Haitian Vodoun, African Ogun, and Cuban Santería.<sup>13</sup> Some of this scholarship has removed “syncretism” from its vocabulary on traditions that evidence religious mixing. A recent and strong critique of the Herskovitsian model of syncretism is part of Jacob S. Dorman’s *Chosen People: The Rise of American Black Israelite Religions* (2013). Here, Dorman contextualizes Herskovits’s understanding of culture as a set of prefabricated, predictable patterns as rooted in his (Herskovits’s) study of racial types as a physical anthropologist in the 1920s. As a corollary to this historicization of “syncretism,” Dorman proposes a new analytic term – “polyculturalism” – to talk about cultural formation in the Americas as a more active and messy process that produces mixed religious forms that are more flexible and porous than what Herskovits thought them to be.<sup>14</sup>

Closer to the subject of this dissertation, one would be remiss not to mention the contentious nature of “syncretism” in the study of South Asian religious traditions. Tony Stewart and Carl Ernst describe scholars’ usage of syncretism, both as process and description, as a codeword for “the products of inter-sectarian or inter-religious encounters, such as that of Hindu and Muslim, producing a mixed product that mysteriously exhibits features of both.”<sup>15</sup> They outline four models of syncretistic

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<sup>13</sup> See Karen McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); Sandra T. Barnes, *Africa’s Ogun: Old World and New* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989); Joseph M. Murphy, *Santería: An African Religion in America*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988). For a brief discussion on syncretism, see Murphy, *Santería*, 120-124.

<sup>14</sup> Jacob S. Dorman, *Chosen People: The Rise of American Black Israelite Religions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 187.

<sup>15</sup> Carl Ernst and Tony Stewart, “Syncretism,” in *South Asian Folklore: An Encyclopedia*, eds. Peter Claus and Sarah Diamond (New York: Routledge, 2003), 586.

encounter: 1) influence and borrowing, which implies the unconscious transmission of ideas from dominant source to passive recipient; 2) the overlay or “cultural veneer,” which describes the meeting of two civilizations as a flimsy, subordinate layer laid upon a sturdier foundation (e.g., the Hindu nationalist view of Islam in India as an intrusion on an essentialized Hinduism); 3) alchemy, a metaphor for the chemical-like interaction of substances, which may be irreversible or reversible (i.e., separable into its constituent parts); and 4) the biological model, which posits two parents whose offspring is either a genetic blend of its parents’ features or a temporary mixture that disaggregates in the next generation.

Despite the variety of syncretistic processes, Stewart and Ernst find the term very problematic. To label as “syncretistic” certain traditions, practices, communities, or religions, especially those at the folk or popular level, entails their comparison with “pure” hegemonies like Sanskritized, Brahminized Hinduism or universalistic, utopian imaginings of Islam. Stewart and Ernst consider this type of dichotomy the primary problem with the term syncretism, because “the initial categories that are established in opposition can never be natural, nor can they be sufficiently comprehensive to accommodate the incredible variety of human religious and cultural experience.”<sup>16</sup> Moreover, they make an apt criticism of syncretism as potentially doing damage to interreligious interactions, rather than fostering mutual understanding. For Sikh practitioners and scholars, to reduce Sikhism to a syncretistic blend of Hinduism and Islam pejoratively implies that Guru Nanak’s revelation lacked originality.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

In his own research on stories about the medieval Bengali mythic figure Satya Pir, Tony Stewart bemoans that conversations about Satya Pir are “generally damned to bear the label of ‘syncretism.’”<sup>17</sup> One may categorize the Satya Pir stories as “Islamic/Sufi” in which the hero is portrayed as a Muslim saint (*pīr*) residing in Mecca and as “Hindu/Vaishnava” in which he is the epochal incarnation (*yugavatār*) of Vishnu. However, to consider Satya Pir as an example of Hindu-Islamic syncretism is to assume that the fusion of two discrete, mutually exclusive entities, Hinduism and Islam, was possible in medieval Bengal. This line of thinking, Stewart argues, not only projects modern notions of religion anachronistically into that past, but it also misses the appeal of his stories to their diverse readership. Satya Pir offers help when it is needed most; he offers wealth in exchange for worship and makes life difficult when he is ignored; and as such, the study of Satya Pir stories “must begin not with timeless religious categories but with context.”<sup>18</sup>

### **Pairing “Syncretism” with “Anti-Syncretism”**

Clearly, “syncretism” has acquired a great deal of conceptual baggage in its reception history, both in the study of South Asia and the academic study of religion, more broadly. However, the historical transformation of the term’s meaning over the last half century should indicate that it has not ossified to the point of being coterminous with the Herskovitsian model. It remains open to redefinition and useful for the critical analysis of religious mixing.

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<sup>17</sup> Tony K. Stewart, “Alternate Structures of Authority: Satya Pīr on the Frontiers of Bengal,” in *Beyond Turk and Hindu: Rethinking Religious Identities in Islamicate South Asia*, eds. David Gilmartin and Bruce B. Lawrence (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2000), 22.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.



To that effect, the most significant effort to reframe “syncretism” in scholarly literature comes in the introduction of Charles Stewart and Rosalind Shaw’s edited volume, *Syncretism/Anti-Syncretism* (1994). To counter the “negative view of the concept of syncretism [that] holds sway over many anthropologists and scholars of religious studies,”<sup>19</sup> Stewart and Shaw cite the observation of anthropologist J. Clifford that regards the mixing of forms as a basic element of the “predicament of culture”<sup>20</sup> in the late twentieth century. Through Clifford, they argue that the study of how people invent new traditions by mixing pasts, symbols, languages, and religious forms is a means to challenge modernist presuppositions about the reified essences and histories of cultures and traditions. In other words, Stewart and Shaw want to change how scholars think about syncretism by forgoing projects that identify certain forms as “syncretistic” and instead focusing on the “discourses” and “processes” of religious mixing.<sup>21</sup>

In doing so, Stewart and Shaw make a significant theoretical contribution to the study of syncretism by pairing it with anti-syncretism, or “the antagonism to religious synthesis shown by agents concerned with the defence of religious boundaries.”<sup>22</sup> Syncretism and anti-syncretism are the social and cultural processes that correspond to boundary maintenance and boundary erosion, respectively. Stewart and Shaw, as well as the contributors to their edited volume, thus draw attention to the political dimension of the meeting and mixing of different peoples and cultures. (The title of this chapter draws from the subtitle of Stewart and Shaw’s text, *Syncretism/Anti-Syncretism: The Politics of*

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<sup>19</sup> Charles Stewart and Rosalind Shaw, “Introduction: Problematizing Syncretism,” in *Syncretism/Anti-Syncretism: The Politics of Religious Synthesis* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 1.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

*Religious Synthesis*, which reflects my use of “syncretism” as a second-order analytic category aimed at revealing the politics infused in portrayals of his compositeness). The essays in *Syncretism/Anti-Syncretism* explore these parallel processes in various global contexts. Peter van der Veer’s essay argues that syncretism must be “discursively identified”<sup>23</sup> with regards to the politics of inclusivity and exclusivity underwriting expressions of unity and diversity in modern India. For example, Hindu-inflected political discourse often synonymizes Hinduism’s syncretistic, nonviolent character with the tolerant, multicultural spirit of the Indian nation. When the great philosopher and first president of India Sarvepallai Radhakrishnan (1888-1975) distinguished between “Religion and religions” and defined “Religion” as both “Hinduism” and “the Spirit of India,” this type of discourse “has the unintended ring of the demand in Hindu communalist writings that Muslims as converts should realize that they are Hindus first.”<sup>24</sup> Van der Veer thus shows that “syncretism” is both a concept invoked in religious discourse to imagine and construct religions as much as nation-states and also a standard for that religion or nation-state’s evaluation, one that can be either positive (a marker of tolerance) or negative (an absence of tolerance).

Van der Veer has also problematized the idyllic image of the Sufi shrine in South Asia as a site where Hindus and Muslims pray and practice together. His ethnographic findings at the tomb of the Sufi master Abdul Rahim Mehbubulla al Qadiri ar Rifa’i (d. 1689) in Surat reveal that the majority of the crowd on the celebration of the “saint’s day” (*urs*) is Hindu and that Hindus participate on their own terms, focusing their attention on the tomb as a silent icon of generic religious power and keeping a respectful distance

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<sup>23</sup> Van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism*, 196.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 201-203.

from the saint's living descendants and the Sufis who "play" with swords and sharp instruments, per Rifa'i practice. Here, boundaries are eroded but only to a certain extent. The festival looks like an event that brings Hindus and Muslims into the same public space, but a closer look at what people do and where they go – such as Muslims marking the *urs* with prayers in the mosque, while Hindus do not – reveals the limits to viewing this festival as a moment of interreligious unity.<sup>25</sup>

In *Hindu, Sufi, or Sikh: Contested Practices and Identifications of Sindhi Hindus in India and Beyond* (2008), Steven Ramey examines the self-assertion of Sindhi Hindus in postcolonial India that claims Sufi saints, Guru Nanak and the god Vishnu as part of their Hindu heritage. Certainly, this amalgam of religious personages seems to exemplify the syncretistic process of combining multiple religious forms to produce something new and distinct. In response to the question of whether or not the Hinduism constructed by Sindhi Hindus can be called straightforwardly a form of syncretism, Ramey says:

[D]esignating Sindhi Hindu practices as syncretic ignores the assertions of many Sindhi Hindus that their practices fit within the boundaries of Hinduism. However, since Sindhi Hindus frequently shift between representing their practice as specifically Hindu and describing them as a combination of diverse elements, syncretism is applicable to some Sindhi Hindu representations when it is defined as a conscious blending of elements. Instead of simplistically labeling Sindhi Hindus as syncretic, analyzing the syncretic references within Sindhi Hindu representations highlights further the choices that Sindhi Hindus make and the continuing influence of the dominant understandings on them.<sup>26</sup>

In other words, "syncretism" is appropriate and useful in the study of Sindhi Hindu identity where it concerns the Sindhi Hindu understanding about the legitimately "Hindu" character of Guru Nanak, Sufi *pīrs*, and Vishnu. Ramey thus treads a fine line between

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<sup>25</sup> See Peter Van der Veer, "Playing or Praying: A Sufi Saint's Day in Surat," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 51, no. 3 (August 1992): 545-564.

<sup>26</sup> Steven Ramey, *Hindu, Sufi, or Sikh: Contested Practices and Identifications of Sindhi Hindus in India and Beyond* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 7.

the statements of his Sindhi Hindu “informants” encountered in his ethnographic fieldwork and the processes that he, as a scholar, sees in the cultural creation of Sindhi identity in modern India. Such a project requires a deft approach because Sindhi Hindus who fled their homeland in modern-day Pakistan and settled in India following Partition faced an important decision vis-à-vis how to be “Sindhi” and “Indian” at the same time. One outcome of this tension between regional and national identities is the bricolage of sacred figures – Hindu, Sufi, and Sikh – that is part of the religion constructed by Sindhi Hindus. Another outcome is that this bricolage is that it enables Sindhi *Hindus* to “pass” in *Hindu-majority* Indian society, while, at the same time, resisting their wholesale absorption into the nationalist discourse of *Indian* identity. Consequently, one theoretical contribution of Ramey’s work is the illumination of the parallel processes of boundary erosion (e.g., the conscious blending of religious personages) and boundary maintenance (e.g., public celebrations of Sindhi heritage) in the context of a South Asian religious community in modern India. These are not value-neutral processes but rather ways to navigate the politics of inclusivity and exclusivity that affect communities in diaspora.

Other scholars of Sindhi religion have identified cases of the simultaneous processes of boundary maintenance and erosion.<sup>27</sup> In particular, Lata Parwani has examined the mythology of the Sindhi river god Jhuley Lal by Sindhi Muslims in Pakistan and Sindhi Hindus in India. In Pakistan, Sindhi Muslims draw on Jhuley Lal’s mythology to distinguish their community and heritage as distinct from the hegemonic discourse of Pakistani nationalism, including the cultural dominance of Punjabi culture in Lahore and Islamabad, as well as the linguistic imperialism of Indian emigres (*muhājirs*),

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<sup>27</sup> See the collection of essays in Michel Boivin and Matthew A. Cook’s edited volume *Interpreting the Sindhi World: Essays on Society and History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

who pushed to make Urdu Pakistan's national language. Parwani also discusses the importance of Jhuley Lal as a "patron saint" for Sindhi Hindus forced to flee to India following Partition. Parwani also traces the story of Jhuley Lal and Sindhi identity into a decidedly modern context, the postcolonial construction of *Sindhiyat*, or Sindhi-ness. While travelling throughout Sindhi communities in India, Sindhi writer and activist Ram Panjwani gave lectures on "Sindhi" identity, reminding Sindhi audiences of the importance and value of their language, folk songs, and mythology but not in a way that would seem subversive or antinationalistic in their new Indian setting. Panjwani's vision of *Sindhiyat* likened it to a river flowing into the ocean, thereby enabling Sindhis to possess dual identities both as Sindhis and as members of the larger Hindu-majority Indian citizenry. Contemporaneously with Panjwani's activities, postcolonial hagiographic texts about Jhuley Lal produced in India tweaked the story of the saint/deity's life. Here, Jhuley Lal does not disappear into the Indus River at the end of his life but rather goes on a tour of Hindu pilgrimage sites in Sindh, solidifying his identity as a squarely Hindu sacred figure.<sup>28</sup> Parwani further illustrates that Jhuley Lal's story as (re)told by Sindhi Hindus in India loses some of its Islamic dimension. Postcolonial hagiographic works gloss over the architectural similarities between Jhuley Lal shrines and Sufi *dargāhs* and the fact that Jhuley Lal was and is worshipped by many Muslims in their ancestral homeland in Pakistan.<sup>29</sup> In sum, Parwani argues that this re-mythologization of Jhuley Lal reflects a worldview entrenched in the Hindu-Muslim

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<sup>28</sup> Lata Parwani, "Myths of Jhuley Lal: Deconstructing a Sindhi Cultural Icon," in *Interpreting the Sindhi World: Essays of Society and History*, eds. Michel Boivin and Matthew A. Cook (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 13 and 26 n.51.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

dichotomy stemming from the social and political realities that precipitated the creation of a “Sindhi diaspora” in 1947.

The work of Peter van der Veer, Steven Ramey, and Lata Parwani – and others<sup>30</sup> – illustrates that “syncretism” remains a useful category of analysis in the study of South Asian religious traditions. Given the term’s historical transformation, specifying what “syncretism” means in any given context is necessary. In my work on the Shirdi Sai Baba hagiographic tradition, I refrain from using “syncretism” as a first-order term of description for religious forms and traditions because syncretism is, ultimately, a fiction of power neutrality. Instead, I follow the path laid out by Stewart and Shaw that reframes syncretism as a process and a discourse dealing with religious mixing and boundary erosion, the complementary aspect of which is the process and discourse of boundary creation and maintenance, or anti-syncretism. Following Ramey’s tact in writing about Sindhi Hindus, I propose that Shirdi Sai Baba is a “syncretistic” saint in that he has been constructed as such by his devotees, whereas his detractors deconstruct the saint’s syncretism and argue against the place of religious mixing in “proper” Hinduism.

As noted at the start of the chapter, some Sai Baba hagiographers use “syncretism” and its adjectival form to describe the type of saint that Shirdi Sai Baba was and the type of message that he preached when he was alive. As we will now see, the idea that Shirdi Sai Baba is a “syncretistic” saint in whom different religions and communities harmoniously coexist is also a key feature of his portrayal in film.

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<sup>30</sup> See Alexander Henn, *Hindu-Catholic Encounters in Goa: Religion, Colonialism, and Modernity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014); Eliza Kent, “Syncretism and Sin: An Independent Christian Church in Colonial South India,” in *Lines in Water: Religious Boundaries in South Asia*, eds. Tazim Kassam and Eliza Kent (Albany: SUNY Press, 2013).

## Shirdi Sai Baba: A “Syncretistic” Saint on Film

### a. Manmohan Desai’s *Amar, Akbar, Anthony*

First, we will turn to the scene featuring Shirdi Sai Baba in Manmohan Desai’s Hindi film *Amar, Akbar, Anthony* (1977) – a *masala* mix of action, drama, and comedy that was among the highest grossing films in the year of its release.<sup>31</sup> *Amar, Akbar, Anthony* was released just after the Emergency, the twenty-one month period between 1975 and 1977 when Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi suspended general elections and imposed direct rule by the central government. Given that this was a period of great political turmoil that shook the Indian public writ-large to its core, part of the popularity of *Amar, Akbar, Anthony* is its reassertion of a key principle of the troubled nation’s foundation – its unity within diversity. Desai’s film tells the melodramatic tale of three brothers, separated in childhood by tragedy and adopted by three (apparently) single men from three different religious communities. In this way, the film is an allegorical tale of religious diversity in modern India in which Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity are envisioned as a fraternity of religions.

As the film begins, the boys’ father Kishenlal is returning home after serving a prison sentence for a hit-and-run accident. His wife Bharati is in dire straits, suffering from tuberculosis and raising three young boys on her own. We soon learn that Kishenlal went to jail because he agreed to take the fall for his employer – a corrupt and lecherous Anglo-Indian businessman named Robert. In exchange, Robert had agreed to take care of

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<sup>31</sup> Recently, several monographs have explored this film’s aesthetic and cultural impact. See William Elison, Christian Novetzke, and Andy Rotman, *Amar Akbar Anthony: Bollywood, Brotherhood, and the Nation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016); Sidharth Bhatia, *Amar Akbar Anthony: Masala, Madness, and Manmohan Desai* (New Delhi: Harper Collins Publishers India, 2013); Connie Haham, *Enchantment of the Mind: Manmohan Desai’s Films* (New Delhi: Roli Books, 2006).

Kishenlal's family, but the villain has reneged on his promise. When Kishenlal goes to confront Robert, Robert subdues him and orders him killed by his gang of crooks. To escape, Kishenlal hops into a car full of Robert's gold and speeds back to his home. He finds his three sons abandoned by his wife/their mother Bharati, who has left a suicide note indicating that she does not want her illness to be a financial burden on the family. Putting the boys in the car, Kishenlal drives to a park where he leaves the children underneath a statue of Mahatma Gandhi, which is doubly significant given that the day's events take place on August 15, India's Independence Day.

Kishenlal returns to the car to draw the villains away from the park. In the chase, his car crashes, and he is presumed dead (until a surprise return later in the film). Meanwhile, as Philip Lutgendorf aptly puts it in his film review, the three young brothers in the park are "partitioned," as they get separated and are adopted by three individuals: a Hindu policeman, a Muslim tailor, and a Catholic priest.<sup>32</sup> The wife/mother Bharati, now stricken blind by a falling tree limb while running in the woods on her way to kill herself, receives the misinformation that her husband and sons have all died. Despite these successive calamities, Bharati resolves to live, viewing these events as divine punishment for attempting suicide.

The eldest Amar grows up in the Hindu home and becomes a dedicated policeman. Akbar, the Muslim and middle brother, is a flirtatious singer of Islamic devotional songs (*qawwālī*) and a popstar of sorts in the city. The youngest brother Anthony is a kindhearted, jocular Christian liquor dealer who gives half of his profits to charity. Although the brothers meet each other and their mother Bharati in the first half of

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<sup>32</sup> For a more detailed overview of the film's plot and themes, see Haham, *Enchantment of the Mind*, 31-36.



the film, nobody knows who anybody is. One misunderstanding between Amar and Anthony leads to a fistfight between the two. Notably, the policeman and Hindu Amar decidedly thrashes the Christian Anthony and throws him in jail. In contrast, the Muslim Akbar is a pacifist who shies away from violent confrontations and even apologizes to Allah before striking a villain in the final brawl with Robert and his gang. Connie Haham astutely observes that the Akbar's characterization is strategically "intended to soothe and comfort those in the audience who could feel threatened by a more aggressive stance from a member of a large minority [community]."<sup>33</sup>

In the film's narrative arc, the pivotal scene that moves the family from misrecognition to recognition and from separation to reunion features Shirdi Sai Baba. While the blind mother Bharati is running away from Robert's henchmen in the countryside, she finds refuge in a rural, open-air Sai Baba shrine/temple where her now-Muslim son Akbar – whom she has met at one of his concerts but never recognized him as her son – is singing a pop-*qawwālī* to a consecrated image of the saint in the temple (see Figure 4.1).<sup>34</sup> The lyrics of "Shirdiwale Sai Baba," which has become, arguably, the most well-known and beloved piece of Sai Baba devotional music, emphasize the saint's religious compositeness alongside his compassion for the downtrodden:

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<sup>33</sup> Haham, *Enchantment of the Mind*, 37.

<sup>34</sup> The film song "Shirdiwale Sai Baba" musically and visually resembles *qawwālī* as it has been used generally in Bollywood soundtracks. Musically, the main singer Akbar is accompanied by the instruments that accompany *qawwālī*, namely, the dholak, tabla, and harmonium. The audience, which is segregated according to gender, sings the chorus with Akbar and also claps in time to the music. Visually, Akbar is at the front of the audience, and everyone faces toward Sai Baba's *mūrtī*, just as everyone typically sings toward the living *pīr* or saint's tomb in *qawwālī* performances. Moreover, both Akbar and the crowd seem to enter trance toward the musical crescendo, the point where Bharati regains her eyesight and sees her children in Sai Baba's face. I am particularly grateful to Isaac Mirza for pointing out the rich comparison between "Shirdiwale Sai Baba" and the representations of *qawwālī* in Bollywood. For more on Hindi film songs, including *qawwālī*, see Anna Morcom, *Hindi Film Songs and the Cinema* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2007).

In you is the glory of God (*khudā*)  
In you is God (*bhagvān*)

Everyone submits to you  
Everyone knows where you dwell

They come running up [to you]  
If they have just a bit of luck

You are the destination of every traveler  
You are the shore of every ship

The person everyone has cast out  
Is the one you care for<sup>35</sup>

As Akbar sings, Bharati cautiously makes her way into the structure, feeling its walls for support and then crawling along its floor. She uses too much force while placing her head onto the marble step in supplication, and she draws a bit of blood on her forehead – an image that opens up multiple interpretations, such as an offering of blood (*balidān*) to a deity, a mark (*tikā*) applied after religious worship (*pūjā*), and a red “dot” (*bindī*) and/or a splash of vermilion (*sindūr*) that denotes a woman’s married status (see Figure 4.2).<sup>36</sup> As she looks up, her eyes lock with those of Sai Baba’s consecrated image. Two flames travel from the *mūrī* to Bharati, and in this miraculous moment of eye-to-eye *darśan*, her eyesight is restored, while Akbar sings: “These dark nights of sorrow / You make them into Eid and Diwali” (*ye gam kī rāteñ, rāteñ ye kālī / inko banā de īd aur divālī*). More unambiguous symbolism follows as her first vision is the sight of her three children, as she remembers them in their childhood, whose faces are superimposed on the face of Sai Baba (see Figure 4.3). The message is that Shirdi Sai Baba is the saint through whom the

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<sup>35</sup> The lyrics in transliterated Hindi are: *khudā kī sān tujh meñ / dikhe bhagvān tujh meñ / tujhe sab mānte haiñ / terā ghar jānte haiñ / cale āte haiñ daure / jo khuś kismet haiñ thore / ye har rāhī kī manzil / yeh har kaśtī kā sāhil / jise sab ne nikālā / use tū ne sambhālā.*

<sup>36</sup> Elison, “Sai Baba of Bombay,” 176.

normative nuclear family is restored. In this way, the saint is linked to the subtext underwriting the film's narrative about the strong, familial relationship between the mother – that is, Mother India – and her children: the Hindus, the Muslims, and the Christians.

Rosie Thomas has argued that “mainstream Hindi cinema is a central arena for the definition and celebration of a modern Indian identity, working to negotiate notions of traditional and modern India.”<sup>37</sup> Following sociologist Arjun Appadurai, Thomas identifies film as a “zone of cultural debate”<sup>38</sup> that can be studied historically to uncover evolving tropes like, for example, “the virtuous Mother” and “the lecherous villain.” The former is particularly relevant to Desai's *Amar, Akbar, Anthony* – and by extension, to *Shirdi Sai Baba*, too. Despite her decision to abandon her children with the intention to commit suicide, the film's mother figure Bharati has virtue, albeit one that needs to be rescued and repaired. Uncoincidentally, her name connects her story to the Indian nation (Bharati > *bhāratīya*, or “Indian”).<sup>39</sup> In line with Thomas's observation that “the virtuous Mother” is often situated in religious contexts, Desai “emplots” – to use Hayden White's terminology – Bharati into a series of calamities that have miraculous resolutions and convey spiritual messages. Earlier in the film, she is hit by a car but then receives a blood transfusion (unbeknownst to her) from the three sons whom she has not seen since the tragic day of their separation. Literally framing the message of unity and diversity are the

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<sup>37</sup> Rosie Thomas, “Melodrama and the Negotiation of Morality in Mainstream in Hindi Film,” in *Consuming Modernity: Public Culture in a South Asian World*, ed. Carol A. Breckenridge (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 158.

<sup>38</sup> Arjun Appadurai and Carol Breckenridge, “Why Public Culture?” *Public Culture* 1, 1 (1988): 6.

<sup>39</sup> Names are important, and Desai's film – like other films and texts that drum up nationalistic fervor – invoke the name of the country derived from the ancient Sanskrit epic, the *Mahābhārata*. Imagining the country as *Bhārat* instead of *Indiā* plays into dichotomies beyond Hindu and non-Hindu, like the “traditional” as opposed to the “modern” and the “nostalgia for bygone mores” in contrast with the “breakdown of the moral order.”

scenes outside the windows above each son's bed: a Hindu temple outside Amar's room, an Islamic mosque behind Akbar, and a Christian church for Anthony. The life-giving blood of all three sons flows into the veins of their mother, just as India's three religious communities comprise Mother India. It is as if the director Desai wants to reassure his audience that religious differences are superficial because, per the lyrics that accompany the title credits, "blood is blood; it isn't water" (*khūn khūn hotā hai, pānī nahīn*). Later in the film, she loses her eyesight but regains it through the miraculous power of Shirdi Sai Baba – as if the saint symbolizing the fraternity of Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity is forgiving the wayward nation of its past divisiveness and restoring the hope for a future of peace and unity.



Fig. 4.1 In *Amar, Akbar, Anthony*, Akbar sings *qawwālī* in front of Sai Baba's *mūrtī*. Source: *Amar, Akbar, Anthony*, dir. Manmohan Desai.



Fig. 4.2 Two lights from the eyes of Sai Baba's image restore the mother Bharati's eyesight. Source: *Amar, Akbar, Anthony*, dir. Manmohan Desai.



Fig. 4.3 The first thing Bharati sees with her new eyes is the sight of her three children superimposed on the face of Sai Baba's image. By this point, the film's narrative has made the boys representatives of Hinduism (the eldest Amar), Islam (Akbar), and Christianity (Anthony). Source: *Amar, Akbar, Anthony*, dir. Manmohan Desai.

But three observations challenge the understanding of Desai's film as a truly egalitarian interpretation of religious diversity. First, even before their separation, the film indicates that the three boys were born Hindu.<sup>40</sup> The "partition" of the boys is actually a "partition" of an essential Hindu-ness into thirds: one that becomes a Muslim,

<sup>40</sup> Elison, "Sai Baba of Bombay," 176.

one that becomes a Christian, and one that remains a Hindu. Second, we might also note that according to the story, the three brothers are not triplets. They are marked in terms of seniority. It is the eldest who is Hindu, the unmarked category of power and privilege in Indian society against which other categories are marked as different – the “Muslim” and the “Christian” are different from the “Hindu.”<sup>41</sup> Philip Lutendorf calls attention to the fact that the the minorities, the Muslim Akbar and the Christian Anthony, are on full display as “embodiments of rakish comedy, exotic color, proletarian uninhibitedness, and yes, rhythm.”<sup>42</sup> The more rambunctious younger brothers who represent the minority religious communities contrast with the stoic and serious elder brother Amar who metonymically stands for the Hindu majority. Third, it is noteworthy that the Hindu Amar is also an extension of the Indian state. He is a policeman – what mainstream culture would value as a “real” job vis-à-vis Akbar’s singing career and more “honest” work than Anthony’s booze peddling. Ultimately, the film applies a Hindu embrace to its representation of religious diversity in modern India, for the “Hindu” elder brother is positioned as the one powerful enough to protect – and police – his junior siblings. The representation of religions coming together in *Amar, Akbar, Anthony* thus evidences the political processes designated by the analytic categories, “syncretism” and “anti-syncretism.” Certainly, the boundaries between three discrete categories – the Hindu, the Muslim, and the Christian – are eroded in the film’s narrative that envisions these three

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<sup>41</sup> In a comparative study of race, caste, and prejudice in the United States and India, Gyanendra Pandey examines the politics of prejudice as a politics of difference. Pandey writes: “Men are not described as *different*; it is women who are. Foreign colonizers are not *different*; the colonized are. Caste Hindus are not *different* in India; it is Muslims, ‘tribals,’ and Dalits (or ex-Untouchables) who are. White Anglo-Saxon Protestant heterosexual males are not *different* in the United States; at one time or another, everybody else is.” See Gyanendra Pandey, *A History of Prejudice: Race, Caste, and Difference in India and the United States* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 34.

<sup>42</sup> Philip Lutendorf, review of *Amar, Akbar, Anthony*, dir. Ashok Bhushan, <http://www.uiowa.edu/indiancinema/amar-akbar-anthony>, accessed December 28, 2015.

identities as part of a single, familial entity. But the subtle hierarchization in the relationship between the majority and the minority, the elder and the junior siblings, betrays a politics of compositeness. As we saw in the last chapter, Narasimhaswami does something similar in *Life of Sai Baba* with his construction of Shirdi Sai Baba as hegemonically Hindu by employing various means (e.g., a new narrative of the saint's origin, references to Sanskrit religious literature).

However, Narasimhaswami and Desai have different principles guiding their respective works. Narasimhaswami writes *Life of Sai Baba* with the intention to include only the “correct knowledge” pertaining to the saint's life and legacy. In an interview in 2006, Desai reflected on his decision to make Shirdi Sai Baba part of the message of religious harmony and fraternity in *Amar, Akbar, Anthony*:

It was never clear about Sai Baba whether he was a Hindu or a Muslim. Until now it is not clear who he was because he believed in both Islam and in Hinduism. Hence he did not get himself cremated. He attained *samaadhi* (liberation) and he was entombed in a place. So Muslims also believe in Sai Baba, as do Hindus and Parsees....[My late wife] was a great believer in Sai Baba; hence that rubbed off on me. She said, ‘Why don't we bring Sai Baba into our film?’ And so when we did had to show a deity who performed a miracle in *Amar, Akbar, Anthony*, I thought why don't we show Sai Baba. Quite a few Muslims, Parsees, and Hindus go to Shirdi.<sup>43</sup>

On one hand, Desai contextualizes the use of Sai Baba in the film as rooted in his relationship with his wife, a devotee of the saint. On the other hand, Desai knows that Shirdi Sai Baba's ambiguous religious provenance – note that his description of the saint resembles the “neither/nor” language of G.R. Dabholkar's *Śrī Sāī Satcarita* – makes him well-suited for inclusion in a film with a positive message about inclusivity. In utilizing Shirdi Sai Baba as the mirror in which the audience can see how different religions are

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<sup>43</sup> Haham, *Enchantment of the Mind*, 39.

“really” a fraternity, Desai reifies the image of Sai Baba as a “syncretistic” saint, one through whom Hindus, Muslims, and Christians achieve peaceful coexistence in the recognition that they are blood-brothers from the same mother (India).

**b. Ashok Bhushan’s *Shirdi ke Sai Baba***

In the same year that *Amar, Akbar, Anthony* was released, Ashok Bhushan’s Hindi hagiopic *Shirdi ke Sai Baba* (1977) became the first widely viewed hagiographic film on the saint. *Shirdi ke Sai Baba* is very much in the tradition of early devotional films that told the life stories of remarkable individuals with new and challenging religious ideas. Such films included *Chandidas* (1934), *Sant Tukaram* (1936), and *Sant Dnyaneshwar* (1940). Although mythological and devotional films were the “founding genres of [silent] Indian cinema” and proved successful in the years following the advent of sound, the number of religiously themed films significantly declined after the 1940s with the exception of two time periods.<sup>44</sup> The first was between 1953-1957, which, Rachel Dwyer suggests, is due to the search in postcolonial India for ancient stories and myths that highlight the new nation’s unity amidst its diversity.<sup>45</sup> The second period of 1975-1983 was a boom in religious filmmaking that followed in the wake of Vijay Sharma’s surprise hit *Jai Santoshi Ma* (1975), a film so popular that its title goddess began to appear in Hindu temples across India. While Sharma mixed elements of the mythological, the devotional, and the social in a tale that situates his titular goddess in the midst of a family

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<sup>44</sup> Rachel Dwyer, *Filming the Gods: Religion and Indian Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 14 and 40.

<sup>45</sup> Indeed, the very first film about Shirdi Sai Baba was made in 1955, a low-budget Marathi feature called *Shirdi che Sai Baba* (dir. Kumarsen Samarth). This film won the All India Certificate in the third annual Indian Film Awards, but it proved difficult to find during my research period in India. Because of time and other logistical constraints, I have been unable to include it in my study of the Shirdi Sai Baba hagiographic tradition – or rather, it remains a subject of a forthcoming study.



drama, Bhushan found a successful formula that both presents the life of Shirdi Sai Baba in the late nineteenth/early twentieth century and also provides reasons why the saint should appeal to Indians in modernity, especially those wary of miracles and “superstition” (See Chapter 6).

While one cannot underestimate the effect that the nationwide release of *Shirdi ke Sai Baba* had on raising the saint’s profile in India and beyond, it is difficult to quantify this popularization.<sup>46</sup> Following the monetary donations that come into the Shri Sai Baba Sansthan and Trust in Shirdi is one way to shed light on the film’s impact. Vijay Chavan and Manohar Sonawane have charted the increase in the Sansthan’s finances over the last half of the twentieth century to show its rapid increase following Bhushan’s film. In 1952, when the Sansthan was registered with the Indian government, it reported an annual income of 214,000 Rupees. By 1973, this amount had climbed to 1,800,000 Rupees. By the end of the 1980s, the amount of money coming into the Sansthan spiked to upwards of 60 million Rupees.<sup>47</sup> Bhushan’s *Shirdi ke Sai Baba*, which spawned several other Sai Baba hagiopics in other Indian languages like *Bhagwan Sri Sai Baba* (1993;

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<sup>46</sup> Chavan and Sonawane write: “About two and a half decades ago, Manoj Kumar produced the film *Shirdi ke Sai Baba*, which spread Sai Baba’s fame throughout India. Afterwards is when the flocks of devotees began to stream into Shirdi” (*Don-aḍic daśakāmpūrvī manoj kumārane ‘śirḍī ke sāl bābā’ hā citrapaṭ kāḍhalā. Yā citrapaṭāne sāl bābāñcī khyātī bhāratācyā kānākoparyāt pohocavalī. Tyānantar śirḍīkaḍe bhāvakāñcā ogh vāḍhalā*). See Chavan and Sonawane, “Sāīkrpēcā gaḍad chāyā,” 28.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 37-38. The authors also cite a report from the Sansthan’s Management Committee (*vyavasthān samittī*) in 2004 that listed its income as approximately 870 million Rupees alongside deposits valued at 2,200,000,000 Rupees. They also note that they do not have current data but nonetheless estimate the annual income (as of their writing’s publication in 2012) at 1,400,000,000 Rupees. A higher annual income – 540 crores or 5,400,000,000 Rupees – was reported by the *Hindustan Times* in March 2012 in its coverage of the Aurangabad bench of the Bombay High Court’s ruling to dissolve the Sansthan’s government-appointed interim management committee on allegations of misappropriation and mismanagement of funds. See “Shirdi Temple Mgmt Panel Sacked,” *Hindustan Times*, March 14, 2012, <http://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/shirdi-temple-mgmt-panel-sacked/article1-824729.aspx>, accessed December 28, 2015.

Kannada) and *Sri Shirdi Saibaba Mahathyam* (1986; Telugu),<sup>48</sup> is certainly one factor contributing to the vast amount of money that has flowed and continues to flow into Shirdi. Alongside the significance of financial figures, *Shirdi ke Sai Baba* is important for scholars because it is one (but certainly not the only) way that Sai Baba devotees know what they know about the saint and his approach to the diversity of religions and religious communities in modern India.

Another reason that Bhushan's *Shirdi ke Sai Baba* makes for an interesting entry in the history of the Shirdi Sai Baba hagiographic tradition is that the film comes with a disclaimer that acknowledges what hagiographic texts generally do not, namely, that there are elements of innovation and creativity in the (re)telling of a saint's story. Before the title credits roll, the first disclaimer specifies that the film is generally based on Dabholkar's *Satcarita*, as well as "other miracles experienced by Baba's many devotees."<sup>49</sup> It is noteworthy that the film cites a specific source (the *Satcarita*) alongside an expansive, unbounded repository of hagiographic information, namely, the miraculous experiences of Sai Baba devotees. The mention of miracles experienced by Sai Baba devotees, however, should not be taken to mean that the film specifically, or exclusively, draws on Narasimhaswami's *Devotees' Experiences*. The second disclaimer adds something interesting: "In order to properly disseminate Baba's message to all of humanity, [this film] has taken recourse to use some new characters (*nae nām*) and new issues (*naī bāteñ*) to round out the story [of Sai Baba]."<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> After being dubbed into Hindi, these two films were renamed *Naam Ek, Roop Anek* (One Name, Many Forms) and *Shirdi ke Sai Baba ki Kahani* (The Story of Sai Baba of Shirdi), respectively.

<sup>49</sup> This first disclaimer reads: *Ye kahānī rav govindrāv dābholkar dvārā likhit 'sāī satcaritra' par aur kuch un chamatkāron par ādhārit hai jo bābā ke ānganit bhaktoñ ke sāth hue.*

<sup>50</sup> This second disclaimer reads: *Mānav jāti ke nām bābā ke sandēs ko pūrñ rūp se peś karne ke liye kahānī ke adhūre hissoñ ko pūrā karne ke liye kuch nae nām aur naī bāteñ kā sahārā liyā gayā hai.*

To impress upon the audience that Sai Baba is a saint fit to be venerated by everyone, the film's first song, which is more of a *bhajan*, is "Sai Baba Bolo," an injunctive to call out to the saint with devotion. The lyrics create a pastiche of religious figures by taking the name "Sai" and combining it with others: "Sai Ram Bolo, Sai Shyam Bolo / Allah Sai Bolo, Maula Sai Bolo / Nanak Sai Bolo, Govind Sai Bolo." The Sikh figures – Guru Nanak and Guru Govind, the first and last of the ten gurus – are noteworthy inasmuch as there is very little mention of Sai Baba in relation to Sikhism or the Sikh gurus in earlier hagiographic works.<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, in its presentation of Sai Baba's life story, Bhushan's film prominently features a Sikh devotional singer named Ram Singh, one of the "new characters" created by the filmmaker. Other Sai Baba hagiopics after *Shirdi ke Sai Baba* similarly "emplot" Sikh characters. Om Sai Prakash's *Bhagwan Sri Sai Baba* (1993) invents a scene where Sai Baba stirs the contents of his large metal cooking vessel (*hāṇḍī*) and shows the cooked rice to Hindus, Muslims, Christians, and Sikhs gathered around him, teaching them that each grain of rice is the same – just like there is only one *jāti* (lit. birth-group or caste, but here meaning something like "species"): *mānav jāti*, or the human race. Also, the animated film *Sab ka Malik Ek*, which is available on YouTube, metonymically represents India's religious diversity through Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh children, who gather around the saint and are identifiable by their clothing (e.g., the Muslim's *topī*, the Sikh's *pagarī*).

Whereas Desai's film constructs a Hindu-Muslim-Christian representation of India's religious diversity, the song "Sai Baba Bolo" in Bhushan's *Shirdi ke Sai Baba*

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<sup>51</sup> Narasimhaswami says that figures like Kabir and Guru Nanak "had some degree of success" in establishing "the bedrock of ideas on which Indian unification in religion could be accomplished" – but "their efforts fell short of that completion and perfection which we shall find in Baba's performance." See Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba*, 46.

invokes a Hindu-Muslim-Sikh representation. In noting that one member of the trifecta changes, I would suggest that the “Christian” and the “Sikh” in each tripartite configuration both refers to a different religion and religious community and also symbolically points beyond its own specificity. It signifies the “rest” of India’s religious diversity, a rhetorical device used to great effect in Sai Baba films to broaden the saint’s ability to harmonize religious difference for the sake of unity.

Many Shirdi Sai Baba hagiographic films begin in similar fashion, with a frame story about a modern Indian family facing some sort of crisis, usually an illness or a confrontation between the “religious” and “nonreligious” family members. By chance, the family comes into contact with Sai Baba devotees who recount the saint’s life story and miraculous deeds. The frame story in *Shirdi ke Sai Baba* is about a medical crisis affecting an upper-class Hindu family in Bombay. The wife, whose name is Puja, and the husband, who is unnamed, have a son, Deepak, who is suffering from an incurable form of blood cancer. Puja, like her namesake implies, is religious, while her husband is a doctor and a rationalist. When a Hindu priest gives Puja some sacred ash, or *udī*, from a Sai Baba temple, she gives the powerful substance to her sick child at home in bed. The film’s cinematography then employs one of the Indian film industry’s standard camera effects to create suspense: quick cuts alternating between characters’ faces while also zooming in on each face. The camera switches from mother looking at child, to father looking at child, to child with closed eyes but directly facing the audience, and to the face of Sai Baba’s *mūrtī*. Playing in the background is the *bhajan* “Sai Baba Bolo,” which intensifies as the cuts become quicker. As if energized by the *bhajan*, the boy Deepak finally opens his eyes and regains consciousness long enough to say, “Baba, Baba! Baba

said, you should take me to Shirdi.” From that point onward and despite the husband/father’s disinclination toward all things religious, the family starts its journey to Shirdi.

The Shirdi Sai Baba constructed in Bhushan’s hagiopic is obviously supposed to be a “syncretistic” saint – one in whom a variety of religions beyond Hinduism and Islam are brought together. For example, we see a new detail added to Sai Baba’s encounter with Chand Patil, the Muslim man who brought the young saint to Shirdi with his wedding party. The two meet in the countryside of Ahmednagar District, just outside of Patil’s village Dhupkheda, and in the middle of their conversation, Sai Baba suddenly speaks Arabic: “Praise be to God, Lord of the Worlds. May prayers and blessings be upon our Messenger Muhammad, and on all of his family and Companions.”<sup>52</sup> Hearing this, Chand Patil asks the saint if he is a Muslim. Sai Baba responds by reciting a verse from the *Bhagavad Gītā*: “Whenever there is a decline in *dharma*, and the absence of *dharma* increases, I create myself.”<sup>53</sup> Prompted by the recitation, Chand Patil asks if the saint is Hindu. The two share a meaningful glance at one another, which prompts Patil to apologize for falling into the circular argument (*cakkar*) about whether Sai Baba belongs to this or that category. At once, this scene both reflects the stance of the early Marathi hagiographic texts like Dabholkar’s *Satcarita* wherein the saint is described as “neither Hindu nor Muslim,” but it also adds this new detail – the verbal expression of his knowledge of Islamic and Hindu scriptures – in a way that imbues Sai Baba with the ability to speak authoritatively as both a Muslim and a Hindu. This detail, an innovation

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<sup>52</sup> The transliterated Arabic, roughly, reads: *alhamdulillah rabbil alamin, wasalatu wa salamu ala rasulina muhammadin wa ala alihi wa sahbihi ajmain*. I am grateful to Vincent Cornell for help with the translation.

<sup>53</sup> For this translation, see *The Bhagavad Gita*, trans. Patton, 51. This is verse 4:7 – *yadā yadā hi dharmasya glānirbhavati bhārata / abhyutthānamadharmasya tadātmānam sṛjāmyaham*.

in the repertoire of ways to tell Sai Baba's life story, is another narrative technique, I argue, to (re)imagine and (re)construct Shirdi Sai Baba as a "syncretistic" saint.

In keeping with our focus on the film's soundtrack, "Sai Nath, Sai Nath, Tere Hazaaron Hath" (Lord Sai, Lord Sai, the One with 1,000 hands) enlarges the scope of religions embodied by the saint. This *bhajan* is sung by a poor, blind man named Hira whose condition is the karmic result of his past indiscretions: drinking, gambling, and strangling his wife to steal her jewelry. Of course, Hira is remorseful and places his faith in Sai Baba, which leads to the miraculous restoration of his eyesight. "When I look to this side," the character Hira sings, "I see that you look like Kanhaiya (Krishna). And when I look to the other side, I see Mother Durga." Some lyrics establish that Shirdi Sai Baba's face reflects the essence of other religious figures – the smile of Nanak (*nānak kī muskān*), the radiance of Muhammad (*śān-e-Mohammad*), while others establish a direct sense of embodiment: "You are the garland of Ram's holy name (*rām nām kī hai tū mālā*) / the enlightenment of Gautama [the Buddha] resides in you (*gautam vālā tujh meñ ujālā*)." Here, the religions syncretized by Shirdi Sai Baba are four vis-à-vis Hinduism, Islam Sikhism, and Buddhism. However, one will observe that the "Hindu" member of this union gets three mentions, viz. the deities Krishna, Durga, and Ram.

Another *bhajan* in the film adds to the number of religions comprising Shirdi Sai Baba's syncretism. The hagiographer Das Ganu – played in *Shirdi ke Sai Baba* by Manmohan Krishna – sings "Sumar Manwa," the title of which means something like a combination of the commands, "Count up!" and "Celebrate!"<sup>54</sup> The things to be counted

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<sup>54</sup> The word *sumār* is the Marathi equivalent of the Hindi-Urdu *śumār*, meaning "counting" or "enumeration." The second person informal command *manvā* is from the causative verb *manvānā*, meaning "to cause to celebrate/believe/accept as true." I am thankful to Elliott McCarter for helping me parse this *bhajan*.

up and celebrated are the *pañca-tattva*, the “five primordial elements” of the universe. In Sanskrit religious literature, these five elements are earth (*pṛthvī*), water (*apu*), fire (*teja*), air (*vāyu*), and space (*ākāśa*). Bhushan’s film re-conceptualizes them as symbols denoting different religions: the Om (Hinduism), the crescent and star (Islam), the cross (Christianity), the wheel of *dharma* (Buddhism), and the sacred fire (Zoroastrianism). Even though this leads the audience to understand Shirdi Sai Baba as a “syncretistic” saint according equal representation and respect to multiple religions, there remains in the film’s construction of the saint a politics of compositeness that leans toward its Hindu aspect. In the scene with Sai Baba stirring the *hāṇḍī* while Das Ganu sings “Sumar Manwa,” Sai Baba flexes an open hand upon which the film’s special effects superimpose five religious symbols. The cross, the crescent, the flame, and the wheel hover above each finger, while the Om is assigned to the thumb – the one digit that stands in contradistinction with the hand’s four fingers (see Figure 4.4).

Bhushan’s film also delicately constructs a frame of “Hindu-ness” in its retelling of a well-known miracle: the time that Shirdi Sai Baba came back to life after seventy-two hours of *samādhī* (i.e., the soul’s absorption into God). According to Dabholkar’s *Satcarita*, in 1886, Shirdi Sai Baba suffered an acute attack of asthma (*damā*) and announced that he would enter a three-day period of *samādhī*. Dabholkar describes a serious situation: the saint’s breathing ceased; he became totally still and without any sign of life; and the villagers in Shirdi grew worried about what to do next. A disagreement broke out between those wanting to bury him and those holding steadfast to the promise of his return. Amidst the bickering, Sai Baba regained consciousness to the

embarrassment of his doubters and the amazement of his devotees.<sup>55</sup> In comparison, Bhushan's *Shirdi ke Sai Baba* basically follows the *Satcarita* in showing this event as a public event, one of great sadness for the whole village. It also does something new. This scene features a reappraisal of "Sai Baba Bolo" – the *bhajan*-like song in the film's beginning – and shows representatives of Shirdi's religious communities lamenting their loss through song. A Hindu singer sings, "Sai Ram Bolo, Sai Shyam Bolo;" a Muslim singer sings "Allah Sai Bolo, Maula Sai Bolo;" and a Sikh singer sings "Nanak Sai Bolo, Govind Sai Bolo." As the music's tempo moves toward crescendo and Sai Baba starts to regain consciousness, the Hindu-inflected lyrics that synonymize Sai Baba with the Hindu deities Ram and Krishna ("Sai Shyam, Sai Ram") get fervently repeated over and over. Their repetition is the force that brings the saint back to life. The other figures, the Muslim and the Sikh, add depth and diversity to the repertoire of religions syncretized by Shirdi Sai Baba, but in *Shirdi ke Sai Baba*, only the Hindu singer and his Hindu-inflected lyrics do the narrative "heavy lifting" in Sai Baba's resurrection.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> See Chapter 44 of the *Satcarita* for Sai Baba's *samādhī* and resurrection. Interestingly, in the *Satcarita*, the doubters – i.e., the ones who thought him dead and favored burial – are said to be the local Muslims. The villagers shocked at the saint's return are also Muslims: "The *maulvīs* and the *fakīrs* turned white with fear on account of the grave error [they were about to commit] (*ŚSSC* 44:88 *maulvī fakīr paḍale phike / kīn prasaṅga cuke bhayaṅkar*)." Bhushan's film changes the nature of the conflict by making the film's anti-Sai Baba antagonists, a Brahmin priest named Mangaloo and a Brahmin apothecary named Kulkarni, into the ones advocating for the saint's quick and timely burial. See Chapter 7 for more on the conflict between these Brahmins and Sai Baba in Bhushan's film.

<sup>56</sup> By pointing out the Hindu frame that couches Sai Baba's compositeness in Bhushan's film, I do not mean to discount the rhetorical impact of showing the saint interacting with a diverse devotional demographic. Indeed, Sai Baba's resurrection in *Shirdi ke Sai Baba* shows the saint opening his eyes just as the Sikh singer shouts the exhortation, "*Jo bole so nihāl*." Sai Baba responds with the complementary phrase so central to Sikh religious culture, "*Sat śrī akāl*." This particular interaction is an innovative twist in the saint's story that originates in Bhushan's film, and it demonstrates the lengths to which late twentieth-century filmmakers (and textual hagiographers, too) go to construct the image of Sai Baba as a saint with an inclusive approach to India's religions and religious communities.





Fig. 4.4 During the song “Sumar Manwa,” the saint’s hand supports five symbols of different world religions: the Hindu *Om* on the thumb, and the Christian cross, Buddhist wheel, Islamic crescent and star, and Zoroastrian sacred fire on the fingers. Source: *Shirdi ke Sai Baba*, dir. Ashok Bhushan.

## Some Detractors of Shirdi Sai Baba

### a. Swami Swaroopananda’s Anti-Sai Baba Campaign

“[Shirdi] Sai Baba is not God –Swaroopananda.” This headline appeared in the *Maharashtrian Times* and other newspapers in India on June 23, 2014.<sup>57</sup> Rather unexpectedly, Swami Swaroopananda Saraswati, a Hindu religious leader who is the head abbot (*śaṅkarācārya*) of the Dwarka and Jyotir monasteries (*maṭha*), began to make a series of disparaging statements about Shirdi Sai Baba and Sai Baba devotees. His first volley stated that contrary to devotees’ beliefs, Sai Baba is not divine (i.e., not “God”); people should not build temples to him; and they should not go about collecting money in

<sup>57</sup> “Sāi bābā deva nahīta! – Swarūpananda,” *Maharashtra Times*, June 23, 2014, <http://maharashtratimes.indiatimes.com/nation/Sai-Baba-is-not-God-Swaroopanand/articleshow/37063097.cms>, accessed December 28, 2015.

his name.<sup>58</sup> In subsequent public statements and an interview with ABP News (all of which took place in Hindi), the swami elaborated on his theological and moral objections to Hindus worshipping Shirdi Sai Baba. He argued that Sai Baba cannot be considered a divine incarnation of a Hindu deity because “according to *sanātana dharma*” only two of Vishnu’s twenty-four *avatāras*, Buddha and Kalki, are said to appear in the present age, i.e. the *kaliyuga*.<sup>59</sup> He said that Sai Baba cannot be a true guru (*sadguru*) because he lacked virtuous behavior: “The guru is one with proper conduct (*sadācār*), but Sai was non-vegetarian. He made people get circumcised. He was the child of Pandarak society, a society based on thieving. Therefore, he cannot be our ideal.”<sup>60</sup> Swami Swaroopananda also challenged the idea that Sai Baba is a “syncretistic” saint: “It is said that [Baba] is a symbol of Hindu-Muslim unity. But he will only be such a symbol when Muslims also accept him. Muslims don’t accept him at all, so why should we Hindus?”<sup>61</sup> He added:

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<sup>58</sup> Swami Swaroopananda has made all of his statements in Hindi. Newspaper articles in Hindi and Marathi interchangeably use the words *deva* and *bhagvān* for “God” when paraphrasing the swami’s statements.

<sup>59</sup> “Phir bole śaṅkarācārya – sab kā mālik ek to sāin kā mālik kaun thā?” *Dainik Bhaskar*, June 24, 2014, <http://www.bhaskar.com/article-ht/NAT-shankracharya-swami-swaroopanand-saraswati-controversy-on-sai-baba-4657338-NOR.html>, accessed December 28, 2015. The *Dainik Bhaskar* quotes Swami Swaroopananda: “It is said that religious worship should be reserved for divine incarnations and gurus. In *sanātana dharm*, it is believed that Lord Vishnu has 24 incarnations. In the *kaliyuga*, there is no mention of any incarnations other than Buddha and Kalki. Therefore, Sai Baba cannot be considered an incarnation [of Vishnu]” (*Kahā jātā hai ki pūjā avatār yā guru kī hotī hai. Sanātana dharm meṅ bhagavān viṣṇu ke 24 avatār māne jāte haiṅ. Kaliyug meṅ buddh aur kalki ke alāvā kisī avatār kī carcā nahīn hai. Isiliye, sāin avatār nahīn ho sakte*).

<sup>60</sup> Ibid. The swami’s quote in Hindi reads: “Sāin mānsāhārī thā, logon kā khatnā karvātā thā, paṅḍārak samāj kī aulād thā jo luṭerā samāj thā.” The word used by the swami is *paṅḍārak samāj* (“Pandarak society”) seems to refer to *piṅḍārīs*, namely, the “predatory hordes that were often retained [by the Maratha armies in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries] after they had paid a tax called *palpati* for the right to plunder” (Cooper, 32). While some *piṅḍārīs* were Marathas from present-day Maharashtra, others were Pathans, meaning that they were of Afghan origin. Clearly, Swami Swaroopananda implies that Shirdi Sai Baba was not only the product of a looting and pillaging society, but also one of the Muslim members of that type of society. For more on the *piṅḍārīs*, see Randolph G.S. Cooper, *The Anglo-Maratha Campaigns and the Contest for India: The Struggle for the Control of the South Asian Military Economy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

<sup>61</sup> “Śaṅkarācārya swāmī swārūpananda bole – bhagvān nahīn hai śirḍī ke sāin bābā,” *Dainik Bhaskar*, June 23, 2014, <http://www.bhaskar.com/news/NAT-shankaracharya-swami-swaroopanand-saraswati-said-shridi-sai-baba-is-not-god--4656072NOR.html>, accessed December 28, 2015. The swami’s quote in Hindi reads: “Ye kahā jātā hai ki yeh hindū-muslim ekatā kā pratīk hai. Lekin ye pratīk tab hotā jab musalmān bhī mānte. Musalmān to mānte nahīn haiṅ, phir hum hī kyon māneṅ?”

“Sai Baba used to say, ‘The Lord of all is one.’ If so, why do Buddhists and Jains worship separate gods?”<sup>62</sup>

As these statements kept coming out during the last week of June, the swami’s antagonism intensified. At one point, Swami Swaroopananda suggested that Sai Baba’s symbolism of Hindu-Muslim unity was a conspiracy by British colonialists who never wanted Hindus to be singlehandedly in power in India.<sup>63</sup> (This element of a British-orchestrated conspiracy theory disappeared in the swami’s later statements, but even its one-off appearance evidences the xenophobic nature of his anti-Sai Baba rhetoric). The height of the swami’s verbal attack came on June 30 when he politicized Sai Baba’s religious identity: “Sai Baba was a Muslim ‘Fakir’ who cannot be compared to Hindu deities or worshipped like them.”<sup>64</sup> Here, he spoke directly to Sai Baba devotees, commanding them to stop worshipping the Hindu god Ram and bathing in the sacred waters of the Ganges River because, according to the nonagenarian Hindu religious leader, devotion to Sai Baba is tantamount to Hindu hypocrisy.

In Shirdi, the Shri Sai Baba Sansthan and Trust quickly condemned Swami Swaroopananda’s comments. On the day after the controversy broke in the media, Jayant Sasane, a former chairperson of the Trust, called the swami’s assessment of Sai Baba “completely wrong:”

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<sup>62</sup> “Swaroopananda Booked, Protests over Sai Baba Comments,” *Hindustan Times*, June 24, 2014, <http://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/swaroopanand-booked-protests-over-sai-baba-comments/article1-1233197.aspx>, accessed December 28, 2015.

<sup>63</sup> “Śaṅkarācārya swāmī swārūpananda bole – bhagvān nahīn hai śirdī ke sāīn bābā,” *Dainik Bhaskar*, June 23, 2014, <http://www.bhaskar.com/news/NAT-shankaracharya-swami-swaroopanand-saraswati-said-shridi-sai-baba-is-not-god--4656072NOR.html>, accessed December 28, 2015. The swami’s quote in Hindi reads: “Ye (pratīk mānne kī bāt) vaham hai jo samāj mein phailāyā gayā hai. Ye bṛīṭen kī taraf se ho rahā hai. Vo cāhate haiñ ki bhārat hindū pradhān nahīn raheñ.”

<sup>64</sup> “Sai Baba Just a ‘Muslim Fakir’ Can’t Be Worshipped: Shankaracharya,” *Deccan Chronicle*, June 30, 2014, <http://www.deccanchronicle.com/140630/nation-current-affairs/article/sai-baba-just-muslim-fakir%E2%80%9D-cant-be-worshipped-shankaracharya>, accessed December 28, 2015.

Baba lived in Shirdi for sixty years. He worked for the benefit of people from all religions. He worked for the whole world and the country; he never robbed anyone. The way the swami talks and the language he uses are completely wrong. It's a move to spread confusion among the people.<sup>65</sup>

Sai Baba devotees in Shirdi held a public procession and demanded that Swami Swaroopananda apologize for his defamatory allegations. In Varanasi, they burned the swami in effigy.<sup>66</sup> In Haridwar, the Sai Kutumb Samiti organized a public bathing at the Hari ki Paudi, the “steps of God” leading into the Ganga, as a public affirmation of faith in Sai Baba at a major Hindu pilgrimage site.<sup>67</sup> Devotees also filed court cases against Swami Swaroopananda in Maharashtra<sup>68</sup> and Madhya Pradesh<sup>69</sup> that cited the sections of the Indian penal code that criminalize statements and actions that “outrage” (Section 295A)<sup>70</sup> and “hurt” (Section 298) the religious sentiments of others.

Meanwhile, Swami Swaroopananda's stance against Sai Baba garnered its fair share of support from a variety of voices in India. On June 26, the *Times of India* reported that members of the Shri Kashi Vidwat Parishad, a major organization of Hindu religious

<sup>65</sup> “Śaṅkarācārya swāmī swārūpananda bole – bhagvān nahīn hai śīrdī ke sāīn bābā,” *Dainik Bhaskar*, June 23, 2014, <http://www.bhaskar.com/news/NAT-shankaracharya-swami-swaroopanand-saraswati-said-shridi-sai-baba-is-not-god--4656072NOR.html>, accessed December 28, 2015. Jayant Sasane's quote in Hindi reads: “Bābā śīrdī mein 60 sāl rahe. Sāre dharm ke logon ke liye unhoṅne kām kiyā. Unhoṅne pūrī duniyā aur deś ke liye kām kiyā, na ki kiśī ko lūṭne kā kām kiyā. Jis tara se, jis bhāṣā mein swāmī bāt kar rahe haiṅ, voh sarāsar galat hai. Logon mein bhram phailāne kī sāziś hai.”

<sup>66</sup> “Devotees in Varanasi Protest against Swami Swaroopananda for His Anti-Sai Baba Remark,” *ANI News*, June 24, 2014, <http://aninews.in/videogallery2/24872-devotees-in-varanasi-protest-against-swami-swaroopanand-for-his-anti-sai-baba-remark.html>, accessed December 28, 2015.

<sup>67</sup> “Muslim Clerics Too Jump into Sai Baba Controversy,” *Deccan Herald*, June 24, 2014, <http://www.deccanherald.com/content/415757/muslim-clerics-too-jump-sai.html>, accessed December 28, 2015.

<sup>68</sup> “Swaroopananda Booked, Protests over Sai Baba Comments,” *Hindustan Times*, June 24, 2014, <http://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/swaroopanand-booked-protests-over-sai-baba-comments/article1-1233197.aspx>, accessed December 28, 2015.

<sup>69</sup> “Saibaba Devotee Moves Court against Dwarka Peeth Seer,” *Times of India*, June 24, 2014, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Saibaba-devotee-moves-court-against-Dwarka-Peeth-seer/articleshow/37133921.cms>, accessed December 28, 2015.

<sup>70</sup> Interestingly, this is the same section of the Indian Penal Code (Section 295A) that was cited in the criminal and civil cases filed by RSS ideologue Dinanath Batra against American scholar Wendy Doniger's book *The Hindus: An Alternative History* after its publication in India in 2010.

scholars in Varanasi, expressed their support for Swami Swaroopananda in a meeting at Shri Vidya Math at Kedar Ghat, and scores of “Sanatan dharma” followers sympathetically observed a collective fast at Mumuksha Bhavan in Varanasi. “We agree with Shankaracharya’s statement that Sai Baba is neither an incarnation nor the symbol of Hindu-Muslim unity,” said Swami Avimukteshwaranad Saraswati, one of Swaroopananda’s disciples.<sup>71</sup> Swami Swaroopananda’s anti-Sai Baba campaign also recruited formidable allies in the form of the Naga Sadhus, the naked Hindu holy men known as much for their matted hair and ascetic practices as for their militant defense of Hinduism from its perceived enemies.<sup>72</sup> Some Naga leaders announced a “war of religion” – or rather, a *dharma-yuddha*<sup>73</sup> – that would require more public demonstrations of support for the swami and protest against the worship of Shirdi Sai Baba. Swami Narendra Giri, the head of the Baghambari monastery and member of the Akhara Parishad, the umbrella organization that oversees Hindu saints and ascetics in India, threatened to mobilize the Naga Sadhus in violence: “Sai followers have left only one alternative (for us), and that is damaging and defacing their temples just as they did with the Shankaracharya’s images and photographs.”<sup>74</sup> Giri added that Sai Baba devotees “should ensure that Hindu Gods and Sai Baba are not kept in a temple and if they want to

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<sup>71</sup> “‘Debate’ on Sai Baba Continues in Holy City,” *Times of India*, June 26, 2014, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/varanasi/Debate-on-Sai-Baba-continues-in-Holy-City/articleshow/37238112.cms>, accessed December 28, 2015.

<sup>72</sup> For more on Naga *sādhus*, see Marcus Franke, *War and Nationalism in South Asia* (London: Routledge, 2009).

<sup>73</sup> “Naga Sadhus Told to Gather at Holy Cities to Counter Sai Baba Followers,” *India Today*, July 2, 2014, <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/naga-sadhus-told-to-gather-at-holy-cities-to-counter-sai-baba-followers/1/369445.html>, accessed December 28, 2015.

<sup>74</sup> “Sai vs. Shankaracharya: Conflict May Turn Ugly,” *Times of India*, July 3, 2014, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Sai-vs-Shankaracharya-Conflict-may-turn-ugly/articleshow/37670625.cms>, accessed December 28, 2015.

keep both, then Hindu Gods should be put above Baba.”<sup>75</sup> The allegations about Sai Baba being a “Muslim fakir” even elicited a response from the Darul Uloom seminary in Deoband, a bastion of conservative Islamic theology in India. Arif Qasmi, one of the seminary’s senior clerics, declared that it would be “un-Islamic” for Muslims to worship Sai Baba and recite “Allah” during such rituals.<sup>76</sup> The Hindu swami and the Muslim cleric will not agree on much else in the realm of religion, but they are aligned inasmuch as neither is a fan of Shirdi Sai Baba or the idea of religious mixing.

If the similarly negative opinion on Shirdi Sai Baba from Hindu and Muslim religious leaders is one surprising outcome of this controversy, then another noteworthy observation is that the conflict was not reducible to a battle between the exclusivist agenda of Hindu nationalists and the religious cosmopolitanism symbolized by Shirdi Sai Baba. One might think that the Hindutva proponents in Hindu nationalist organizations like the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) would have been sympathetic to the swami’s argument that Sai Baba is something like an undercover Muslim double-agent who has been smuggled into Hinduism. However, this was not the case. Consider the verbal exchange between Swami Swaroopananda and the BJP’s water resources minister Uma Bharti. While Uma Bharti, like the swami, has advocated in Hindu nationalist fashion for the building of a Ram temple in Ayodhya, she came out in support of Sai Baba worship, saying that it is a matter of “personal faith” and rejecting the claim that Sai Baba hypocritically called himself “God:”

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<sup>75</sup> “Akhadas Soften Stand against Sai Followers,” *Times of India*, July 4, 2014, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/allahabad/Akhadas-soften-stand-against-Sai-followers/articleshow/37776761.cms>, accessed December 28, 2015.

<sup>76</sup> “Muslim Clerics Too Jump into Sai Baba Controversy,” *Deccan Herald*, June 24, 2014, <http://www.deccanherald.com/content/415757/muslim-clerics-too-jump-sai.html>, accessed December 28, 2015.

Sai Baba never proclaimed that he was God (*bhagvān*). His devotees never said that [Baba] claimed to be a divine incarnation (*avatār*). They only said that they considered him to be God. Now, some of us have a faith that considers our mothers and fathers, our guests and gurus to be God. How many people have bowed their heads in Sai Baba's court (*darbar*) and had their troubles taken away!<sup>77</sup>

Swami Swaroopananda responded polemically by saying that he was disappointed to hear that Bharti "is a worshiper of a Muslim."<sup>78</sup> Other parties created separation between the issue and themselves. The BJP's national spokesperson Vijay Sonkar Shastri issued a statement to say that the swami's "personal opinion" regarding Shirdi Sai Baba is not a subject of the party's political interest.<sup>79</sup> Indresh Kumar, an ideologue of the RSS, emphasized the importance of an individual's freedom of belief: "I feel that the saints and seers shouldn't interfere into the affairs of others concerning gods and goddesses."<sup>80</sup>

The non-alliance between Swami Swaroopananda and other Hindu nationalists is probably due in large part to the swami's history as a Congress supporter and a critic of the BJP's prime ministerial candidate Narendra Modi in the months before 2014 general elections. In March 2014, Congress officials submitted a complaint to the country's election commission and claimed that the slogan used by BJP party workers in Varanasi –

<sup>77</sup> "Umā bhāratī ne kiyā sāīn pūjā kā samarthan to bhārake śaṅkarācārya kahā – Rājñīti nahīn karen mantrī," *Dainik Bhaskar*, June 29, 2014, <http://www.bhaskar.com/article-ht/NAT-sankaracharya-swami-swaroopanand-saraswati-slams-%E2%80%8Euma-bharti-for-defending-worshi-4663074-PHO.html>, accessed December 28, 2015. Uma Bharat's quote in Hindi reads: "Sāīn bābā ne kabhī ghoṣit nahīn kiyā ki maiñ bhagvān hūñ. Bhaktoñ ne kabhī nahīn kahā ki unheñ avatār ghoṣit karo. Unhoñne to keval itnā kahā ki hum sāīn ko bhagvān mānte haiñ. Ab kisī kī āsthā hai to hum to apne māñ-bāp, atithi aur guru ko bhī mānte haiñ. Kitne logoñ ne sāīn ke darbar par matthā ṭekā hai aur unke sañkaṭ dūr hue haiñ."

<sup>78</sup> "Sai vs. Shankaracharya: Conflict May Turn Ugly," *Times of India*, July 3, 2014, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Sai-vs-Shankaracharya-Conflict-may-turn-ugly/articleshow/37670625.cms>, accessed December 28, 2015.

<sup>79</sup> "Shankaracharya's Comments on Sai Baba His Personal View: BJP," *Economic Times*, June 30, 2014, [http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2014-06-30/news/50974296\\_1\\_sai-baba-ram-temple-issue-bjp-and-rss](http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2014-06-30/news/50974296_1_sai-baba-ram-temple-issue-bjp-and-rss), accessed December 28, 2015.

<sup>80</sup> "Saints Should not Interfere in Each Other's Affairs: RSS," *Economic Times*, June 27, 2014, [http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2014-06-27/news/50912149\\_1\\_rss-saints-sai-baba](http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2014-06-27/news/50912149_1_rss-saints-sai-baba), accessed December 28, 2015.



“*Har Har Modi, Ghar Ghar Modi*” – was an explicit strategy to conflate Modi with a Hindu deity.<sup>81</sup> According to the swami, the BJP’s version of this phrase puts “Modi” in place of the name of the god Mahadev/Shiva, thereby offending Hindu religious sensibilities. Religious leaders in Varanasi, the constituency from which Modi was contesting for a seat in the Lok Sabha, joined the Congress Party in voicing their disapproval of what they perceived as the “politicization of the sacred mantras,” and Swami Swaroopananda spoke on his objection to the worship of a human being as a divine figure: “Instead of worshipping god, it is an attempt to worship a particular human being and is against Hindu religion.”<sup>82</sup> It is thus helpful to understand the swami’s verbal attack on Sai Baba as both a public denouncement of “man-worshipping” intertwined with a politicized denigration of the saint primarily on the accusation that he is a Muslim holy man.

After several weeks of public statements and demonstrations of support and protest, Swami Swaroopananda announced that he wanted to convene a *dharma sansad*, or what the Indian press translated as “religious conclave.” Between August 24 and 25, Swami Swaroopananda led a gathering of more than 400 Hindu religious leaders in Kawardha (Chhattisgarh) in a debate with a specific topic: the deification of Shirdi Sai Baba.<sup>83</sup> While the Sansthan and Trust in Shirdi declined the invitation to participate, a few Sai Baba devotees were invited to voice their opinion at the gathering, only to be cut

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<sup>81</sup> “Congress Wants BJP Derecognized over ‘Har Har Modi’ Slogan,” *Times of India*, March 24, 2014, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/home/news/Congress-wants-BJP-derecognized-over-Har-Har-Modi-slogan/articleshow/32797226.cms>, accessed December 28, 2015.

<sup>82</sup> “Dwarka Seer Swaroopananda Saraswati Slams ‘Har Har Modi’ Chants, Complaints to RSS,” *Zee News*, March 23, 2014, [http://zeenews.india.com/news/nation/dwarka-seer-swaroopanand-saraswati-slams-har-har-modi-chants-complaints-to-rss\\_919716.html](http://zeenews.india.com/news/nation/dwarka-seer-swaroopanand-saraswati-slams-har-har-modi-chants-complaints-to-rss_919716.html), accessed December 28, 2015.

<sup>83</sup> “Meet on Deification of Shirdi Saibaba Starts near Raipur,” *Deccan Chronicle*, August 24, 2014, <http://www.deccanchronicle.com/140825/nation-current-affairs/article/meet-deification-shirdi-saibaba-starts-near-raipur>, accessed December 28, 2015.



off on stage by an intrepid sadhu.<sup>84</sup> The Hindu religious leaders in attendance passed a number of resolutions – with final approval coming from the Kashi Vidvat Parishad – that Hindus (i.e., “followers of sanatan dharma”) should not worship Shirdi Sai Baba as a deity and should not put his *mūrtī* alongside the *mūrtīs* of Hindu deities. Other resolutions included the classic Hindu nationalist desires, such as the introduction of Hindu scriptures into the Indian school system, the protection of women and cows, the construction of the Ram temple in Ayodhya, and so on.<sup>85</sup>

Before the *dharma sansad*, media reports indicated that some Hindus were already sympathetic to the anti-Sai Baba campaign. In July, Shivji Maharaj, the administrator and trustee of an old Shiva temple in Dharampur (Valsad District, Gujarat), said that he was following the instructions of Swami Swaroopananda in removing the temple’s recently installed Sai Baba *mūrtī*.<sup>86</sup> After the conclave, a couple of other Hindu temples made news for following its resolution. In September, caretakers of the Balajipuram temple in Betul (Madhya Pradesh) removed a Sai Baba *mūrtī* that had been installed some thirteen years ago, turned it over to a local group of Sai Baba devotees, and performed *śuddhikaraṇ*, or ritual purification, of the temple’s environs.<sup>87</sup> Also in

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<sup>84</sup> “Devotees of Shirdi Saibaba and Shankaracharya Clash at Religious Meet in Chhattisgarh,” *Daily Bhaskar*, August 28, 2014, <http://daily.bhaskar.com/news-ht/MP-OTC-latest-news-devotees-of-shirdi-sababa-and-shankaracharya-clash-at-religious-meet-4723998-NOR.html>, accessed December 28, 2015.

<sup>85</sup> “Shirdi Sai Baba Should Not Be Worshipped as Deity, Says Dharma Sansad,” *The Hindu*, August 26, 2014, <http://www.thehindu.com/features/friday-review/religion/shirdi-sai-baba-should-not-be-worshipped-as-deity-says-dharma-sansad-convoked-by-the-shankaracharya-swami-swaroopanand-saraswati-of-dwarka-peeth/article6351000.ece>, accessed December 28, 2015.

<sup>86</sup> “Swami Swaroopananda Saraswati’s Followers to Remove Sai Idol Installed at Ancient Gujarat Temple,” *Daily Bhaskar*, July 15, 2014, <http://daily.bhaskar.com/article/GUJ-AHD-swami-swaroopanand-saraswati-followers-to-remove-sai-idol-installed-at-ancient--4680845-NOR.html>, accessed December 28, 2015.

<sup>87</sup> “Betul: Bālājīpuram se haṭegi sāñ kī mūrti, mandir kā hogā śuddhikaraṇ,” *Aaj Tak*, September 22, 2014, <http://aajtak.intoday.in/story/sai-baba-idol-to-be-removed-from-balajipuram-temple-in-betul-madhya-pradesh-781019-1.html>, accessed December 28, 2015.

September, a Sai Baba image was removed from a Hindu temple in the Muradnagar area of Ghaziabad (Uttar Pradesh) and immersed in a manmade canal nearby.<sup>88</sup>

During the rest of 2014 and the first half of 2015, Swami Swaroopananda was relatively quiet. The swami occasionally made headlines, for example, when he criticized Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan for visiting Shirdi.<sup>89</sup> The swami continued to condemn Shirdi Sai Baba worship at public gatherings of Hindu nationalists in cities like Dhamtari (near Raipur) and Allahabad.<sup>90</sup> He made headlines yet again in October 2015 during a public gathering in Bhopal, wherein the swami revealed his newest piece of anti-Sai Baba propaganda: a poster depicting the Hindu god Hanuman chasing the saint with a large, uprooted tree. The poster's imagery was inspired by a disciple's dream, in which it was foretold that Sai Baba would be chased away to Pakistan within the next three years.<sup>91</sup> Despite these sustained verbal attacks on the saint by the swami and others, there has been no indication of a slowdown in the flow of people and money coming into Shirdi. For the week between Christmas and New Year's Day 2015, the tomb-temple complex received

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<sup>88</sup> "Ghaziabad: Sai Baba Idol Removed from Temple," *E-Newspaper of India*, September 6, 2014, <http://eni.news24online.com/ghaziabad-sai-baba-idol-removed-from-temple/>, accessed December 28, 2015.

<sup>89</sup> "Shankaracharya Sparks Controversy Again: Warns Narendra Modi ahead of Shirdi Visit," *Daily Bhaskar*, August 9, 2014, <http://daily.bhaskar.com/news/NAT-TOP-shankaracharya-sparks-controversy-again-warns-narendra-modi-ahead-of-shirdi-visit-4708410-NOR.html>, accessed December 28, 2015. "Chouhan's New Year's Visit to Shirdi Irks Shankaracharya," *Hindustan Times*, January 2, 2015, <http://www.hindustantimes.com/bhopal/mp-cm-s-visit-to-shirdi-raises-shankaracharya-s-eyebrows/article1-1302411.aspx>, accessed December 28, 2015. Chief Minister Chouhan is a member of the BJP, and the BJP's state spokesperson for Madhya Pradesh Deepak Vijayvargiya issued a statement rebuking the swami's criticism of Chouhan, saying: "It's not necessary whatever Shankaracharya says defines Hindutva. Visiting Shirdi was a matter of personal faith of a person and nobody should question it."

<sup>90</sup> "Dwarka Shankaracharya Swami Seer Threatens Sai Baba Devotees," *Deccan Chronicle*, September 16, 2014, <http://www.deccanchronicle.com/140916/nation-current-affairs/article/dwarka-shankaracharya-swami-seer-threatens-sai-baba-devotees>, accessed December 28, 2015.

<sup>91</sup> "MP: Shankaracharya Releases Poster against Sai Baba," *Hindustan Times*, October 30, 2015, <http://www.hindustantimes.com/bhopal/mp-shankaracharya-releases-poster-against-sai-baba/story-n6PuqdoEJovkQ8Hah6QPPO.html>, accessed February 28, 2016.

offerings totaling over 115 million Rupees from an estimated 800,000 visitors from India and abroad.<sup>92</sup>

While the ultimate goal of Swami Swaroopananda's outspokenness against Sai Baba is the total eradication of Sai Baba temples and imagery in India, the only success of his movement, so far, has been the raising of awareness among Hindus about the "problems" with the saint and his worship for adherents of *sanātana dharma*. More importantly, the lesson to be learned from the ongoing Swami-Sai controversy is that Swami Swaroopananda exemplifies many fundamentalist religious figures in modern India who claim the authority to define what is and is not properly "Hindu" but are not recognized universally by all Hindus as having the power to do so.

#### b. Anti-Sai Baba Rhetoric and Imagery on Facebook

Swami Swaroopananda and likeminded Hindu religious leaders are not alone in criticizing Shirdi Sai Baba and the idea of religions mixing together. In June 2013, the *Daily Bhaskar* featured an article about the online activity of Sai Baba's detractors: "Sai Baba called 'biggest lie,' 'Islamic agent,' Facebook fails to remove the 'profanic' page."<sup>93</sup> The *Bhaskar* article is a short informational piece on a Facebook page, open to the public and composed entirely in Hindi, with the title: "Shirdi Sai Baba: The Biggest Hypocrite in the History of India" (*śirḍī sālī bābā – bhārat ke itihās kā sabse baḍā*

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<sup>92</sup> "Shirdi Saibaba Temple Receives Offerings Worth Over Rs. 11 Crore in a Week," *Financial Express*, January 3, 2015, <http://www.financialexpress.com/article/miscellaneous/shirdi-saibaba-temple-receives-offerings-worth-over-rs-11-crore-in-a-week/25653/>, accessed December 28, 2015.

<sup>93</sup> "Sai Baba Called 'Biggest Lie,' 'Islamic Agent,' Facebook Fails to Remove 'Profanic' Page," *Daily Bhaskar*, June 26, 2013, <http://daily.bhaskar.com/article/MAH-MUM-sai-baba-called-as-biggest-lie-islamic-agent-facebook-fails-to-remove-the-profan-4303002-PHO.html>, accessed December 28, 2015.

*pākhaṇḍ*).<sup>94</sup> The article notes that the page had 8,442 “likes,” and by August 2015, it had acquired approximately 21,000.<sup>95</sup> Another Facebook page with similar hostility toward the saint is “The Islamization of Hindus by the Islamic Fakir Shirdi Sai” (*islāmīk fakīr śīrḍī sāī dwārā hinduoṅ kā islāmīkaraṅ*).<sup>96</sup> Other pages purport to expose the hypocrisy of Shirdi Sai Baba as a Muslim holy man named “Chand Muhammad” and insinuate that Sai Baba’s ability to work miracles is synonymous with rapaciousness – a saint who is not *camatkārī* but *balātkārī*.<sup>97</sup> However, in this section, I have selected as the subject of analysis the “Biggest Hypocrite” page because its administrators have updated it regularly with new content. The other pages are either sporadically active (like the “Islamization” page) or dovetail hatred for Shirdi Sai Baba with other Hindu nationalist issues, such as the call to change Delhi’s Aurangzeb Road to something non-Islamic (like the “Chand Muhammad” page).

This section primarily approaches anti-Sai Baba rhetoric and imagery on Facebook in light of this dissertation’s focus on the Shirdi Sai Baba hagiographic tradition. An analysis of social media, including Facebook, as an interactive space wherein people collaboratively create its content is a topic beyond the scope of the

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<sup>94</sup> See “Shirdi Sai Baba – Bhārat ke itihās ke sabse baḍā pākhaṇḍ,” Facebook, <http://www.facebook.com/expose.shirdisai>, accessed December 28, 2015. As of December 2015, this Facebook page, which is open to the public, has accumulated more than 20,000 likes.

<sup>95</sup> As I was monitoring the public page throughout 2013, I noticed that it closed in October when it had approximately 15,000 likes. It reopened shortly thereafter, and the admins indicated in a post that the page was removed due to the complaints of Sai Baba devotees. As of September 2015, the page is still open and active. The number of 21,000 “likes” is the number reacquired in the page’s second incarnation. There is also a closed group on Facebook with the same “Biggest Hypocrite” title and approximately 19,000 members. Because I have elected not to join this group, this section of the chapter concentrates on the posts and images on the page open to the public.

<sup>96</sup> See “Sai Baba of Shirdī – Islāmīk fakīr śīrḍī sāmī dwārā hinduo kā islāmīkaraṅ,” Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/islamic.saibaba?fref=ts>, accessed December 28, 2015.

<sup>97</sup> For example, see two other pages along similar themes: “Pākhaṇḍī ‘śīrḍī sāī bābā urf ‘cānd muhammad’ kā pardāfās,” Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1038633759489466/>, accessed December 28, 2015; “Śīrḍī ke camatkārī [balātkārī] sāmī urf kasāmī bābā,” Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1543263045949913/>, accessed December 28, 2015.

current project.<sup>98</sup> However, the “Biggest Hypocrite” Facebook page is a useful case study for understanding Shirdi Sai Baba’s detractors for two primary reasons. First, the posts on the page are full of new and polemical iconography that serve a hagiographical function. The “Biggest Hypocrite” is a resource for communicating information about Sai Baba’s life and legacy, as well as what he did and did not do. The difference is that a text like Dabholkar’s *Satcarita* or a film like Bhushan’s *Shirdi ke Sai Baba* come from the perspective of devotees wanting to tell others about their saint’s greatness, whereas the anti-Sai Baba pages on Facebook are reactionary responses to the saint’s popularity that construct antithetical arguments about why the saint should be rejected by “good” Hindus. Second, these pages are significant because they can deliver these anti-Sai Baba arguments to new audiences, particularly those who are already sympathetic to Hindu nationalist causes but unaware of the “problems” with Shirdi Sai Baba. In other words, these pages can function as recruitment tools. Their creators can share and link their messages with other anti-Sai Baba voices across the world, and promotionally support those who are not active on social media, like Swami Swaroopananda (see Figure 4.5).

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<sup>98</sup> In terms of recent scholarship on the intersection of religion and Facebook, see *Social Media and Religious Change*, eds. Marie Gillespie, David Herbert, and Anita Greenhill (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013).

Profile Pictures Like Page

Back to Album · Shirdi Sai Baba - भारत के इतिहास का सबसे बड़ा पाखंड's Photos · Shirdi Sai Baba - भारत के इतिहास का सबसे बड़ा पाखंड's Page Previous · Next

**सच बोलने के लिये स्वरूपानन्द जी का खुलकर समर्थन होना चाहिये.**



**Shirdi Sai Baba - भारत के इतिहास का सबसे बड़ा पाखंड**

**अन्यथा दुबारा कोई सच बोलने की हिम्मत भी नहीं जुटा पायेगा.**

Shirdi Sai Baba - भारत के इतिहास का सबसे बड़ा पाखंड Album: Profile Pictures · 1 of 10

Like · Comment · Share · July 7, 2014 Shared with: Public

Fig. 4.5 A post (7 July 2014) on the “Shirdi Sai Baba – The Biggest Hypocrite in the History of India” Facebook page calls on Hindus to support Swami Swaroopananda. The Hindi text reads: “We should openly support Swami Swaroopananda for speaking the truth. Otherwise, nobody else will have the courage to speak the truth.” Source: Facebook.com.



Fig. 4.6 Another post on the “Biggest Hypocrite” Facebook page features Sai Baba’s face overwritten with text: “I am a *jihādī*, a promulgator of a *bhakti jihād*.” Source: Facebook.com.

The admins of the “Biggest Hypocrite” Facebook page, who do not give their names but do provide a phone number and blog site (<https://saiexposed.wordpress.com/>) as contact information, complement the points raised by Swami Swaroopananda. For example, one of the tenets of the anti-Sai Baba campaign is the argument that the saint is not a symbol of Hindu-Muslim unity because he is originally and essentially a Muslim. Moreover, the saint is envisioned as an especially nefarious Muslim who infiltrated Hinduism (that is, *sanātana dharma*) and tricked gullible Hindus into worshipping him.



One of the more commonly posted and reposted images on the anti-Sai Baba pages on Facebook, including the “Biggest Hypocrite” page, is a headshot of Shirdi Sai Baba with a polemical statement of self-identification: “I am a *jihādī*, a promulgator of a *bhakti jihād*” (see Figure 4.6). Other images offer more explanation regarding the parts of Shirdi Sai Baba’s behavior that the image’s creator finds objectionable and contrary to the moral and religious compass of “proper” Hinduism. One exemplary image has white text on a black background and reads:

The worship of Sai is both the greatest insult to *sanātan*/Hindu religion and an evil act. It is very unfortunate that this Sai who was a staunch Muslim (*kaṭṭar musalmān*) has been placed in temples. One can worship Sai as one wishes, but to replace the name of Mata Sita with Sai, to worship this meat-eating, chillum-smoking Sai alongside Hindu gods and goddesses, and to equating Sai with Hindu deities – these deplorable customs are currently in vogue. The *bhakti jihād* waged through the name of Sai has seeped into Hindus like a poison, and now it is necessary to get rid of it (see Figure 4.7).<sup>99</sup>

This construction of Sai Baba as a Muslim saint with a fraudulent Hindu veneer is one of the prevalent themes in the posts and images on the “Biggest Hypocrite” page.

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<sup>99</sup> In transliterated Hindi, the passage on Figure 4.7 reads: *Sāī ko pūjanā sanātan/hindu dharm kā sabse barā apamān hai aur pāpakarm bhī. Sāī jo kī ek kaṭṭar musalmān thā, use mandiron meñ biṭhānā bahut hī durbhāgyapūrṇ hai. Ap sāī ko cāhe jaise pūje par sāī ke sāth mātā sītā kā nām haṭākar sāī lagānā aur anya devī-devatāon ke sāth māms khānevālā, cilam-bīṛī pīnevāle sāī ko pūjane aur hindū bhagvānon se sāī ko joṛnā sabse ghaṭiyā pracalan ban cūkā hai. Sāī nām kā bhakti jihād hinduon meñ ek zahar kī tarah ghul cūkā hai, jise bāhar nikālnā ab āvaśyak hai.*



**Shirdi Sai Baba - भारत के इतिहास का सबसे बड़ा पाखंड's Photos** Like Page

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साई को पूजना सनातन/हिन्दू धर्म का सबसे बड़ा अपमान है और एक पापकर्म भी। साई जो की एक कष्टर मुसलमान था उसे मंदिरों में बिठाना बहुत ही दुर्भाग्यपूर्ण है आप साई को चाहे जैसे पूजे पर साई के साथ माता सीता का नाम हटाकर साई लगाना और अन्य देवी देवताओं के साथ मांस खाने वाला, चिलम बीडी पीने वाले साई को पूजने और हिन्दू भगवानो से साई को जोड़ना सबसे घटिया प्रचलन बन चूका है, साई नाम का भक्ति जिहाद हिन्दुओ में एक जहर की तरह घुल चुका है जिसे बाहर निकलना अब आवश्यक है, सौजन्य से - Shirdi Sai baba - भारत के इतिहास का सबसे बड़ा पाखंड

Shirdi Sai Baba - भारत के इतिहास का सबसे बड़ा पाखंड  
साई की मार्केटिंग में प्रोडक्ट को मूर्ति+सन्चारित+और एक दो चीजों को जोड़कर बेचा जा रहा है,,,, और ये रोज आपको 500-1000 तक रूपए में उपलब्ध है,,,,

From: Shirdi Sai Baba - भारत के इतिहास का सबसे बड़ा पाखंड's Photos in Timeline Photos  
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परन्तु घोर अपमान --

Fig. 4.7 A cover photo of the “Biggest Hypocrite” Facebook page, instructing Hindus to give up the poison (*zahar*) of devotion to Shirdi Sai Baba. Source: Facebook.com.

## पूजा चित्र की नहीं, चित्र के चरित्र की होती है।

साईं के शिष्य श्री गोविन्दराव रघुनाथ दामोदकर (हेमाडपन्ना) द्वारा लिखित व श्री साईं बाबा विश्वस्त, शिरडी, द्वारा प्रकाशित।

**श्री साईं सत्चरित्र के मुख्य बिन्दु:-**



अध्याय 6, 10, 23, और 41 के अनुसार साईं जब मुस्लिम में आते थे, तब वह गाली और अपसन्द बोलेते थे, अधिक मुस्लिम में तो बर्द भी देते।

अध्याय 6 : मस्जिद का जीर्णोद्धार - दिन-रात परिश्रम कर मस्जिदों में लोहे के खम्भे गाढ़े। जब दूसरे दिन पत्थरी में बाबा लीठे, उन्होंने उन खम्भों को उखाड़ कर फेंक दिखे और अति क्रोधित हो गये। वे एक हाथ से खम्भा फकड़कर उसे उखाड़ने लगे और दूसरे हाथ से उन्होंने ताप्या का साया ऊपर दिया और उसमें आग लगाकर गूदे में फेंक दिया। बाबा के नेत्र जलते हुए आंगरे के सदृश्य लाल हो गये...मांगोनी शिंदे (बाबा के एक कोठी भक्त) कुछ साहस कर आगे बढ़े, पर बाबा ने उसकी गद्दी दबा की...अन्याय ही बिना किसी गोचर कारण के वे क्रोधित हो जाया करते थे। ऐसी अनेक घटनाएँ देखने में आ चुकी हैं, परन्तु मैं इसका निर्वचन नहीं कर सकता कि उनमें से कौन सी शिर्दु और कौन सही उन्हें।

अध्याय 6 : निज समय मुसलम की चर्च हो रही थी, तो उसके कुछ भग्न अन्याय ही बाबा की आँसु में चले गये, तब बाबा एकदम क्रुद्ध होकर उच्च-स्वर में अपसन्द करने व कोसने लगे। वह दृश्य देखकर सब लोग भयभीत होकर शिरदिहाने लगे।

अध्याय 10 : बाबा... कभी पत्थर मारते, कभी गालियाँ देते।

अध्याय 10 : (साईं) "याव अजब मीमासा वा दर्शन शास्त्र पढ़ने की कोई आवश्यकता नहीं है।"

अध्याय 23 : ...स्वामा मस्जिद की ओर दौड़ा, अपने पिताबा श्री साईंनाथ के पास, जब बाबा ने उन्हें दूर से आते देखा तो वे झिझकने लगे और गाली देने लगे।

अध्याय 23 : (बाबा) "सातोच्छ्वास (आणवाम) निराकरण, हठयोग वा अन्य कठिन साधनाओं की कोई आवश्यकता नहीं है।"

अध्याय 28 : ..."मंगा स्नान मुझे इस इलाक़ से दूर ही रहने दो। मैं तो कलहिर (मुसलमान) हूँ।"

अध्याय 32 : ...बाबा ने स्वयं कभी भी उपवास नहीं किया, ना ही उन्होंने दूसरी को करने दिया।

अध्याय 38 : ...एक पत्थरारी के दिन उन्होंने कोसकर को कुछ काले केरु कुठ मारल करदिकर लाने को कहा। (बाबा ने एक आदमी को कल्पवृक्ष विद्यापी का स्वाद बदलने को मजबूर किया।)

अध्याय 38 : ...देखे ही एक अन्य अपसन्द पर उन्होंने दादा से कहा, "देखो तो जम्बीन विद्यापी भुगत कौसा क्या है?" दादा ने मुँ ही कह दिया कि अच्छा है। तब वे कहने लगे की तुम्हें ना अपनी आँसु से देखा और न ही शिष्टा से स्वाद किया, फिर तुम्हें यह कैसे कह दिया कि उत्तम क्या है? थोड़ा जखन हटाकर देखो। बाबा ने दादा की बांह पकड़ी और कल्पवृक्ष बान में डालकर बोले, "थोड़ा इतने से निकालो और अपना कट्टरपन छोड़कर पचकर देखो।"

अध्याय 41 : (साईं) "इसने बूढ़ होकर भी तुम वहाँ घोंरी करने को आये हो?" इसको पचवाल बाबा अपने से बाहर हो गये और उनकी आँसु क्रोध के कारण लाल हो गयी। वे बुरी तरह से जालियों देने और डीठन लगे। शानिपूक वे सम सुनते रहे। वे मार चरने की भी आसका कर रहे थे।

मिसे अउ आप सभी इस अभियान में अपना सहयोग दे,  
<http://shirdisaixpose.wordpress.com/>

धर्म की शुद्धि का समय आ गया है, और ये शुद्धि आप सभी को भी करनी होगी क्योंकि ये आपका भी धर्म है अतः सभी मित्रों से निवेदन है कि इस फोटो पीडीएफ के पर्स छपवा कर इन्हे हर मस्जिद, घर दुकान में वितरित करावा दें और जहाँ सम्भव हो घिपका दें, पीडीएफ का लिंक नीचे है  
... See More

पूर्ण विवरण के लिए श्री साईं सत्चरित्र पढ़ें।

सनातन धर्म का इस्लामीकरण बन्द हो।

Fig. 4.8: Another cover photo of the “Biggest Hypocrite” page, listing examples of Sai Baba’s objectionable behaviors cross-referenced with passages in Dabholkar’s *Satcarita*. Source: Facebook.com.

As of August 2015, the cover photo of the “Biggest Hypocrite” Facebook page (see Figure 4.8) bears the headline in Hindi that reads: “This isn’t a picture of religious worship; this is the picture of the *Satcarita*” (*pūjā citra kī nahīn, citra ke caritra kī hotī hai*). Supplementing the crossed-out photograph of Shirdi Sai Baba is a list of references in Dabholkar’s *Satcarita* that tell us what the saint did. All of these references legitimately derive from the text, but in this case, they do not indicate the saint’s enigmatic and divine personage but rather become arguments against why Sai Baba is not an appropriate recipient of Hindu worship, or *pūjā*. For example, the image notes Dabholkar’s passage in the *Satcarita*’s tenth chapter, in which it is said that Sai Baba sometimes threw stones and insulted other people (*bābā kabhī patthar mārte, kabhī gāliyān dete*) and that the saint rejected the necessity of reading religious scriptures

(*śāstra*), specifically pertaining to Nyaya and Mimamsa philosophical systems. In the original Marathi of the *Satcarita*, the hagiographer Dabholkar objects to the study of these systems because they contain blustering talk (*ghaṭpaṭ*) and require great intellectual wrangling (*khaṭpaṭ*), whereas devotional service to a sadguru, or *sadgurusevā*, is the most excellent means to achieve liberation from transmigratory existence. In comparison, the image from the Facebook page flattens the original argument's complexity, simply noting that Sai Baba told others that there was "no necessity" (*koī āvaśyaktā nāhīn*) for the study of Hindu philosophy.

The image also refers to an "objectionable" story in the thirty-eighth chapter of the *Satcarita*, in which Sai Baba encourages a Brahmin devotee to taste a non-vegetarian rice dish to see if it is ready to eat. According to the image's synopsis of this episode, Sai Baba indeed forced the Brahmin to eat meat and violate the principles of his caste: "Baba caught hold of [Dada Kelkar's] arm and forcefully (*balapūrvak*) shoved it into the pot, saying – 'Take a little bit out, taste it, and get rid of your orthodox ways.'"<sup>100</sup> While I will return to this story in Chapter 7, it suffices to say that this synopsis is indicative of a selective reading of the *Satcarita*, which stipulates that Shirdi Sai Baba always "knew what was *dharma* and what was *adharmā*."<sup>101</sup> This means, per Dabholkar's interpretation, that the saint only gave the non-vegetarian food that he prepared in his communal cooking pot, the *hāṇḍī*, to those who wanted to take it. In the *Satcarita*, this story indeed features Sai Baba putting the Brahmin's hand into the *hāṇḍī* that contained

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<sup>100</sup> In transliterated Hindi, the excerpt of text on Figure 8 reads: *Bābā ne dādā kī bānh pakarī aur balapūrvak bartan mein dālkar bole, "Thore is mein se nikāl lo aur apnā kaṭṭarpan choṛkar cakkhar dekho."*

<sup>101</sup> Dabholkar, *ŚSSC*, 38:88 *yā śaṅkecem ekaci uttar / dharmā āṇi adharma vicār / sātīnpāśīm sēcār / nirantar jāgat.*

non-vegetarian rice, at which point the saint tells him not to worry about keeping to the standards of Brahminical purity: “Don’t have any care for being *sovalā*.”<sup>102</sup> But Dabholkar emphasizes that Sai Baba never forced anyone to eat what they did not want to:

If a person wanted to taste that which should not be eaten (*abhakṣya*), then [Baba] enabled him to indulge that desire. But Sai was most pleased with the one who is able to control his mind.

Sometimes devotees followed [Baba’s] commands so much that one who had never ever touched meat questioned their confidence (*tyāñcā bharamvsā ḍaḷmale*) [in that belief].

But look at the fact of the matter – Baba never forced any devotees to do something that would take them down the wrong path (*kadhīm na bābā swayem pravartavitī / unmārgavaritī vḥāvayā*).<sup>103</sup>

So, the question is whether or not Dada Kelkar is one of those Brahmins who “wavered in their belief” with regards to non-vegetarian food. The *Satcarita* is ambiguous, but a detractor can flatten the text’s ambiguity by implying that Sai Baba made a Brahmin violate his Brahminhood by “forcing” (i.e., the use of the Hindi adverb *balapūrvak*) him to touch meat. In this way, Shirdi Sai Baba becomes portrayed as a saint who enjoins the pollution of normative Brahminical Hinduism. Such villainy requires a call to action, as there is at the image’s bottom: “Stop the Islamization of *sanātana dharma* (*sanātana dharma kā islāmīkaraṇ band ho*)!”

Now, let’s turn to an image (see Figure 4.9) that tags the historical photograph of Shirdi Sai Baba with “Allah” in Arabic script. A thought bubble next to the saint’s head contains the motto that sums up his presumably inclusive approach to religion: “The Lord of all is one” (*sab kā mālik ek*). Above this image and motto, there are two sections of

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 38:101 *soṃvayācī na dharīm cād*.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 38:104-106.

text in Devanagari designed to summarize and juxtapose the “essences” of Hinduism and Islam. On the left, there is the Sanskrit adage, “The world is like a family” (*vasudhā iva kuṭumbakam*), and the well-known invocation for peace in Sanskrit: “May all beings be happy, may all beings be well” (*sarve bhavantu sukhinaḥ, sarve santu nirāmayā*). On the right, there is a rather disingenuous translation in Hindi of *Qur’ān* 9:5: “Kill the unbelievers. Always make ready. Ambush them, for they are certainly your enemies. And if they repent, establish prayer, and pay the obligatory tax, then forgive them.”<sup>104</sup>

Underneath these two passages is the question that the image’s creator wants to ask: “How can these two contradictory demeanors belong to one person (*do viprīt ācaraṇ karnewāle ek kaise ho sakte haiṅ*)?”

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<sup>104</sup> To clarify, this is my translation of the problematic Hindi rendering of this verse from the *Qur’ān*. For a better translation, see *The Qur’an*, trans. M.A.S. Abdel Haleem (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

Shirdi Sai Baba - भारत के इतिहास का सबसे बड़ा पाखंड's Photos

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वसुधैव कुटुम्बकम् ।  
सर्वे भवन्तु सुखिनः सर्वे  
सन्तु निरामया । सर्वे  
भद्राणि पश्यन्तु मा कश्चित्  
दुःखभाग् भवेत् ॥ ॐ

काफिरों को मारो , जगह  
जगह तत्पर रहो उनकी घात  
लगा कर बेठो निश्चय वे  
तुम्हारे खुले शत्रु है , और यदि  
वे तोबा: करते , नमाज  
कायम करें जकात दे तो  
उनको बक्श दो

दो विपरीत आचरण करने वाले एक कैसे हो सकते हैं ??

सबका मालिक एक

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m/Shirdi.Sai  
.Expose

Shirdi Sai Baba - भारत के इतिहास का सबसे बड़ा पाखंड

साईं के भक्त कहते हैं कि साईं केवल सबका मालिक एक कहते थे?  
पर ये नहीं बताते कि कौन है वो मालिक?? पूरी साईं सन्धारित में एक बार भी सबका मालिक एक नहीं आया  
है, सिर्फ अल्लाह मालिक आया है जो कुरान में काफिरों को कत्ल करने बलानकार करने और कुरान २:223  
में औरतों को घर की छेती कहता है, ऐसे घाटिया इन्सान को साईं ने मालिक क्यू कहा??  
आप साईं भक्त कब तक झूठ क सहारा लेते रहेंगे,

From: Shirdi Sai Baba - भारत के इतिहास का सबसे बड़ा पाखंड's Photos in Timeline Photos

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Fig. 4.9 An image posted on the “Biggest Hypocrite” Facebook page, stating that the saint’s motto “the Lord of all is one” (*sab kā mālik ek*) is wrong. In the upper left and right, the image’s creator juxtaposes the Sanskrit aphorism *vasudhaiva kuṭumbakam* (“the world is like a family”) with a verse from the *Qur’ān* about killing *kāfirs*, or those who deny the truth of the one and only God. Source: Facebook.com.

This is not a question asked in the spirit of Dabholkar's *Satcarita*, where the answer is that Sai Baba is "neither Hindu nor Muslim." Instead of a categorical conundrum, this image presents saint as someone trying to harmonize two incongruent religions, one of which is benevolent (Hinduism) and the other, violent (Islam). Whoever created this image clearly wants to convince others that Sai Baba's motto, "The Lord of all is one," is theologically impossible. The corollary of this argument is that Shirdi Sai Baba is – in reality – a Muslim. The graffiti-like writing of "Allah" over the photograph of Sai Baba is the hermeneutic key to understanding that the "real" Sai Baba is a Muslim double agent, secretly working to defile Hinduism. Another image (see Figure 4.10) more bluntly caricaturizes Shirdi Sai Baba as a Muslim, draping him in a robe colored Islamic green and putting "Allah Hoo Akbar" in a bubble quote. The addition of a pirate's eyepatch further embellishes his wickedness.

Indeed, it is ironic that both scholars and detractors of Sai Baba have similarly theorized that he was a Muslim. Each side has its own reasons to make its argument. Marianne Warren seeks to recover the "historical" Sai Baba, who was a Sufi saint, from hagiographical manipulations of Brahmin hagiographers, while the admins of the "Biggest Hypocrite" Facebook page work to construct Sai Baba as a Muslim capable of duping gullible Hindus into worshipping him.

The content found on the "Biggest Hypocrite" Facebook page is typical of rightwing Hindus who exhort their coreligionists to "wake up" and return to the ways of the "timeless law/path/religion," *sanātana dharma*. Such rhetoric often targets secularists, communists, missionaries, atheists, feminists, rationalists, outspoken minorities, and anyone else who threatens the narrowly defined notion of Hindu orthodoxy and

orthopraxy. Attacks on dissenting voices can have the utmost serious of consequences, as evident with the assassinations of scholars and activists like Narendra Dabholkar in Pune (2013), Govind Pansare in Kohlapur (2015), and M.M. Kulbargi in Dharwad (2015). As highlighted in this section, Hindu nationalists like Swami Swaroopananda, the admins of the “Biggest Hypocrite” page, and the people who express their support through comments on the page’s posts and images have identified Shirdi Sai Baba as another one of these threats.

These detractors represent a small but new and growing source of dissent. That Shirdi Sai Baba is on the radar of Hindutva ideologues is, certainly, one way to gauge his prominent place in modern India’s religious panoply. Just like there was sad reflection in newspaper editorials in Jaipur in 2008 and Pune in 2010 that each city can now be considered “important enough” to be on the receiving end of terrorism, so too has Shirdi Sai Baba reached a level of popularity that he can now be considered among the threats to *sanātana dharma*.

What observations can scholars contribute to the academic study of Sai Baba’s detractors and their efforts to mobilize an anti-Sai Baba campaign online and offline? For one, we might note that this issue features competing sources of religious power and authority. On one hand, there is the dogmatic brand of Hindu fundamentalism represented by religious leaders like Swami Swaroopananda and supported by others on Facebook pages, such as “Shirdi Sai Baba: The Biggest Hypocrite in the History of India.” This side feels that they must fight back against attacks from forces like Western imperialism, leftist politics, and non-Hindu religious traditions, especially Islam. On the other hand, there is the unlettered, country preacher who had no honorary titles or affiliation with any



established sect or tradition but nonetheless gathered a community of devotees attracted by his miracles and his ideas of religious unity. The swami and his supporters use discourse that shores up social, cultural, political, and religious boundaries, while Sai Baba's sainthood is predicated on the fluidity and flexibility of these boundaries. As W.L. Smith has pointed out, conflicts between saints and representatives of Hindu orthodoxy is a longstanding pattern in South Asian hagiographical traditions.<sup>105</sup> While the roots of the conflict animating the anti-Sai Baba campaign echo themes in the history of religion in South Asia, it is taking place in modern mediums (e.g., cable and online news media, Facebook) and invokes concepts relevant to the discourse of contemporary Hindu nationalism, particularly the construction of Hinduism as a "timeless religion" (*sanātana dharma*) and the notion that religions are distinct, tightly-packaged, mutually exclusive packages of uniquely salvific beliefs and practices that should not be mixed with one another. This latter point is quite obvious in one final image pulled from the "Biggest Hypocrite" page (see Figure 4.11) – a juxtaposition of the Hindu god Shiva and a crossed-out image of Sai Baba with a cartoon character exclaiming, "Stop adulterating religion!"

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<sup>105</sup> See Chapter 12 in W.L. Smith, *Patterns in North Indian Hagiography* (Stockholm: Department of Indology, University of Stockholm, 2003).



Fig. 4.10 An image/meme posted on the “Biggest Hypocrite” page depicting Shirdi Sai Baba as a villainous, pirate-like Muslim proclaiming “God is Great.” Source: Facebook.com.



Fig. 4.11 An image of Shiva is juxtaposed against a crossed-out image of Shirdi Sai Baba, and also features a cartoon character angrily exhorting: “Stop adulterating religion” (*roko milāvṭ dharm meṅ*). Source: Facebook.com.

## The Politics of Compositeness in a “Syncretistic” Saint

In 2014 and 2015, religious identity, both at the communal and the national levels, remains a central issue in Indian society and political discourse. In August 2014, RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat publically reiterated his organization’s founding principle, namely, that the “cultural identity of all Indians is Hindutva.”<sup>106</sup> A few weeks earlier, the Deputy Chief Minister of Goa Francis D’Souza declared India a “Hindu nation” and called himself a “Christian Hindu,” remarks for which he later apologized.<sup>107</sup> New textbooks in schools in Gujarat claim that references in the Vedas and the Mahabharata show that the use of “cars” and knowledge of “stem cells,” respectively, existed in ancient India.<sup>108</sup> New buzzwords have also been coined in conversations about religion in modern India. The discourse of “love jihad” – the idea that Muslim men seek out Hindu women, marry them, and convert them to Islam – speaks to the fear felt by Hindus about an Islamic takeover in their country. Paralleling the emergence of “love jihad” is “ghar vapasi,” a reactionary movement that Hindu groups say is not a form of conversion but rather an organized appeal to non-Hindus, especially Christians and Muslims, to return to their spiritual home in Hinduism. In December 2014, the VHP announced that two hundred Christian “tribals” had been welcomed home and converted back to Hinduism.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> “Cultural Identity of All Indians is Hindutva, RSS Chief Mohan Bhagwat Says,” *Times of India*, August 10, 2014, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Cultural-identity-of-all-Indians-is-Hindutva-RSS-chief-Mohan-Bhagwat-says/articleshow/40019241.cms>, accessed December 28, 2015.

<sup>107</sup> “Goa Deputy Chief Minister Francis D’Souza Apologises for His ‘Christian Hindu’ Remark,” *Economic Times*, July 28, 2014, [http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2014-07-28/news/52139118\\_1\\_hindu-nation-d-souza-trojano-d-mello](http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2014-07-28/news/52139118_1_hindu-nation-d-souza-trojano-d-mello), accessed December 28, 2015.

<sup>108</sup> “Science Lesson from Gujarat: Stem Cells in Mahabharata, Cars in Veda,” *Indian Express*, July 27, 2014, <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/gujarat/science-lesson-from-gujarat-stem-cells-in-mahabharata-cars-in-veda/>, accessed December 28, 2015.

<sup>109</sup> “Gujarat Conversions Spark Anger,” *Hindustan Times*, December 22, 2014, <http://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/vhp-claims-voluntary-re-conversion-of-200-tribal-christians-in-gujarat-cong-says-it-s-unfortunate/article1-1298721.aspx>, accessed December 28, 2015.

Notably, this “ghar vapasi” event happened in the district of Valsad, the same area where Sai Baba’s *mūrtī* was removed from a temple the previous July in response to Swami Swaroopananda’s criticism of the saint.

The above instances are barometric readings for the politicized atmosphere of religious identity in twenty-first century India. They also reflect the ideological ground on which the contestation over Shirdi Sai Baba’s life and legacy is currently taking place. On one side, there are Sai Baba devotees, including hagiographers and filmmakers, who have constructed the saint into a syncretistic figure who brings people and religions together in harmony. On the other side, there are the detractors who have a definitive understanding of religious truth, according to which the veneration of Sai Baba is incompatible with “proper” Hinduism. Both perspectives – those of devotees and detractors – implicate Shirdi Sai Baba in a politics of compositeness. From the devotional perspective, Desai’s *Amar, Akbar, Anthony* makes Sai Baba into a figure in whom one finds the fraternity of three religious communities: Hindus, Muslims, and Christians. Bhushan’s *Shirdi ke Sai Baba* expands the scope of inclusivity and features *bhajan*-like devotional songs that build Sai Baba into a symbol Hindu-Muslim-Sikh-Christian-Buddhist-Zoroastrian unity. As we have seen, these examples of the saint’s compositeness take place in situations where Sai Baba traffics toward markers that emphasize his Hindu dimension most strongly. Desai and Bhushan’s hagiographic films thus assign the saint a Hindu-inflected compositeness, one that places non-Hindu others, including Muslims, within a Hindu embrace. This type of majority-minority dynamic in representations of Shirdi Sai Baba’s compositeness resonates with the eminent scholar Irfan Habib’s suggestion that the secular ethos of the Republic of India, which does not

separate religion from the state but rather stipulates respect and tolerance for all religions, can lead to majority communalism, the flexing of the power and privilege of India's Hindu majority in social and political matters.<sup>110</sup>

Swami Swaroopananda and the admins of the anti-Sai Baba Facebook pages implicate Shirdi Sai Baba in another politics of compositeness. For the swami and his supporters, the main problem with Shirdi Sai Baba is that he falsely assumes the guise of a syncretistic saint in order to trick misguided Hindus into worshipping him as a divine figure. Their anti-Sai Baba campaign, which tells Hindus to “wake up” (*jāgo!*) and “expel” (*bāhar nikālo!*) this saint from the fold of *sanātana dharma*, is a product of “Syndicated Hinduism,” a term coined by Romila Thapar to refer to the type of Hinduism that “draws largely on reinterpreting Brahmanical texts of which the Gita is an obvious choice, defends the Dharmashastras and underlines a brand of conservatism in the guise of a modern reformed religion.”<sup>111</sup> Relatedly, this form of Hinduism is concerned with both defining what is “good” and what is “bad” for “good” Hindus in terms of belief and behavior, as well as proselytizing this worldview among Hindus in India and abroad. In general, Syndicated Hinduism does not accept a wide range of religious views as equal or valid but rather privileges rigid, singular interpretations of sacred texts and theological concepts.

For example, recall that Swami Swaroopananda objected to Hindus venerating Sai Baba as an *avatār* because the saint from Shirdi is not one of the twenty-four *avatārs* of

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<sup>110</sup> See Ajaz Ashraf, “Irfan Habib: The Indian Variant of Secularism Opens the Door to Majority Communalism,” August 14, 2015, <http://scroll.in/article/748241/irfan-habib-the-indian-variant-of-secularism-opens-the-door-to-majority-communalism>, accessed December 28, 2015.

<sup>111</sup> Romila Thapar, “Syndicated Hinduism,” in *Hinduism Reconsidered*, eds. Günther-Dietz Sontheimer and Hermann Kulke (New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1989), 75.

Vishnu. To speak of counterarguments, one could compile the various lists of *avatārs* in different texts like the twelve mentioned in the *Matysa Purāṇa* (47.32-52) and the twenty-two in the *Garuḍa Purāṇa* (1.12-35). There is the passage in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* that names twenty-two incarnations but also indicates the existence of many more: “Even as a perennial lake has canals by the thousands, even so there are innumerable *avatāras* of Hari, the receptacle of goodness” (1.3.26).<sup>112</sup> There is also the case made in hagiographic literature like A.Y. Dhond’s Marathi text *Sāi Bābā: Avatār va kārya* (1955) that Sai Baba is only one of several *avatārs* of the Hindu god Dattatreya to appear in nineteenth-century Maharashtra.<sup>113</sup> While Swami Swaroopananda can indeed argue that Sai Baba should not be worshipped on account of not being a divine incarnation, it is also true that the swami’s interpretation stems from a particular textual tradition and a restrictive understanding about who can and cannot be an *avatār* in Hinduism. Most importantly, the swami and his ilk maintain that Sai Baba cannot be an *avatār* due to the “fact” that he was a Muslim. The Hindutva ideology that forms the backbone of Syndicated Hinduism perceives Islam as a threat to the Hindu nation. In the light of Hindutva, Shirdi Sai Baba is a doubly dangerous because he is not only Muslim but a Muslim cloaked in Hindu garb who speaks the seductive language of peace and harmony that has led Hindus to sympathize with their perennial “enemy.”

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<sup>112</sup> Antonio Rigopoulos, *Dattātreya, the Immortal Guru, Yogin, and Avatāra: A Study of the Transformative and Inclusive Character of a Multi-faceted Hindu Deity* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998), 53 n.55.

<sup>113</sup> See Dhond, *Sāi Bābā: Avatār va kārya*, 53-65. Dhond’s argument that Sai Baba is an *avatār* of Dattatreya is based on the saint’s comparison with two previous incarnations of Dattatreya in the nineteenth century, Swami Samartha and Manik Prabhu. In particular, Dhond sees Sai Baba’s incarnation as a continuation of the work of Manik Prabhu who worked to end the conflicts between different religious communities and sought to establish an ethical religion (*ācārdharma*) based on tolerance towards others’ religions.

This chapter has sought to highlight the constructed and contested nature of Shirdi Sai Baba as a “syncretistic” saint in modern India. Some may still press for an answer to the question: Is Shirdi Sai Baba “syncretistic”? As the introductory section made clear, “syncretism” and “syncretistic” are problematic inasmuch as they are used as part of first-order descriptive language to describe who Sai Baba was and what he did vis-à-vis religious practice. However, following the approach of Stewart and Shaw in thinking about syncretism and anti-syncretism in terms of the politics of religious inclusivity and exclusivity is helpful for looking with nuance at the compositeness assigned to Sai Baba by his hagiographers. In that way, this chapter’s main contribution has been the study of the *portrayals* of Shirdi Sai Baba as a “syncretistic” saint in his hagiographic tradition and the *discourses* of syncretism and anti-syncretism undergirding those portrayals. Shirdi Sai Baba is thus a syncretistic saint inasmuch as he has been constructed and deconstructed as such by his devotees and detractors.

Instead of asking whether or not “syncretistic” aptly describes Shirdi Sai Baba, the better question pertains to which situations and for which audiences is “syncretism” a solution or a problem. The subsequent discussion of this question will bring us back to the hagiographic films of Desai and Bhushan, as well as the public statements of Swami Swaroopananda and the imagery on the “Biggest Hypocrite” Facebook page. Ultimately, we see that Shirdi Sai Baba’s compositeness exists between the push and pull of two forces, one that builds him into a “syncretistic” saint with an overarching Hindu dimension and one that reveals an “essential” and essentially stigmatized Muslim-ness. To study the politics of Shirdi Sai Baba’s compositeness is to remind us that the life and legacy of a “syncretistic” saint like Shirdi Sai Baba is fluid, contextual, and sometimes

contested – an ongoing project betwixt and between the inclusivist and exclusivist agendas of hagiographers and haters alike.



## Chapter 5

### **The Time Sai Baba Lit Lamps with Water: Miracles in the Shirdi Sai Baba Hagiographic Tradition**

To review our progress so far in charting the history of the hagiographical transformations of Shirdi Sai Baba's life and legacy, we can begin with the reminder that this saint became notable when he was alive for two primary reasons. The first reason relates to the ways in which he combined Hindu and Islamic vocabularies and practices to soften the perception that they denoted two separate, mutually exclusive categories. The second is his reputation as a miracle-worker whose deeds occasionally evidenced his supernatural power but more frequently functioned to solve a number of person-specific problems (e.g., cholera, infertility, job placement, excessive pride).

While chapters two through four explored the additions and omissions to Sai Baba's life story in the major texts and films that comprise a century's worth of hagiographic tradition, the remaining portion of this dissertation, namely, the fifth through seventh chapters, explores one of the defining features of Sai Baba's sainthood: the wide variety of miracles that he performed when he was alive and continues to perform posthumously. According to hagiographic sources, some of the saint's most well-known miracles in the late nineteenth/twentieth century took place in front of large audiences. These evidentiary miracles – like the seventy-two hour period of *samādhī* in 1886 and the lamp lighting miracle in 1892 – convinced the public in Shirdi that their village's mendicant was a holy man with legitimate religious power and authority. Some miracles had smaller, even individualized, audiences like the time that the saint exercised

his omniscience while exposing the secret greed of a wealthy devotee<sup>1</sup> and the many times he granted miraculous visions to individual Brahmins to criticize their excessive pride and purity-mindedness.<sup>2</sup> Other miracles had no intended audiences or beneficiaries but were either part of the saint's quotidian routine (e.g., sleeping in the mosque on a narrow plank impossibly suspended from the ceiling by four strands of ragged cloth) or amazing feats of yogic prowess, such as *dhoṭī-poṭī*<sup>3</sup> and *khaṇḍa-yoga*,<sup>4</sup> that were discovered by curious or intrepid devotees. Some of these miracle stories have been recorded in texts written by professional hagiographers like Das Ganu, Dabholkar, and Narasimhaswami, while other stories come from the devotional testimonies of ordinary devotees (i.e., not professional hagiographers), who experienced the saint's miraculous presence and power. In doing so, these chapters revisit several of the hagiographic texts and films with which we are already acquainted. Some sources discussed tangentially in previous chapters, such as Narasimhaswami's *Devotees' Experiences of Sri Sai Baba* (1940) receive more thorough treatment, for example, in Chapter 6. We will be introduced to more recent entries in the Shirdi Sai Baba hagiographic tradition, particularly Sunit Nigam's Hindi text *Sāī Bābā ke camatkār* (2013), Raj Chopra's

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<sup>1</sup> See Chapter 2 for more on this episode in the *Satcarita* and the conversation between Sai Baba and the greedy devotee who asks the saint for the highest religious knowledge (*brahmajñāna*).

<sup>2</sup> See Chapter 7 for a detailed analysis of encounters between Sai Baba and Brahmins in hagiographic text and film.

<sup>3</sup> Shirdi Sai Baba's peculiar version of *dhoṭī-poṭī* did not involve swallowing cotton or water to induce vomiting as a means to cleanse the inner organs, but rather the saint extracted his intestines and washed them by hand – much to the perturbation of the individuals who spied him doing this yogic practice. See Dabholkar, *ŚSSC*, 7:56-58.

<sup>4</sup> According to the *Satcarita*, Sai Baba also occasionally did *khaṇḍa-yoga*, the practice of separating the limbs from the torso. A villager once discovered Sai Baba's arms and legs scattered throughout the mosque and left horrified, thinking that someone murdered and dismembered saint. After keeping the matter silent, the villager was both relieved and astonished to see Sai Baba in one piece the next day. See Dabholkar, *ŚSSC*, 7:60-64. For further discussion of Sai Baba's yogic practices, see Rigopoulos, "Sāī Bābā of Śīrdī and Yoga Powers."

English text *Shirdi Sai Baba: The Divine Healer* (2012), and Deepak Balraj Vij's Hindi hagiopic *Shirdi Saibaba* (2001).

The present chapter proceeds in three sections. First, I provide an overview of the emic terms used by Sai Baba hagiographers and devotees to refer to what I heuristically call the saint's "miracles," viz. *līlā* and *camatkār*. Second, I discuss the hermeneutic responsibility undertaken by a hagiographer faced with telling the story of a saint known for miraculous actions. Third, I chart the transformations in hagiography of the meaning attached to Sai Baba's most well-known evidentiary miracle: the time that he lit lamps with water instead of oil. The story about the saint performing this particular miracle has been retold and reinterpreted at different times and in different languages and mediums – from texts composed in Marathi religious poetry in the early twentieth century and to Hindi hagiographic films in the late twentieth century. A careful study of the many iterations of the lamp lighting miracle shows how a miracle that was once said to have taken place in front of an audience becomes resituated in the interaction between Sai Baba and one other person, who is either the saint's devotee or an antagonist. I argue that this transformation in the telling of the lamp lighting miracle is helpful for understanding the perceptions of Shirdi Sai Baba by his devotees, past and present. The earlier hagiographic representations of a saint acting like a performance artist becomes, in later works, re-imagined as a divine figure whose actions impact individual lives more acutely than the public at large.

### ***Līlā and Camatkār***

The boundary between the divine and human realms in South Asian cosmologies – Hindu, Islamic, and others – is quite porous. Between the divine and human realms is a

middle ground populated by numerous divine or semi-divine figures known as *sādhus* and *santas*, *pīrs* and *fakīrs*, *yogīs* and *avatārs*, and a host of *bābās*, as well as ancestors, nature deities, and the deified warriors of local legends. The figure known as the Sai Baba of Shirdi exemplifies how this middle ground expands over time, as human beings come to be seen as more than human in the eyes of their beholders. As the only sources of information that we have on Sai Baba, early twentieth-century hagiographic works maintain that the saint said and did things when he was alive that set him apart from other people. He sometimes talked at length about complicated spiritual concepts, while at other times he spoke with a simple benediction, such as “God will make it alright” (*allā acchā karegā*).<sup>5</sup> He exhibited a great capacity for compassion and care for people suffering from all sorts of mental and physical afflictions. His residence (a dilapidated mosque), clothing (a mendicant’s robe), and knack for combing Hindu and Islamic rituals and vocabularies without consternation marked him as “different” from the rest of Shirdi’s population. But one of the most significant factors in Sai Baba’s sainthood, according to the hagiographic record, is his capacity to work wondrous deeds that produced real, tangible results for his devotees.

In this dissertation, I use the term “miracle” as a heuristic device that refers to events described in Marathi and Hindi hagiography as Sai Baba’s *camatkār* (lit. “that which surprises or astonishes”) or a *līlā*, a Hindu theological term that means “play,” namely, a divine figure’s playful manipulation of physical reality.<sup>6</sup> Hagiographers and

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Dabholkar, *ŚSSC*, 13:114 and 29:88.

<sup>6</sup> Common terms for “miracle” in other Indian languages include *alaukika* and *āścarya* in Hindi, *putumai* in Tamil, and *athputham* in Malayalam. See Corinne Dempsey, “Introduction,” in *Miracle as Modern Conundrum in South Asian Religious Traditions*, eds. Corinne G. Dempsey and Selva J. Raj (Albany: SUNY Press, 2008), 3.

devotees use *camatkār* and *līlā* interchangeably. Other terms used in the hagiographic tradition refer to Sai Baba’s “action” (e.g., *kr̥tya*, *gati*, *ghaṭaṇī*), and these non-specific nouns are paired with adjectives indicating that what he does is incomprehensible or impossible by ordinary standards. For example, in the *Bhaktalīlāmṛt*, Das Ganu describes the saint’s lamp lighting miracle as an “action done that was thoroughly impossible” (*kr̥tya kele aghaṭit thor*).<sup>7</sup> Dabholkar writes similarly in the *Satcarita*: “No one understood his incomprehensible action” (*koṇā na kaḷe tī agamya gati*) and “the actions of Sai are impossible” (*aghaṭit ghaṭaṇī sāñcī*).<sup>8</sup> Dabholkar also uses the term *karaṇī*, which simply means “something done” but also connotes supernatural power and “black magic.”<sup>9</sup> In this way, the hagiographer also describes the “impossible actions of this fakir” (*aghaṭit yethīl fakīrācī karaṇī*) and the “unfathomable actions of Lord Sai” (*agādh sāñcī karaṇī*).<sup>10</sup> Given that there are many well-educated devotees (e.g., professors, lawyers, judges) who are at the center of Sai Baba miracle stories in the hagiographic tradition, the language of incredulity is important for understanding how Sai Baba devotees find meaning in miraculous experiences taking place in the midst of modernity. The epistemological conflict written into many Sai Baba miracle stories – a conflict catching a devotee between “faith” in the saint’s miracles and the epistemological hegemony of scientific rationalism – is further explored in the next chapter.

Although the two most commonly used terms, *līlā* and *camatkār*, are essentially synonymous when describing Sai Baba’s miraculous actions, each carries additional

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<sup>7</sup> Das Ganu, *BLA*, 31:33.

<sup>8</sup> Dabholkar, *ŚSSC*, 7:69 and 26:142.

<sup>9</sup> John M. Stanley, “Gods, Ghosts and Possession,” in *The Experience of Hinduism: Essays on Religion in Maharashtra*, eds. Eleanor Zelliott and Maxine Berntsen (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988), 29-30.

<sup>10</sup> Dabholkar, *ŚSSC*, 11:96 and 52:88.

connotations in other religious contexts. For example, a *camatkār* in Kashmir Shaivism is a byproduct of cognitive practice that leads to the “rapturous delight of consciousness.”<sup>11</sup> Modern Hindu hagiographers thus reframe this experience of rapture as the feeling of wonderment produced by actions and events that contravene natural laws. *Līlā* is a more complex term. In Dabholkar’s *Satcarita*, the term *līlā* not only refers to the saint’s miraculous deeds but also to the stories about those deeds that are recorded in his text. In this latter sense, *līlā* is a “story” – like a *kathā* or *kahānī* – and the auditory consumption of these stories is a powerful spiritual resource for devotees. Reading, reciting, or simply hearing Sai Baba’s *līlās* can “liberate a listener from the effects of accumulated action (*karma*),” “destroy ignorance instantly,” and give the “knowledge of one’s true self to a devotee,” which “fulfills the objective of divinely-received scripture (*śrutī*).”<sup>12</sup> For Shirdi Sai Baba devotees, the saint’s *līlās* are not only narratives that record the miraculous deeds performed by him in the late nineteenth/early twentieth century but also conduits of that miraculous power to the narrative’s reader.

In relying on the English word “miracle” as a heuristic device to refer to deeds performed by Sai Baba that hagiographers call the saint’s *camatkārs* and *līlās*, it is important to keep the particular resonances of these two terms in mind: *camatkār* as an action done by a saint that surprises individuals and, occasionally, larger audiences; and *līlā* as an action and a narrative about that action that establishes the saint’s ability to manipulate the physical world.

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<sup>11</sup> Mark Dyczkowski, *The Doctrine of Vibration: An Analysis of the Doctrines and Practices of Kashmir Shaivism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1987), 147.

<sup>12</sup> See Dabholkar, *ŚSSC*, 2:41 *śravanārthiyāñce karmaṇāś / toḍūni tākītī...*; 2:82 *avidyānirasana rokaḍem...*; 2:82 *bhaktāsī nijarūpajñān...*; 2:85-86 *heñc śrutīcem dhyeya sampūrṇa*.

### Finding the Meaning of Sai Baba's Miracles Hagiographically

Throughout the history of the Shirdi Sai Baba hagiographic tradition, some hagiographers have registered some ambivalence about the saint's miracles, carefully distinguishing his actions, which always served a meaningful purpose, from miracles used for self-aggrandizement. For example, A.Y. Dhond makes it clear in his Marathi text *Sāī Bābā: Avatār va kārya* (1955) that Shirdi Sai Baba “never did miracles for the sake of miracles” (*camatkārānsāḥī camatkār nāhī*).<sup>13</sup> More recently, Raj Chopra's *Shirdi Sai Baba: The Divine Healer* (2012) states that “Baba never used miracles as visiting cards. He performed his miracles for the protection and welfare of his people.”<sup>14</sup> Here, Chopra seemingly criticizes a certain type of miracle-working figures, particularly Sathya Sai Baba, whose manifestation of material objects (e.g., sacred ash, pendants bearing his picture) are interpreted as miracles by his devotees and as magic tricks by his detractors.<sup>15</sup> Such statements reflect what I have heard in conversations where Shirdi Sai Baba devotees differentiate their saint's intercessory and compassionate actions from the demonstrative, public performances of Sathya Sai Baba. In Jaipur and Shirdi alike, I have heard Shirdi Sai Baba devotees distinguish the two Sai Babas: the “real” (*aslī*) one in Shirdi and the “fake” (*naklī*) one in Puttaparthi. This dissertation does not engage in such polemics, but it pauses to note that this type of categorization is symptomatic of the contentiousness of the category of the “miraculous” in modernity.

A hagiographer does not merely tell the story of a sacred life but also takes on the hermeneutic responsibility to discover – or create, if we employ a Ricoeurian

<sup>13</sup> Dhond, *Sāī Bābā: Avatār va kārya*, 25.

<sup>14</sup> Raj Chopra, *Shirdi Sai Baba: The Divine Healer* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 2012), 54.

<sup>15</sup> The “magic tricks” of Sathya Sai Baba have been a frequent target of the Committee for the Eradication of Superstition in Maharashtra. See Quack, *Disenchanted India*, 120 and 250.

hermeneutics of suspicion – the underlying messages in a saint’s utterances and actions. To evidence the devotional hermeneutics brought to bear on Sai Baba’s opaque actions, consider a particularly well-known miracle story in Dabholkar’s *Satcarita* about the saint’s ability to be in two places at once, a miracle of bi-location. Before starting his narration, Dabholkar announces that this story illustrates several key points about Sai Baba as a protector and healer of his devotees: “This was a *hakīm*<sup>16</sup> who only sought the benefit of others (*parārtha*); who was disinclined toward self-interest (*nijasvārtha*); who, for the benefit of others (*parkīyārtha*), tolerated the intolerable.”<sup>17</sup> A synopsis of the episode is as follows:

The year was 1910 (*san ekonīsaṣem dahā sālīn*).<sup>18</sup> On the eve of Diwali, i.e. Dhanteras – the festival celebrating the prospect of increased wealth and prosperity in the new year – Shirdi Sai Baba was sitting in his mosque, in front of the fire (*dhunī*). Suddenly, he stuck his hand into the flames. A devotee named Madhavrao Deshpande ran to Sai Baba’s side, and Sai Baba explained that a child of ironworkers (caste: Lohar) had slipped from the arms of its mother who was sitting in front of a furnace in a village far away.<sup>19</sup> Sai Baba’s hand caught and protected the child when he reached into the *dhunī*.

<sup>16</sup> Platts defines *hakīm* as “a wise man, a sage; a philosopher; a physician, doctor” (480). Molesworth adds that *hakīm* is “used particularly of Muhammadan physicians” (880).

<sup>17</sup> Dabholkar, *ŚSSC*, 7:71.

<sup>18</sup> Recording the specific dates of events, which Dabholkar does frequently – but not consistently – in the *Satcarita*, is a characteristic of modern hagiographies. Writing on the subject of the twentieth-century “discovery” of a medieval account of the poet-saint Tulsidas, Philip Lutgendorf argues that the text’s puzzling anachronisms, like the use of modern Hindi and references to exact dates and names of people in the saint’s life, should make the scholar suspicious of its purported date of composition in the early seventeenth century. See Philip Lutgendorf, “The Quest for the Legendary Tulsīdās,” in *According to Tradition: Hagiographical Writing in India*, eds. Winand Callewaert and Rupert Snell (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1994), 65-85.

<sup>19</sup> It is interesting to note that Dabholkar records Shirdi Sai Baba’s very angry words for the negligent mother, calling her a “*rāṇḍa*,” a rude appellation for a woman that means something between “idiot” and “whore.” According to Molesworth’s Marathi-English dictionary, the term may also refer to a widow but “always with contemptuous implication” (690). The full verse in the *Satcarita* features Shirdi Sai Baba’s narration of events: “Hearing her husband calling her, the ironworker’s wretched woman (*lohārācī rāṇḍ*) was startled. The child slipped from her arms, as the bellows of the furnace flared up.” See Dabholkar, *ŚSSC*, 7:78. Retellings of this story in Gunaji’s English adaptation and Mohan Yadav’s “inspired translation” (*bhāvārthānuvād*), refer to the woman as the “wife of a blacksmith” and the “ironworker’s wife,” or *lohārācī strī*, respectively. The omission of the coarse language in later versions suggests an interest in “cleaning up” the saint’s image for posterity. See Gunaji, *The Wonderful Life and Teachings of*



Taking note of the saint's injury, Madhavrao informed [another devotee] Nanasaheb Chandorkar, and the latter immediately brought a doctor (*ḍakṭar*) named Paramanand to the mosque. Before the doctor arrived, a leper named Bhagoji Shinde had been massaging Shirdi Sai Baba's burned hand with clarified butter and wrapping the wound in a leaf. Other devotees tried to convince Shirdi Sai Baba to let the doctor apply proper medicine (*ḍavā*) to the injury, but the saint turned them away, saying: "Allah is my physician" (*vaidya āpulā allā*).<sup>20</sup>

At this point, Dabholkar inserts himself back into the narrative to provide the necessary interpretation of events. According to Dabholkar, this episode is designed to show that Sai Baba was working for the benefit of other people. In addition to rescuing the child far away, the burn that Sai Baba received, Dabholkar says, was the premise to bring Dr. Paramanand to Shirdi for the blessed opportunity to meet the saint in person (i.e., to have *sāi-darśan*). The message administered by Bhagoji the leper was another type of blessing because "Bhagoji's service was not necessary for the powerful Sai" (*hī upasanā bhāgojīcī sāisiddhā na āvaśyaktā jīcī*). The injured hand was actually a pretext for instilling a "fondness for a devotee's work" (*bhakta-kājācī āvaḍī*) in Bhagoji.<sup>21</sup> This is especially important because, in Dabholkar's words, the leper is a "sinner from previous births" (*pūrvajanmīncā mahāpāpiṣṭa*) whose sins caused his disease. Even though "leprosy has wasted away his appendages" (*raktapitīnem jhaḍalī boṭem*) and his "entire body stinks" (*durgandhīnem sarvāṅga ākhaṭem*), Bhagoji's misfortune (*durbhāgya*) is mediated by the good fortune (*bhāgya*) that only comes from the happiness of serving (*sevāsukhem*) Shirdi Sai Baba.<sup>22</sup>

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*Shri Sai Baba*, 43; Mohan Yadav, *Śrī sāi caritra darśan: 'Śrī sāi caritra' ya granthāt bhāvānuvād* (Shirdi: Shri Sai Baba Sansthan and Trust, 2009), 43.

<sup>20</sup> Dabholkar, *ŚSSC*, 7:88.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 7:93 and 95.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 7:98-99.

The hagiographical search for meaning is also particularly evident when one comes to the parts of a saint's story about which previous generations of hagiographers have either kept silence or failed to interpret sufficiently. Why, one might ask, did Sai Baba wear a headscarf (*topī*) and white robe (*kafnī*)? Dabholkar's *Satcarita* gives the narrative situation in which Sai Baba acquired his trademark dress: his loss in a wrestling match in Shirdi to a Muslim named Mohinuddin Tamboli, after which he adopted what became his trademark garb. However, Dabholkar is silent with regard to its symbolism. In the introduction to a collection of devotional essays on Sai Baba, Bela Sharma stresses the need to look for "the esoteric secrets hidden behind [Baba's] *līlās*" (*līlāṅ ke pīche chipe gūḍha rahasya*), including the "deep mystery" (*gaharā rahasya*) behind the saint's *topī* and *kafnī*.<sup>23</sup> According to Sharma, free-flowing hair (*khule keś*) is a symbol of a loss of control, an inability to reign in the senses, and a susceptibility to confusing reality and illusion (*māyā*). The headscarf, therefore, represents the mastery over the senses and the distractions from the spiritual path caused by them. The plain, white robe is a sign of modesty, a visible marker that the outer simplicity of the garb matches the inner purity of the heart. The fact that Sai Baba lost the match, Sharma opines, is a moral lesson about the futility of following one's ego in a contest for superiority over another.<sup>24</sup> Absent from this interpretive frame is any acknowledgement that Sai Baba's dress resembles that of a Muslim mendicant, which is one of the points emphasized in Marianne Warren's argument about the saint's Sufi origin.<sup>25</sup> This is not to suggest that the two interpretive

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<sup>23</sup> B. Sharma, *Sāī Bābā: Ek avatār*, 133.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 133-139.

<sup>25</sup> Warren, *Unravelling the Enigma*, 104.

frames must always be mutually exclusive but rather to demonstrate that the hagiographer and the historian draw different conclusions from the same data.

Of course, the hermeneutic frame employed in the above stories rests on the presumption that everything a particular saint says or does has meaning that is either immediately relevant or eventually revealed in the course of time. Other saints, such as the thirteenth-century Mahanubhava figure Gundam Raul, are considered divine by their devotees because they fully engage in contradictory or non-normative behaviors. In the case of Gundam Raul, the hagiographic account of his life, the *Ṛddhipuralīlā* (thirteenth-sixteenth century), contains no attempt to deny or rationalize the saint's eccentric behaviors like laughing to himself, curing diseases, raising the dead while telling others to "drop dead," and violating purity taboos (e.g., polluting a Brahmin's water vessel, going inside a low-caste Mahar's home and then going inside a high-caste Brahmin's home). Rather, Anne Feldhaus argues that Mahanubhavas view the saint's madness a manifestation of God's madness, a revelation on earth of God's "otherness" and transcendence of social norms and customs.<sup>26</sup>

As with Gundam Raul, some of Shirdi Sai Baba's behavior must have seemed inexplicably erratic, ornery, and violent in the eyes of his hagiographers. Recall the discussion from Chapter 3 of the episode in Dabholkar's *Satcarita* where Sai Baba becomes enraged during the renovation of his mosque and attacks several devotees. In this particular instance, the hagiographer Dabholkar eschews any attempt to locate or interpret the cause of the anger, except to say that the saint's mood is difficult to

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<sup>26</sup> In particular, Feldhaus argues that in the case of the Mahanubhava interpretation of Gundam Raul, "the folly of the saints is an imitation of the folly of God." See Anne Feldhaus, *The Deeds of God in Ṛddhipur* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 25.

predict.<sup>27</sup> In other episodes recorded in the *Satcarita*, Dabholkar goes to great hermeneutic lengths to divulge the hidden meaning of the saint's actions. For example, in Chapter 41 of the *Satcarita*, a revenue officer (*mamlātdār*) named B.V. Deo visits Shirdi in search of the saint's blessing to eliminate the distracting thoughts in his mind that make it difficult to read the *Jñāneśwarī*, a thirteenth-century Marathi commentary on the *Bhagavad Gītā* composed by Jnaneshwar. Before his visit, Deo had talked with another devotee about how to receive Sai Baba's grace (*kṛpā*). Later, in the mosque, Sai Baba accuses Deo of stealing one of his rags (*cindhī*) and threatens to kill him: "I will strike you with an axe! I will cut you up, and kill you!"<sup>28</sup> Sai Baba labels Deo a thief and evicts him from the mosque, but the saint calls him back later, acknowledges that his words hurt the devotee, and says that he had to do what he did because Deo stole something from him. Sai Baba requests twelve Rupees as alms (*dakṣiṇā*), which Deo pays. Then, Sai Baba instructs the devotee to read religious literature (*pothī*) daily and asks why one would try to steal rags when the embroidered cloth (*śelā*) is available in the mosque. These words trigger Deo's realizations that the "rag" metaphorically refers to his discussion with the other devotee – i.e., someone other than Sai Baba – about spiritual matters. Here, the hagiographer Dabholkar clarifies the moral of the story: one should not hesitate to turn to Sai Baba as the first resource to solve problems and fulfill wishes. The saint's violent gesture becomes reframed as a pedagogical tool for teaching Deo about a new and imminently accessible source of spiritual counsel in Shirdi's mosque, namely, Sai Baba himself.

<sup>27</sup> Dabholkar, *ŚSSC*, 6:146. See also the third chapter of this dissertation.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 41:118 *tulā kurhāḍīnem hāṇīn / tulā kapīn ṭhār karīn*.

### The Lamp Lighting Miracle across the Hagiographic Tradition

Previous academic scholarship on Shirdi Sai Baba hagiography consistently identifies the lamp lighting miracle as the turning point in the saint's popularity in Shirdi.<sup>29</sup> This observation follows the cues of earlier hagiographic accounts that attach a similar importance to this event. For example, in 1933, Rao Bahadur Moreshwar W. Pradhan – a member of the Bombay Legislative Council – writes in his brief account in English that Sai Baba's tattered clothes, ornery disposition, and choice of seat underneath a *neem* tree on the village's outskirts made people think that he was “mad.” Pradhan says that Sai Baba had...

...a line of conduct, which to the worldly folks appeared to be that of a madman. But these Shirdi folks happened to be very soon disillusioned, when Sai Baba's superhumanity steadily asserted itself... But when Sai Baba struck a match and lighted the lamps one by one, and when these lamps remained lighted throughout the night, then these worldly folks came to their senses and approached Sai Baba in suppliant postures to be forgiven.<sup>30</sup>

Not long after Pradhan's account was published, the Tamil hagiographer B.V. Narasimhaswami assesses the situation in Shirdi before and after the lamp lighting miracle: “The contemptible *pagal fakir*, as they called him, was turned overnight into the hero or the weird magician or the holy Sadhu of the place.”<sup>31</sup> Following the public performance of this miracle, the devotional community, both inside and outside Shirdi, grew very quickly. By 1908, devotees had initiated many facets of modern-day Sai Baba worship, including the ritual of *gurupūjā*, the procession of the saint around the village on a palanquin (*pālkhī*), and the daily singing of devotional *bhajans* and *āratīs*. In this way,

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<sup>29</sup> Kamath and Kher, *Sai Baba of Shirdi*, 8; Rigopoulos, *Life and Teachings*, 106; Warren, *Unravelling the Enigma*, 255.

<sup>30</sup> Pradhan, *A Glimpse of Indian Spirituality*, 25.

<sup>31</sup> Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba*, 20.

the primary significance of the lamp lighting miracle in the Shirdi Sai Baba hagiographic tradition is that it transformed the popular perception of Sai Baba: from ordinary madman to powerful saint.

In this section, I focus on a component of the Shirdi Sai Baba hagiographic tradition that no scholar has discussed in any detail. Here, I chart the many iterations in hagiographic texts and films of Sai Baba's most well-known miracle: the *camatkār* wherein the saint lit lamps in his dilapidated mosque with water instead of oil, an event that took place in or around 1892.<sup>32</sup> Many features of this miracle story remain constant throughout the history of the hagiographic tradition, but we will see the narrative density that develops as this miracle story is told and retold over the last century. The lamp lighting miracle first appears in the second earliest written account about Sai Baba, Das Ganu's Marathi text *Bhaktalīlāmṛt* (1906).<sup>33</sup> Its story also gets told in subsequent hagiographic texts, such as Dabholkar's *Śrī Sāi Satcarita* (1929), which is also in Marathi, and Narasimhaswami's English tome *Life of Sai Baba* (1955). A close study of more contemporary hagiographic works like Ashok Bhushan's Hindi hagiographic film *Shirdi ke Sai Baba* (1977) and Sunit Nigam's Hindi book *Sāi Bābā ke camatkār* (2013) reveals the additional details and characters inserts into this miracle story, which contrasts with the shorter, terser accounts in works produced earlier in the twentieth century. In addition to the lamp lighting miracle's narrative density, we will also note how the contemporary works resituate the miracle: from being one that evidences the

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<sup>32</sup> Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba*, 28; Kamath and Kher, *Sai Baba of Shirdi*, 8; Rigopoulos, *Life and Teachings*, 106; Warren, *Unravelling the Enigma*, 254-255.

<sup>33</sup> The first written record of Shirdi Sai Baba is Chapter 57 of Das Ganu's *Santakathāmṛta* (1903) in which the saint has a conversation with the devotee Nanasaheb Chandorkar about Vedanta philosophy. See Chapter 2 for a detailed study of this text and its author Das Ganu Maharaj.

saint's power in front of a public audience to one that results from the personalized interactions between Sai Baba and another individual, who is either the saint's devotee or an antagonist.

#### a. Early Iterations of Sai Baba's Lamp Lighting Miracle

The first twenty-two verses of Chapter 31 of Das Ganu's *Bhaktalīlāmṛt* describe Shirdi Sai Baba as an egalitarian guru for all of humanity, comparing him with the fifteenth-century north Indian poet-saint Kabir whose "caste was God" (*tyāñce jātīs paramēśvar*).<sup>34</sup> In similar fashion, the teenaged youth who arrived and settled in Shirdi, writes Das Ganu, gave no indication where he was born or where he came from.

Moreover, Sai Baba grew very angry with such questions. Das Ganu further writes:

If someone questioned him, "Where do you come from? Please tell us your residence, your name."

The moment that question was asked *mahārāj* would reply harshly, like clouds roaring in the sky and unleashing a downpour on the ground:

"I have no place or residence! I am, in essence, formless (*nirguna*). Being subject to previously accumulated action (*karma*), I have obtained this heap of flesh.

You call this heap 'the body' (*deha*). So, my name is 'Embodied' (*dehī*). The world is my village. Know it to be so.

*Brahma* is my father; *māyā* is my mother. Taking a form through their union (*yāyoge*), I obtained this body."

This was his response to the people's question. Everything in the world is impermanent (*naśvar*). This was his disposition at all times.<sup>35</sup>

That the saint speaks in the language of non-dualism (*advaita*) is a characteristic of Das Ganu's hagiographic accounts (See Chapter 2). Here, Sai Baba says that he is the

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<sup>34</sup> Das Ganu, *BLA*, 31:10.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 31:16-21

offspring of two Hindu philosophical concepts. On one hand, he says his father is *brahman* – the essential and divine substance of the universe, which is also the cause of the universe’s creation. On the other hand, his mother is *māyā* – the concept of illusoriness in non-dualistic philosophy, or the false notion that the multiple and diverse phenomena perceptible in the universe exist distinctly and independently of one another. In this early hagiographic account, Das Ganu constructs Sai Baba as a saint who challenges and confounds how people perceive him. Sai Baba’s angry response that his parents are Hindu theological concepts (*brahma* and *māyā*) and that he resides in one and all places (“the world is my village”) is a way of mocking the attempt to collect discreet, categorical data about his background. His recalcitrance to answer directly the type of questions that would define him by his place and parentage (and consequently, by caste and religion) serves a didactic purpose in the hands of the hagiographer Das Ganu, whose task it is to tease out the underlying lesson to be learned in this exchange between a divine figure and unsophisticated villagers. Place and parentage are ultimately unimportant, Das Ganu intimates in the last line, because all things in the phenomenal world are impermanent, or *naśvar*. This exchange also reminds the reader that the hagiographic subject, Sai Baba, is an extraordinary figure, someone who lives within but is not bound by the phenomenal world. Following the exchange, Das Ganu explicitly states the purpose of Chapter 31 of the *Bhaktalīlāmṛt* as the narration of Sai Baba’s “innumerable miracles” (*agaṇit camatkār*), the first of which is the lamp lighting miracle.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 31:22.



According to Das Ganu’s version of events, for three or four decades, Sai Baba had routinely visited shops in Shirdi to beg for oil to light the lamps he kept in his mosque and some nearby temples. One day, the grocers (*vāṇī*) grew tired of giving away oil for free, so they lied to Sai Baba about its availability when he came to their shops. Sai Baba was stunned (*cakit*) at the ease with which they lied to him and reflected – privately, to himself – about how they have distanced themselves from God (*narāyaṇa*) and how they will suffer as a result of their actions. Sai Baba returned to the mosque where he “performed a thoroughly impossible act, one of his unfathomable *līlās*” (*kr̥tya kele aghaṭit thor / agādh līlā bābāñcī*).<sup>37</sup> He placed wicks in empty earthen saucers, while the grocers and other villagers watched him and wondered how he could light the lamps without oil. They deduced: “This must be a mad saint (*veḍāpīr ase hā*)... Would a sensible person (*sūjñā jana*) plant a seed in rocky soil, or expect a barren woman to give birth? This is the crown jewel of madmen (*veḍyāñcā śikhāmaṇī*).”<sup>38</sup>

A Sai Baba devotee named Nanasahab Dengale rebuked the grocers and asked them: “If a diamond (*hirā*) fell into a pile of stones, would you still consider [the diamond] a stone? Sit still for a minute. See what this fakir is about to do. Don’t jump hastily to conclusions.”<sup>39</sup> Dengale went into the mosque as Sai Baba was mixing water with the little bit of the leftover oil. The saint “offered the mixture to God” (*ātmārāmālāgūnī arpaṇ kele*), drank the “oil-mixed water” (*telmishrit pāñī*), put the remaining water into the earthen saucers, and lit the wicks.<sup>40</sup> Dengale immediately

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., *BLA*, 31:33.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 31:35-37.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 31:40-41.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 31:43-44. Molesworth glosses *ātmārāma* as: “the soul; the vivifying or the sentient principle; a designation or epithet of the Deity” (67).

clutched Sai Baba's feet in supplication. The lamps burned throughout the night, and the village took this miracle (*camatkār*) to exemplify the saint's religious authority (*adhikār*), the action of "God born on earth" (*pratī īśvar janmalā*).<sup>41</sup> Then, the grocers and other villagers who had accused Sai Baba of madness asked for his forgiveness: "We're your children (*pore*). You're our mother (*māy*). Forgive us our fault (*aprādh*), O Sai Maharaj, the reservoir of compassion."<sup>42</sup> Then, Shirdi Sai Baba addressed his audience with the lesson to be learned:

Then, in front of everyone, Baba began to say, "Listen up to what I'm going to say right now.

Keep your behavior such that Sri Hari is pleased. Don't speak untruth (*asatya*). Always uphold the truth (*satya*).

Don't be a detriment (*ghātpāt*) to anyone, ever. Spend your wealth (*dravya*) in virtuous deeds (*dharmakarmī*) and according to your capacity (*yathāśaktī*).

Only then you will be blessed and meet God (*narāyaṇ*). These are the words of truth (*satya vacana*). Take this to heart."<sup>43</sup>

Afterwards, everyone addressed by the saint accepted what he said was true, bowed at his feet, and returned happily to their homes. The hagiographer Das Ganu concludes by reflecting on the wonderment that he feels while narrating this episode: "Sai Maharaj is a great practitioner of yoga (*yogābhyāsī*). How much should I say? It's impossible to narrate all of his unfeasible (*agamya*) *līlās*."<sup>44</sup>

The next major iteration of the lamp lighting miracle occurs in G.R. Dabholkar's *Śrī Sāī Satcarita*, a hagiographic text published about two decades after Das Ganu's

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<sup>41</sup> Das Ganu, *BLA*, 31:46.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 31:48.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 31:50-53.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 31:55.

*Bhaktalīlāmṛt*. In general, Dabholkar keeps Das Ganu’s same basic narrative. Baba used to beg for oil from the grocers (*vāñī*) until they lied about its availability; he returned to the mosque, mixed water with the smidge of leftover oil and drank the mixture as a religious offering (*brahmārpaṇa*); and he lit the lamps, much to the shock of the grocers (lit. “the grocers put their fingers in their mouths” [*vāñī ghāliti ṭoṇḍānt boṭem*]).<sup>45</sup> When other people in the village started to say that the grocers were not worthy of Sai’s grace, the grocers realized that the saint must have great power (*pratāp*). In this way, the grocers repented for lying and angering Baba needlessly. Reentering the frame, the hagiographer/narrator Dabholkar summarizes a point about the saint’s equanimity towards all people: “In Baba’s heart there was neither hatred nor anger. Among enemies and friends, there was no [difference]. All creatures were equal to him.”<sup>46</sup>

About twenty-five years after the *Satcarita* – and five decades after the *Bhaktalīlāmṛt* – the next iteration of the lamp lighting miracle is in B.V. Narasimhaswami’s four-volume English text *Life of Sai Baba*. While Narasimhaswami maintains the preexisting narrative arc of the lamp lighting miracle, he also adds some flourish. For example, he compares Sai Baba’s humble habit of begging for oil to the “*bhikshu* monk” in the *Bhikṣugītā*, a composition featured in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, an iconic Hindu religious text. Narasimhaswami also describes the grocers as being afraid that Sai Baba would curse them for lying “just as Viswamitra cursed Rambha and Konkanava killed a crane with a glance,” two stories from the repository of Hindu mythology.<sup>47</sup> When Sai Baba tells them that their behavior is “unsocial and wicked,” the

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<sup>45</sup> Dabholkar, *ŚSSC*, 5:111.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 5:114.

<sup>47</sup> Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba*, 19.

hagiographer Narasimhaswami also adds a novel comparison between Sai Baba's admonition about not being a detriment to others and a quote from the English poet Wordsworth about how we are "never to blend our pleasure or our pride with sorrow of the meanest thing that feels."<sup>48</sup> As discussed in Chapter 3, Narasimhaswami's knack for referencing both Hindu mythology and modern English poetry are rhetorical devices to broaden the relevancy of Shirdi Sai Baba's sainthood from the provincial context of rural Maharashtra to the larger, national context of the new Indian nation-state and its English-reading public. Identifying similarities between Sai Baba's life story and events in Sanskrit religious literature is a way to give a particular gloss – a Hindu gloss – to the saint whom the hagiographer optimistically envisioned a symbol of Hindu-Muslim unity. (This should also remind us that the compositeness assigned to Sai Baba in Narasimhaswami's *Life of Sai Baba* reflects a politics of compositeness, in which the saint becomes dominantly Hindu and subordinately Muslim). The narrative insertion of references to Hindu mythology and Wordsworth's poetry shows that *Life of Sai Baba*, a text purportedly based on the "correct knowledge" about the saint, actually creates more than it condenses the amount of hagiographic information available to devotees about the saint's life and legacy.

#### **b. More Recent Iterations of Sai Baba's Lamp Lighting Miracle**

While Dabholkar's *Satcarita* and Narasimhaswami's *Life of Sai Baba* do not significantly diverge from Das Ganu's *Bhaktalīlāmṛt* in terms of characters and plot, there is more narrative innovation and density in more recent entries in the Shirdi Sai Baba hagiographic tradition. This is not only a difference noticeable when comparing the

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

iterations of the miracle story in various works, but also a difference in the time periods of the works: from before and just after the saint's death in 1918 to the latter half of the twentieth and into the twenty-first centuries. As we will see, the miracle that was once solely about the establishment in public of Sai Baba's religious authority takes on a new set of meanings as a miraculous event situated in the relationship between Sai Baba and new interlocutors.

We discussed in the previous chapter the importance of Ashok Bhushan's *Shirdi ke Sai Baba* (1977), the first hagiopic about the saint in Hindi and "one of the last great religious films made in India."<sup>49</sup> Bhushan's hagiographic film innovatively organizes its presentation of Sai Baba's life story around the conflict in Shirdi between a loving, tolerant saint and two prudish, manipulative Brahmins: a priest named Mangaloo and an apothecary named Kulkarni. These Brahmins feel threatened by Sai Baba's rising popularity in the village. Mangaloo is upset that no one is coming to him to perform religious rituals; people are going to the saint instead of seeking his blessings. Kulkarni is angry because Sai Baba is hurting his business; people are taking recourse to the miraculously curative power of the saint's sacred ash (*udī*) instead of his concoctions. These two Brahmins hatch numerous schemes to expose the saint as a fraud, all of which are unsuccessful. To my knowledge, there is no prior textual reference to these particular characterizations of villainous Brahmins in the Shirdi Sai Baba hagiographic tradition, but there are numerous examples in hagiographic traditions in South Asia, where low-caste or casteless saints must confront harassment and triumph over their Brahmin antagonists. In this sense, Bhushan's film incorporates a longstanding hagiographic trope

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<sup>49</sup> Rachel Dwyer, "Hinduism," in *The Routledge Companion to Religion and Film*, ed. John Lyden (New York: Routledge, 2009), 152.

of conflict between representatives of different types of religious power and authority, but it is also noteworthy that the Brahmin “bad guys” Mangloo and Kulkarni are newly emplotted antagonists, whose first appearance occurs in Bhushan’s hagiopic.

In Bhushan’s *Shirdi ke Sai Baba*, the lamp lighting miracle begins with a young girl named Vidya – an “untouchable” (*achūt*), we learn later in the film – who asks Kulkarni for help obtaining oil for Sai Baba’s lamps on the night before Diwali. Kulkarni angrily shoos the girl away, and she returns sadly to Sai Baba’s mosque. Immediately, one notices three new details in the miracle story’s setup. First, the request for oil takes place between a Brahmin and a Sai Baba devotee, not between Sai Baba and the grocers. Second, the request for oil occurs on the eve of a major Hindu religious festival. Making it so that Sai Baba will be unable to light lamps for Diwali amplifies the drama in the conflict between the orthodox Brahmins and the unorthodox saint. Third, the film overwrites the public dimension of the lamp lighting miracle and the collective lying by a particular caste (the grocers, or *vāñīs*) with a curt exchange between a Brahmin man and the “untouchable” girl whom he ejects from his property.

Returning emptyhanded to the mosque, the visibly upset Vidya explains to Sai Baba what happened. The girls’ tears fall into a nearby pot of water, which the saint pours into the lamps. He miraculously lights a few next to him, and as he flicks the water into the air, more lit lamps suddenly appear along the mosque’s railing. This is the cue for the start of a song about celebrating a beautiful Diwali and the power of the saint’s “magic water” (*jādū kā pānī*). The lamp lighting miracle thus takes place as the result of the personalized, emotional bond between Sai Baba and Vidya, whose tears – or rather, “tears of faith” (*śraddhā ke āmsū*), as they are called in the film – consecrate the water. It

is the girl's faith in Sai Baba that make the impossible possible, that alchemically transforms ordinary water into the fuel for the saint's lamps. In other words, Bhushan's *Shirdi ke Sai Baba* divests the miracle of the public character that it had in earlier hagiographic texts. The grocers do not even appear in this scene because the agent of deception is singularly the Brahmin Kulkarni, thereby repurposing the lamp lighting miracle as an episode in the film's main conflict between Sai Baba and the Brahmin elite. Moreover, while the earlier sources portray the lamp lighting miracle as a "moral miracle" culminating with the saint lecturing his audience on the virtue of honesty, Bhushan's film emphasizes the sentimentality of the event as an outward expression of the power of an individual's love for Sai Baba. In this hagiographic transformation, the Sai Baba in the *Bhaktalīlāmṛt*, who speaks to everyone about *satya*, is supplanted by the Sai Baba in *Shirdi ke Sai Baba*, who stimulates an individual's *śraddhā*.

To be clear, I am not suggesting that the portrayal of the lamp lighting miracle in Bhushan's hagiopic *Shirdi ke Sai Baba* is "wrong." Rather, the twists and turns added to the miracle story for new dramatic and didactic effects resembles what happens in the course of the ever-expanding poetic corpus of personages who lived and died in medieval north India. This naturally raises lively questions of interpretation and authority. Given the Western way of thinking that wants to link a historically verifiable author with a specific work rooted in a specific time and place, how would one make sense of a poem attributed to the fifteenth-century poet-saint Kabir, in which there is a reference to railways?<sup>50</sup> Most likely, the Western way of thinking steeped in historical positivism

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<sup>50</sup> On the importance of looking for the sensibility that undergirds a composition, as opposed to its "authentic" author, Hawley references a lecture by Purushottam Agarwal, in which there is discussion of a contemporary poem attributed to the medieval saint Kabir. The poem highlighted by Agarwal references modern technology: "Hari has built a railway like this – Take your seat, brother, let's ride." See John S.

would categorize the railway poem as a spurious addition in the body of work of the “historical” Kabir. In contrast, John Stratton Hawley has argued that authority supersedes authorship in hagiographic hymnody in South Asia. The person who performs or quotes the railway poem would certainly know the difference in historical time between a medieval poet-saint and the laying of the first railbeds in India in the nineteenth century. Nonetheless, the poem can convey the “Kabir sensibility,” the authority of a voice who speaks about devotion to a casteless, formless, nonsectarian God who can be reached immediately – even faster than a locomotive. Accordingly, the scholar’s task is not to traffic in the discourse of (il)legitimacy, but rather to shed light on the means and metaphors used to perpetuate and recreate the authority of a saint.

This chapter similarly emphasizes the diverse ways that hagiographers have invoked the authority of a particular saint over historical time by suggesting that the twists and turns added to the lamp lighting miracle in its various iterations reflect a transformation in the hagiographic imagination of the saint: from a saint performing for and in front of the public to a saint lighting lamps for one person in particular. Other interpretations exist in the hagiographic tradition, too. Whereas the lamp lighting miracle as it appears in *Shirdi ke Sai Baba* stems from the emotional bond between Sai Baba and a young devotee, let’s consider a very recent iteration of this miracle story, in which the conflict between Sai Baba and a Brahmin antagonist becomes paramount.

In many ways, Sunit Nigam’s *Sāī Bābā ke camatkār* (2013) is not remarkably different from the rest of hagiographic literature that one can find in bookstores in India today (e.g., Crossword) and online ordering services, such as Flipkart or Amazon.

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Hawley, *Three Bhakti Voices: Mirabai, Surdas, and Kabir in Their Time and Ours* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005), 6-7.



Nigam's text in Hindi has chapters organized around the major events and themes of Sai Baba hagiography: "*Sāī Bābā kī śaktī*" (The Power of Sai Baba), "*Ūdī kā camatkār*" (The Miracle of Sacred Ash), "*Mahāmārī se anūṭhā bacāv*" (A Unique Escape from the Plague), "*Saṅkaṭ-haraṇ Śrī Sāī*" (Sri Sai, the Crisis-Averter), and "*Pānī se dīp jale*" (When Lights Burned with Water). What is more distinctive about Nigam's text, however, is that many chapters turn on the conflict between Shirdi Sai Baba and an anonymous Brahmin priest. Nigam just calls him the "*paṇḍit,*" but in terms of characterization, this antagonist strongly resembles the figure of Mangloo, the Brahmin priest and one of the main villains in Bhushan's iconic film, *Shirdi ke Sai Baba*. Nigam's Brahmin priest has a huge ego (*ahāṅkār*) rooted in his Brahminhood (*brāhmantva*) and erudition (*pāṇḍitya*).<sup>51</sup> Like his film counterpart Mangloo, this anonymous priest derides Sai Baba by spreading misinformation about the saint being a fraud and magician. For example, when Sai Baba cured a snakebite victim by ordering the poison to leave the body, it was only the priest, writes Nigam, who considered this command to be the work of any ordinary snake charmer.<sup>52</sup>

Eventually, we learn, in Nigam's account, that the priest wants to get rid of Shirdi Sai Baba because the latter's arrival brought an end to the former's many jobs in the village. Sai Baba's cures supplanted the priest's work as the village doctor (*vaidya*). More people started going to the mosque to visit the saint instead of coming to the religious storytelling events (*kathā*) organized by the priest. Also, the saint's blessings eliminated the need for farmers to seek out the priest's performance of ritual sacrifices

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<sup>51</sup> Nigam, *Sāībābā ke camatkār*, 13.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 19-23.

(*yajña*) for bountiful rainfall.<sup>53</sup> Recall that Bhushan's film divided these Brahminical responsibilities between two characters, the priest Mangloo and the apothecary Kulkarni. By contrast, Nigam has collapsed the two into a single Brahmin antagonist, who wants Sai Baba gone from Shirdi.

In light of the other hagiographic works considered in this chapter, Nigam's *Sāī Bābā ke camatkār* offers the most detailed and conflict-driven dramatization of the lamp lighting miracle. In Nigam's text, the story begins – like Bhushan's hagiopic does – on the day before Diwali. The shopkeepers (*dukāndār*) have grown displeased with Sai Baba's presence in the village. The anonymous, anti-Sai Baba Brahmin priest approaches them with a plan to turn public opinion against the saint:

Look, guys. Tomorrow is Diwali, and it is written in the *śāstras* that Lakshmi [the goddess of prosperity] will not enter homes enveloped in darkness. Whichever house has even a little bit of Lakshmi's presence gets blessed. So, listen up, tomorrow when Sai Baba comes for oil, don't give any to him. He doesn't have any powers or such anyway, and if all goes accordingly, Lakshmi will pass him by on Diwali because the mosque will be dark.<sup>54</sup>

If the mosque is dark on Diwali, then the absence of Lakshmi's blessings, so the Brahmin's plan goes, will cause Sai Baba to lose face. One shopkeeper further suggests that none of them should sell oil to anyone in the village as retributory punishment for becoming the saint's devotees. That way, the only lights in the village will be in the homes of the shopkeepers and their Brahmin ringleader, and the population of Shirdi will blame Sai Baba for their misfortune. From this point onward, Nigam's account unfolds

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 48 and 87.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 90. The passage reads in transliterated Hindi: *Dekho bhāī, kal dīpāvalī hai aur śāstron meñ likhā hai ki dīpāvalī ke din jis ghar meñ andherā rahtā hai, vahāñ lakṣmī nahīn ātī hai. Jo bhi lakṣmī kā thorā-bahut amś us ghar meñ hotā hai, vo bhī calā jātā hai. Suno, kal jab sāīn bābā tel māngne āēn to unheñ tel hī na diyā jāē. Vaise to unke pās siddhi-viddhi kuch ha nahīn, aur yadi hogī bhī to kal dīpāvalī ke din masjid meñ andherā rahne ke kārañ lakṣmī, uskā sāth chorakar calī jāēgī.*

according to the precedent set in the earlier hagiographic works. Sai Baba is denied oil; he creates the oil-water mixture; and the lamps burn miraculously. Then, the miracle story takes an innovative turn. In *Sāī Bābā ke camatkār*, Sai Baba distributes the consecrated mixture to the oil-less denizens of Shirdi. The whole village begins to light up – except for the homes of the shopkeepers and the Brahmin priest, who somehow cannot find a drop of oil for their lamps. Realizing the error of their ways, the shopkeepers go to Sai Baba and ask forgiveness for being persuaded to join the Brahmin’s plan. Sai Baba is pleased that they have admitted their fault and gives them the oil they need to celebrate Diwali properly. He also instructs a devotee to bring oil to the home of the Brahmin priest – but the priest, ever the antagonist, staunchly refuses and remains in the dark.<sup>55</sup>

One of the main differences evident in Nigam’s version of this miracle story is the more generalized nature of the characters in conflict. Early twentieth-century hagiographic works maintain that the people who denied Sai Baba oil belonged to a particular caste of grocers, or *vāñīs*. The narrative in Nigam’s text replaces them with the more generic, casteless title “shopkeepers.” Additionally, the first generation of hagiographers, Das Ganu and Dabholkar, say that the lamp lighting miracle originated in a conflict between Sai Baba and the village’s grocers, whereas Nigam’s version of events makes the shopkeepers into the pawns of the unnamed *paṇḍit* working to embarrass Sai Baba. But the most innovative aspect of Nigam’s version of the lamp lighting miracle is that it relies on the juxtaposition of the “good” saint and the “bad” Brahmin, which also aligns Sai Baba with a religious ethos that is humanistic, compassionate, and reform-

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 90-94.

oriented. Elsewhere in his text, Nigam describes Sai Baba as a modern-day humanist: “[Baba] didn’t believe in any caste or sect. For him, the most important religion was the religion of humanity (*mānav kā dharm*).”<sup>56</sup> Nigam also holds that Sai Baba always opposed superstition (*andhaviśvās*), as well as dowry (*dehāj*) and the custom of *sati* (*satī prathā*).<sup>57</sup> More to the point, Nigam’s final chapter – “*Hindū sudhār āndolan aur širdī ke sār*” (*The Hindu Reform Movement and Shirdi Sai*) – places Shirdi Sai Baba in a comparative light alongside notable nineteenth-century Hindu reformers like Dayananda Saraswati, Rammohan Roy and Swami Vivekananda.<sup>58</sup>

Interestingly, the lamp light miracle is not the only episode in Nigam’s *Sāi Bābā ke Catmatkār* with significant innovations upon extant hagiographic tradition. For example, there is a very brief story in Dabholkar’s *Satcarita* about an unnamed Englishman who comes to Shirdi, visits the saint, but leaves without his permission. Consequently, the Englishman has an unfortunate accident on the road when his horse-cart collides with a cyclist, thereby demonstrating the inherent danger of disobeying Sai Baba’s instructions. Dabholkar tells this story in fifteen verses. Nigam, meanwhile, provides a rich, detailed prose narrative about this event, one that includes Christian missionaries in Shirdi, growing animosity between Shirdi’s Indian Hindu and British Christian communities, and an encounter between Sai Baba and a prideful British preacher named Mr. Thomas. This account also gives the story a new ending, wherein Mr. Thomas experiences Sai Baba’s miraculous presence as he recovers from his roadside accident in the hospital and realizes that the saint is “working for the salvation

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 14 and 86.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 138-139.

of the human race” (*mānav jāti ka uddhār karne ke liye*).<sup>59</sup> Nigam’s enlarged and embellished telling of the story tacitly points to the underlying similarity of two salvific figures, Shirdi Sai Baba and Jesus. It also encodes into the story a new message about Sai Baba’s ability to reform – or, one might say, “convert” – his prejudiced and haughty British Christian interlocutor.

### The Miracle: A Contentious Category in Colonial and Postcolonial India

What might account for the hagiographical transformation of the lamp lighting miracle in a century’s worth of texts and films? Why do some more recent versions resituate the

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<sup>59</sup> The ninth chapter of the *Satcarita* gives examples of disasters caused when someone does not seek Shirdi Sai Baba’s permission before travelling. There is an “important English gentleman” (*āṅglabhaum thor grhasth*) who came to Shirdi for the saint’s audience (lit. *darśan*). Shirdi Sai Baba refuses him entry into the mosque three times, so the Englishman, who is unnamed in the *Satcarita*, decides to return to Bombay even though the saint tells him to leave the next day. On the way, the Englishman’s horse-cart crashes into a bicyclist, dumping him onto the road below. The gentleman gets up and takes his seat back in the cart, proceeding on his journey. See Dabholkar, *ŚSSC*, 9:21-35. In comparison to this rather simple narrative, consider the significantly expanded account offered in Nigam’s contemporary Hindi text *Sāī Bābā ke camatkār*, a synopsis of which reads:

In the British period, Christian missionaries had established themselves in Shirdi and its surrounding villages. Some Shirdi residents had even converted. The missionaries taught them to distinguish themselves from the Hindus and Muslims in their behavior, and “their principle objective was to create hatred and instill enmity between Hindus and Muslims” (*unkā ekmātra uddeśya hindū aur muslim sampradāyōṅ ke bīc dveṣa utpanna karke vaimanasya paidā karna thā*). The missionaries also had a hospital that offered medical treatment, but only for Christians, as an enticement for conversion. However, when the injections and medicine from the hospital were seen to have no effect, people started going to Shirdi Sai Baba and “his sacred ash which had immediate miraculous effects” (*us ūdī kā turant camatkārik asar hotā thā*). With falling Sunday attendance in local churches, one of the English pastors – a certain Mr. Thomas – decided that the saint should be exposed as a hypocrite (*dhōṅ*) and liar (*jhūthā*). Thomas went to the mosque in Shirdi, but devotees made him wait outside until the saint called him in. The saint offered to meet Thomas the next day, instructing him to stay the night in the village so as to avoid an imminent calamity (*aniṣṭa*). Angry and with wounded pride, Thomas left immediately. Halfway from the train station, his horse-cart suddenly collided with a cyclist, and the cart overturned, dumping Thomas on the ground. Passers-by brought the unconscious pastor to the local hospital, and Thomas awakened in his hospital bed to see Shirdi Sai Baba changing the bandages on his head. Shirdi Sai Baba purportedly told him: “Even though your heart was full of disbelief in me, it was my duty to save you (*tumhāre man meṅ to mere prati aviśvās bharā huā thā, phir bhī tumhārī rakṣa karna merā dharm thā*).” Then, Thomas woke up, looked around his hospital room, and saw no one there. A few days later, Thomas returned to Shirdi, laid his head at Sai Baba’s feet, and asked for forgiveness, an event that everyone considered a miracle (*camatkār*). Thomas then told Sai Baba: “You have come here on Earth for the salvation of the human race (*āp mānav jāti kā uddhār karne ke liye hī is dhartī par āye haiṅ*).” See Nigam, *Sāībābā ke camatkār*, 61-64.

event in the interactions between the saint and individuals, the young girl Vidya in Bhushan's film and the anonymous Brahmin priest in Nigam's text? Perhaps the changing contours of the lamp lighting miracle relate to the growth of the saint's popularity, from local to national and colonial to postcolonial contexts. With this growth comes an ambivalence about how to portray this extraordinary event in Sai Baba's life story and what message(s) it should convey.

One cannot underestimate the impact of the entrance into India of post-Enlightenment rationalism and European intellectualism during the colonial period on the understanding of the category "religion" and its extraordinary, paranormal elements, like miracles. The spirit of Hume's mission in the mid-eighteenth century England to "check all kinds of religious superstition"<sup>60</sup> reappeared in colonial India, first as Ram Mohan Roy's rejection of miracles in favor of moral principles in his interpretations of Hinduism and Christianity and later as Sayyid Ahmad Khan's rationalization of miracles in the *Qur'ān* as explanations of natural phenomena or metaphorical descriptions of the same.<sup>61</sup> Eminent late nineteenth-century Hindu theologians and philosophers Swami Rama Tirtha and Swami Vivekananda similarly aligned the notions of religion, miracles, and scientific rationality by acknowledging certain types of miracles like healing and walking on water, but also stipulating that such powers are an ordinary and replicable result of one's intense spiritual practice. The true Vedantin should push beyond this middling-level of religious truth and its miraculous feats to achieve the highest truth, viz. unmediated knowledge of

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<sup>60</sup> David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding, with a letter from a gentleman to his friend in Edinburgh; and Hume's abstract of A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. Eric Steinberg (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1993), 73.

<sup>61</sup> On Ram Mohan Roy, the Brahmo Samaj, and early nineteenth-century Bengal, see David Kopf, *The Brahmo Samaj and the Shaping of the Modern Indian Mind* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979). On Sayyid Ahmad Khan's reinterpretation of Muslim theology, see Christian W. Troll, *Sayyid Ahmad Khan: A Reinterpretation of Muslim Theology* (Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1978).

one's true self.<sup>62</sup> In colonial India, the category of the “miraculous” is thus caught between, on one hand, reform-oriented discourse that neither entirely proscribes nor sanctions its legitimacy as evidence of spiritual accomplishment, and, on the other hand, the anti-miracle discourse of ardent rationalists like Roy and Hindu religious leaders like Dayananda Saraswati, in which religion becomes “rational” inasmuch as it lacks “superstitious” elements, like miracles.

This is not to overlook the pre-colonial prohibitions and anxieties, for example, about the use of miraculous or magic powers vis-à-vis the *siddhīs* that one acquires during intense meditational and ascetic exercises. Additionally, more conservative Sufi traditions have long viewed miracles as “snares on the way toward God.”<sup>63</sup> Abu'l Hasan Qadiri (d. 1635), who lived in Bijapur (approx. 400km from present-day Shirdi), warned readers in his *Sukh Anjan* to stay away from “ecstatics” – the *majzūbs*, holy fools whose “attraction” (*jazb*) to God does not require the guidance of a spiritual master, or *pīr*. Qadiri says that *majzūbs* indulge in feats like prophecy, changing into a boy, and the transubstantiation of water into oil.<sup>64</sup> Qadiri's statement thus suggests that the mendicant in Shirdi was neither the first nor the only divine figure to evidence his divine power by lighting lamps without oil in the premodern Deccan region.

But the central point is that there were various sources of anti-miracle rhetoric in pre-colonial and colonial India by the time that Shirdi Sai Baba purportedly lit lamps with consecrated water in 1892. Furthermore, in modern India, the miracle remains a contentious category put under scrutiny through the discourse of rationality and

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<sup>62</sup> See Robin Rinehart, “The Neo-Vedanta Miracle,” in *Miracle as Modern Conundrum in South Asian Religious Traditions*, eds. Corinne G. Dempsey and Selva J. Raj (Albany: SUNY Press, 2008), 23-38.

<sup>63</sup> Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1975), 212.

<sup>64</sup> See Abu'l Hasan Qadiri, *Sukh Anjan*. Cited in Eaton, *The Sufis of Bijapur*, 277.

superstition. Organizations like the Committee for the Eradication of Superstition (Marathi: Andhaśraddhā Nirmūlan Samitī), which has been particularly active in Maharashtra since its establishment in 1989, seek to awaken the spirit of scientific rationality at the grassroots level. One of ANiS's trademarks is the "science van," a mobile stage where rationalists expose the "imposters in saffron robes" by performing the same tricks of the purported "godmen."<sup>65</sup> In Maharashtra's state government, the committee's efforts have succeeded in pushing forth a bill that would criminalize religious practices deemed harmful and/or exploitative. Included in the bill's categorization of "inhuman, evil, and aghori practices and black magic" is the "display of so-called miracles by a person and thereby earning money; and to deceive, defraud, and terrorize people by propagation and circulation of so-called miracles."<sup>66</sup> Some Hindus fear that the bill targets Hinduism wholesale. Ramdas Kadam, a member of both the Maharashtra Legislative Council and the Shiv Sena, addressed the state assembly in December 2013, interrogating the government's will to criminalize miracle-working:<sup>67</sup>

In the second item listed on the bill, it is a crime to promote so-called miracles (*tathākathit camatkār*). If this bill had come into being a few years prior, then the current chief minister Ashok Chavan would have had a criminal case filed against him. He invited Sathya Sai Baba into his home. Sathya Sai used to do miracles. That's what people believe. But leave this issue. [Shirdi] Sai Baba lit lamps with water. The organization (*santhān*) in Shirdi today has hundreds of thousands of devotees. The

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<sup>65</sup> See Quack's *Disenchanted India* (2011).

<sup>66</sup> The bill's name is the Maharashtra Prevention and Eradication of Human Sacrifice and other Inhuman, Evil, and Aghori Practices and Black Magic Act. The text of the bill is available online: <http://www.bombayhighcourt.nic.in/libweb/acts/Mah.Ord.2013.14.PDF>.

<sup>67</sup> In the lead-up to the 2014 general election in India, Kadam received criticism for a "hate speech" in Mumbai that targeted Muslims for clashing with police, vandalizing memorials, and "misbehaving" with female police officers during the Azad Maidan riots in 2012. Kadam also said that Narendra Modi, the BJP candidate for prime minister, "won't rest until such elements are taken care of." See "Sena Neta Attacks Muslims, Modi Looks On," *India Times*, April 22, 2014, <http://www.indiatimes.com/news/more-from-india/lok-sabha-elections-2014-shiv-senas-ramdas-kadam-targets-muslims-narendra-modi-looks-on-143243.html>, accessed December 28, 2015.



government collected Rs. 50 crore [approx. \$8 million] from that organization. How did this happen?<sup>68</sup>

The debate over the so-called “anti-superstition” bill highlights the precarious place of the miracle in modern India as it becomes a cultural and legal battleground for distinguishing “legitimate” from “superstitious” religion, a continuation of the colonial-era debates and categories. The lamp lighting miracle in the pages of early twentieth-century hagiography is a rhetorical tool that communicates Sai Baba’s power and authority, and it does so at a time when some of the major intellectual figures in colonial India had either thrown miracles out of their concept of “religion” or significantly marginalized their importance. At the time of the composition of texts like Das Ganu’s *Bhaktalīlāmṛt* and Dabholkar’s *Satcarita*, the miracle had only recently happened. The earliest iterations of the miracle story capture its function as a “social act”<sup>69</sup> that established the saint’s authority in the village, viz. Das Ganu’s verse describing the change in the public’s perception from “mad saint” to “the Lord born on earth.”

The contemporary hagiographic works considered in this chapter evidence a transformation in the miracle’s significance. Instead of a public event that produced a moral lesson aimed at a specific caste and occupational community (the *vāṇīs*), it becomes re-imagined as the product of an encounter with an individual: the “untouchable” girl Vidya in Bhushan’s film *Shirdi ke Sai Baba* and the manipulative Brahmin *paṇḍit* in Nigam’s text *Sāi Bābā ke camatkār*. Recall that Bhushan’s film opens with a disclaimer stating the filmmaker’s invocation of creative license: “In order to

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<sup>68</sup> “Hindū dharma sampaviṇyācī annisane ghetalī supārī,” *Sakal*, December 17, 2013, <http://online2.esakal.com/esakal/20131217/5562957080078870505.htm>, accessed December 28, 2015.

<sup>69</sup> See Richard H. Davis, “Introduction: Miracles as Social Acts,” in *Images, Miracles, and Authority in Asian Religious Traditions*, ed. Richard H. Davis (Boulder: Westview Press, 1998), 1-22.

properly disseminate Baba’s message to all of humanity, [this film] has taken recourse to use some new characters (*nae nām*) and new issues (*naī bāteñ*) to round out the story [of Sai Baba].”<sup>70</sup> The girl is one of these “new characters” and the miraculous power of her “tears of faith” reflects one of these “new issues” layered onto Sai Baba’s legacy as a saint, who specializes in solving person-specific problems and anxieties – a fulfillment of the saint’s promise that his bones will speak to people about matters of their individual interest. Nigam’s *Sāī Bābā ke camatkār* situates the miracle in yet another new context. Here, Sai Baba’s ability to light lamps with water instead of oil thwarts the scheming Brahmin’s plan to expose the saint as a fraud. While the conflict crafted in Nigam’s text has its basis in early hagiographic sources with stories about Sai Baba’s miraculous encounters with excessively proud Brahmins, it escalates the animosity felt by the Brahminical opposition through stories, in which the unnamed priest repeatedly tries to damage the saint’s public image and hurt him – a characterization most likely traceable to the popularity of Bhushan’s film and its dramatization of the clash between Sai Baba and his Brahmin antagonists. Accordingly, both Bhushan and Nigam solidify the understanding of Shirdi Sai Baba as a figure through whom there can be a critique of the manipulative representatives of Hindu orthodoxy.

Both of these modern entries in the Shirdi Sai Baba hagiographic tradition approach the lamp lighting miracle as a personal, one-on-one encounter between an individual and Sai Baba. So, I suggest that there is a convergence of factors contributing to the miracle’s reinterpretation: 1) the force of the miracle as a “social act” is less

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<sup>70</sup> The disclaimer in Bhushan’s hagiographic film reads in transliterated Hindi: *Mānav jāti ke nām bābā ke sandeś ko pūrṇa rūp se peś karne ke liye kahānī ke adhūre hisson ko pūrā karne ke liye kuch naye nām aur nayī bātoñ kā sahārā liyā gayā hai.*

important in the late twentieth century vis-à-vis the early twentieth century when Sai Baba had yet to gain a substantial following in Shirdi; 2) the precariousness still assigned to miracle-workers and the belief in their miracles nudges the miracle to be reinterpreted as a less ostentatious event; and 3) Sai Baba is a particular type of saint whom hagiographers perceive as speaking to people and working miracles for them on an individual basis, rather than in front of large, public audiences.

Miracles are so effective in communicating the extraordinariness of a saint because they rattle the reality of the audience, both those who experience them and those who read about them or see them reenacted in films. Hagiographers have to record these events and interpret the message that is to be conveyed or the lesson that is to be taught, a task structured by the particularities of the hagiographer doing the interpretation. The many iterations of the lamp lighting miracle evidence the capability of hagiographers, textual authors and filmmakers alike, to reshape saints and their miracles with the creative freedom endowed by historical distance and hagiographic hermeneutics. It suffices to say that all acts of interpretation, whether hagiographic or otherwise, are necessarily provisional. Interpretation unfolds according to the specifics of times, places, voices, and mediums of interpreters. Viewing interpretation as a process of (re)telling is helpful for investigating the issues raised in this chapter: how hagiographers construct a saint's interaction with his devotees, what these interactions look like in hagiographic texts and films, and what kinds of messages are encoded into these interactions by those who recreate them on the written page and the cinematic screen. Privileging the earliest hagiographic sources over and above more recent entries in the hagiographic tradition is to make the tough choices that are best left to hagiographers and devotees, viz. the

labeling of sources as “authentic” and “inauthentic,” or “more authentic” and “less authentic.” Instead, we might conclude that there is no lamp lighting miracle other than its imaginations, constructions, and transformations in the domain of hagiography. To that extent, the portrayals of Sai Baba’s lamp lighting miracle in contemporary hagiographic works certainly do not contradict extant hagiographic tradition – but they do not exactly repeat it, either.

## Chapter 6

### **“Common Sense” and “Medical Opinion” or Faith and Forbearance: Considering the Epistemological Conflicts in Some Sai Baba Miracle Stories**

- Doctor: These babas, this Sai, these saints, these fakirs, I don't believe in any of them. I'm educated. I'm a doctor, a doctor!
- Scientist: I'm a scientist.
- Doctor: So, even though you're a scientist, you still believe in miracles (*camatkār*)?
- Scientist: Doctor, every new experiment, every new experience in science is a type of miracle.

This conversation between a skeptical doctor and a scientist who is also a Sai Baba devotee is part of the narrative frame in Ashok Bhushan's *Shirdi ke Sai Baba* that bookends the hagiographic film's telling of the saint's life story. The film begins in present-day India with the doctor (Rajendra Kumar) at the bedside of his son Deepak who is suffering from an untreatable blood cancer. When his wife Pooja (Hema Malini) gives their child a bit of sacred ash (*ūdī*) from a nearby Shirdi Sai Baba temple, the doctor maintains that if science cannot help his son, then what is the use of some saint who died many decades ago?

To the parents' surprise, the ash brings their son back to consciousness, only long enough to say that Baba wants them to take him to Shirdi, which they do. Upon arrival, the doctor meets and talks with the devotee/scientist played by the popular actor and the film's producer Manoj Kumar, whose affinity for Shirdi Sai Baba is well-known in Bombay's film industry.<sup>1</sup> The scientist tells his new friend about Sai Baba's miraculous cures and intercessions, arguing that the saint continues to help people today just as he did when he was alive. The doctor grapples with his inability to make the Kierkegaardian

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<sup>1</sup> Dwyer, *Filming the Gods*, 94-95. Today, actors and actresses like Manoj Kumar, Rani Mukherjee and Shilpa Shetty are routinely spotted visiting the Samadhi Mandir in Shirdi.

leap of faith until Deepak's illness is cured through the miraculous agency of Shirdi Sai Baba. Ultimately, the miracle causes the doctor's faith to overflow, as he collapses when he finds his son healthy. At the end of the film, the family stands together and prays around the saint's *mūrtī*. It is significant that unlike the other roles in the film, neither the doctor nor the scientist have specific names, perhaps, because their characters symbolize two contradictory perspectives, scientific rationality and religious devotion. Taken this way, *Shirdi ke Sai Baba* is just as much a hagiographic film (or hagiopic) about the life of a saint who lived in the late nineteenth/early twentieth century as it is a contemporary devotional journey from skepticism to faith. For the film's audience, the doctor exemplifies the profound, personal transformation that can be engineered by the miracle-working Shirdi Sai Baba, a saint whose "business is to give blessings."

D.B. Vij's Hindi hagiopic *Shirdi Saibaba* (2001) adopts a similar structure: narrative flashbacks to Sai Baba's life in the late nineteenth/early twentieth century set inside a present-day frame story about a staunch atheist's transformation into a Sai Baba devotee. One significant difference between the two hagiographic films, however, is that *Shirdi Saibaba* has a transnational dimension in its frame story, which begins with a conversation between two Indian acquaintances in the United States. Initially, a wealthy and successful businessman named Arjun is unimpressed while a devotee named Malik recites past instances of the saint's miraculous blessings (e.g., helping stranded devotees on their way to Shirdi, fulfilling a dying woman's last wishes, reviving the dead). Afterwards, Arjun ridicules Malik: "Here you are in America. In this age of science and technology, how can you talk [about these miracles] like an imbecile?"<sup>2</sup> Arjun then

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<sup>2</sup> The dialogue in transliterated Hindi reads: *Tum to amerikā meñ rahte ho, malik. Is science aur technology ki age meñ tum kaisī bevakūf-sī bāteñ karte ho?*

leaves New York to visit family in India, remarking on his cab ride from Bombay to Pune that his driver's habit of lighting incense to an image of Sai Baba on the dashboard is "nonsense." Accidentally, his driver takes him to Shirdi instead of the intended destination Pune, at which point Arjun suddenly remembers Malik's parting words – one does not go to Shirdi; one is drawn there.

Of course, in Shirdi, Arjun is inexplicably drawn to the Samadhi Mandir. While gazing at the marble image above the saint's tomb, Arjun has a vision that pulls him from the crowd and transports him outside the temple to an ethereal forest setting. The saint tells Arjun what his life is missing, viz. tranquility and peace of mind, which only arise through the addition of religious faith (*śraddhā*) to one's character. To stimulate faith, Sai Baba shows himself to Arjun as Jesus and as the Hindu god Shiva, a combination perhaps symbolic of the film's synthesis of Western/American/Christian and Eastern/Indian/Hindu religio-cultural forms in the person of Shirdi Sai Baba. (The revelation of a divine figure to an interlocutor named Arjun also functions as an homage to the vision of Krishna's cosmic form, the *viśvarūpa*, in the *Bhagavad Gītā*). Arjun's vision imparts the lesson that all measures of worldly success will disappear when one dies, whereas faith and faithful forbearance, *śraddhā* and *saburī*, can guarantee a peaceful afterlife. Arjun opens his eyes and finds himself back in the Samadhi Mandir, which is charged with fervently devotional singing. The transformation is now complete – the *nāstik* has become the *bhakta*. With his newfound faith, Arjun picks up a text, presumably the *Satcarita*, and starts reading under a tree outside the temple. The devotee's act of reading the saint's sacred biography then serves as the film's transition to a ninety-minute flashback narrative of Sai Baba's life, teachings, and interactions with

people in Shirdi. At the very end of the film, there is an epilogue to Arjun's story wherein he returns to the United States and impresses his old friend Malik with his change of heart, telling Malik that he now knows that there is no place in the world where Sai Baba cannot reach those in trouble.

These two hagiographic films highlight a prominent theme found in the descriptions of Sai Baba's miracles, namely, that faith is a "process, not a possession."<sup>3</sup> This is a type of faith, termed *śraddhā*, *niṣṭhā*, or *viśvās* in Indian languages, that does not come easily but instead requires cultivation, as well as the exercise of intellectual labor when reflecting on inexplicable experiences. In this chapter, we will consider two early twentieth-century hagiographic works that record a variety of Sai Baba miracle stories: G.R. Dabholkar's *Śrī Sāī Satcarita* (1929) and B.V. Narasimhaswami's *Devotees' Experiences of Sri Sai Baba* (1940). The rhetoric in these accounts evidences the process of faith as it runs aground of modern sources of knowledge, like science, medicine, rationalism, and what one would colloquially call "common sense." Furthermore, as the conclusion of *Shirdi ke Sai Baba* attests, the principal argument put forth in these arguments is that faith and forbearance in the inscrutable ways of Sai Baba succeeds where and when non-faith-based recourses fail. To borrow from Ann Gold's work on cultic shrines in Rajasthan, I want to begin this chapter with the premise that "miracles present worshippers not so much riddles to be solved but glimpses of causalities beyond the visible."<sup>4</sup> Here, I aim both to study the language used by devotees to talk about these

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<sup>3</sup> Nathan Schneider, *God in Proof: The Story of a Search from the Ancients to the Internet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 46.

<sup>4</sup> Ann Grodzins Gold, "Showing Miracles in Rajasthan: Proof and Grace," in *Miracle as Modern Conundrum in South Asian Religious Traditions*, eds. Corinne G. Dempsey and Selva J. Raj (Albany: SUNY Press, 2008), 99.



riddles as posing an epistemological conflict between two worldviews, and also to consider the early twentieth-century historical context in which these voices registered their experiences in the Shirdi Sai Baba hagiographic tradition.

### **S.B. Dhumal Experiences Sai Baba's Miraculous Protection**

To begin, let's consider a paradigmatic example of the conflict between two epistemologies, i.e. two theories of knowledge for understanding how the world works, in hagiographic literature. The following account comes from Narasimhaswami's *Devotees' Experiences*, a collection of devotional testimonies from seventy-nine people who knew Sai Baba when he was alive. S.B. Dhumal, a 63-year-old Brahmin lawyer from Nasik, foregrounds his account with remarks about the counterintuitive nature of Sai Baba's instructions:

I invariably followed [Shirdi Sai Baba's] advice – however much it might run counter to 'common sense,' 'medical opinion,' 'rules of prudence,' etc., and invariably discovered that the path chosen for me by Baba was the safest and wisest.<sup>5</sup>

Dhumal's account opens with an outbreak of plague in Nasik and his fright upon finding dead rats in his house. Dhumal writes a letter to Sai Baba, asking permission to move to another house, and the saint says 'yes.' But then Dhumal finds a dead rat in his new bungalow. He asks for permission to move again. This time, the saint says, "Stay put." In the patient words of the devotee Dhumal: "And contrary to the rules of prudence and [the] wisdom of medical experts and laymen, I kept on living with my family at the bungalow."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Narasimhaswami, *Devotees' Experiences*, 31.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

However, dead rats soon appear in the servant's quarters, throughout the neighborhood and even in the well from which he and his family get their drinking water. His patience understandably shaken, Dhumal packs up everyone and everything and moves to yet another house, thereby disobeying Sai Baba's order to remain. When Dhumal arrives at his new home, he receives an anonymous letter with "Shirdi" as the postal address. It reads: "Why should we leave? Stay there." Dhumal interprets this as a sign from Sai Baba that he should return to the plague-infested bungalow, which he does. Dhumal concludes his account by stating that "there were times during the Plague Season when there were 14 or 15 deaths per day due to plague in the town – and despite that fact, Baba bade us stay in the house in town and we were all safe."<sup>7</sup>

The rhetorical structure of Dhumal's testimony reflects two epistemologies in conflict. The first epistemology comprises what Dhumal calls "common sense," "medical opinion" and the "rules of prudence," and according to this worldview, it is unreasonably dangerous to continue living alongside dead rats during a time of plague. Dhumal's use of "common sense" is particularly interesting because it invokes what some people would call the "logical approach" to a dangerous situation. If one were to express the so-called "logical approach" in terms of a clear pattern of cause and effect – something like the Naiyāyika five-limbed (*pañcāvayava*) syllogism – then it might be reasoned thus:

- 1) The premise is: I'm in danger of dying from plague.
- 2) Why? Because I see dead rats in my house.
- 3) Invariable concomitance tells me that where there are dead rats, there is plague (i.e., knowledge reinforced by the modern science of disease transmission).
- 4) Where there are dead rats, there must be a danger of dying from plague.
- 5) I conclude: I'm in danger of dying from plague.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>8</sup> This is my play on the demonstration of inference (*anumāna*) as a valid means (*pramāna*) of knowledge: 1) There is fire on the mountain over there; 2) Why? Because I see smoke; 3) Invariable concomitance tells

Following this line of reasoning, one should keep moving out of plague-infested areas until reaching uncontaminated environs. This syllogistic logic is what challenges Dhupal's patience with Sai Baba's instructions that run against his "common sense."

However, Dhupal's decision is not informed by such reasoning. When he finally returns to the plague-infested bungalow, he exercises what he calls an "implicit faith in the truth of [Shirdi Sai Baba's] words."<sup>9</sup> This faith comprises the second epistemology, which is rooted in the relationship between saint and devotee, one that is predicated on a transaction between the two, in which the devotee gives faith and the saint gives a miraculous blessing, like protection, in return. Skeptics will dismiss the knowledge derived from this epistemological worldview as superstitious or illogical, but the scholarly commitment to the Geertzian combination of "thick description" and interpretation in the study of religious phenomena should move us to see that this second epistemology operates with its own form of logic, one that draws from faith and forbearance, *śraddhā* and *saburī*, two of Sai Baba's favorite terms of instruction.

### **Some Accounts of Miraculous Healing in the *Śrī Sū Satcarita***

A similar conflict between different systems of knowledge appears in miracle stories in Dabholkar's *Satcarita*, too. The thirteenth chapter of the text features several stories, in which Sai Baba cures people in unusual ways. In the synopses of a section of these stories below, we will see the familiar argument that positions faith in Sai Baba's miraculous ways as the most effective medicine to combat a range of illnesses.

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me that where there is smoke, there is fire (i.e. what is observed in the kitchen); 4) Where there is smoke, there must be fire; and 5) I conclude that there is fire on the mountain over there.

<sup>9</sup> Narasimhaswami, *Devotees' Experiences*, 31.

**a. Bhimaji Patil<sup>10</sup>**

In the first story, Bhimaji Patil is a well-to-do gentleman from Pune who comes down with pulmonary consumption (*kaphakṣaya rog*). He develops a high fever, nausea, frothing at the mouth and bloody coughing. Patil calls for a doctor, and the word in the text is the Indianized English word “*ḍaktar*,” thereby implying that this is an individual trained in the modern medicine of the day. Patil also calls for the local physicians (*vaidya*, *hakīm*), but all of these medical specialists determine that his disease is incurable (*duḥsādhya*). Patil’s friend Nanasaheb Chandorkar suggests a trip to Shirdi as the “one and only remedy” (*ekaci upāya*), so Patil goes to Shirdi. Within one hour of sitting near the saint in his mosque, he stops coughing up blood. According to Dabholkar, “[Baba] did not examine [the patient’s] illness. He did not ask about what caused it. Only his graceful glance (*krpānirīkṣaṇa*) eradicated the disease instantaneously.”<sup>11</sup> The hagiographer concludes his narration of the story with additional examples of Sai Baba’s glance (*darśana*) making the impossible possible, viz. making withered trees sprout new leaves and making flowers bloom out of season. Likewise, his glance cured Bhimaji Patil when the efforts of the *ḍaktar*, the *vaidya* and the *hakīm* failed.

**b. Bala Ganapat<sup>12</sup>**

In the second story, a devout tailor named Bala Ganapat wonders what sin he committed to contract malarial fever (*hiṃvatāp*). After trying all of the available treatments (*sarva auśadhem*) without any result, he cries out for help. Sai Baba is moved with compassion

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<sup>10</sup> See Dabholkar, *ŚSSC*, 13:31-87.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 13:79.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 13:88-97.

and prescribes a remedy, albeit an unconventional one. The saint tells Bala: “[Take] some handfuls of curd and rice [and go] near the Lakshmi temple. Feed the black dog there. You will feel better instantaneously.”<sup>13</sup> Even the hagiographer Dabholkar is taken aback by the inexplicable connection between the disease and its cure, as he reflects at the story’s conclusion: “In short, this incident, whatever anyone calls it, ended with the disappearance of the malarial fever, [after which] Bala was at ease.”<sup>14</sup>

### c. Bapusaheb Buti<sup>15</sup>

There is also Bapusaheb Buti, a wealthy gentleman from Nagpur, who suffers from diarrhea and vomiting during a cholera outbreak (*vākhyācā udreka*). A nearby *ḍakṭar* named Pillai has already “tried all of the remedies” (*tayānnīm upāya sarva veñcale*), but “when nothing worked” (*śevaṭīm jevhām kāmhīnc na cale*), Bapusheb goes to Sai Baba. The saint tells him to ingest milk, almonds, pistachios, walnuts and buttermilk. After doing so, Bapusaheb’s cholera immediately disappears (*upadrava-nirasana jāhalem*).

### d. Three other stories

In the remainder of this chapter in the *Satcarita*, there are three very short references to miraculous healings with significantly less narrative description. To summarize them quickly: Sai Baba cures a swami from Alandi of his ear infection, even after surgery (*śastraprayog*) proved ineffective, just by saying the words, “Allah will make everything alright” (*Allā acchā karegā*);<sup>16</sup> Kaka Mahajani receives roasted peanuts as *prasād*, which

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 13:92.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 13:97.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 13:98-109.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 13:110-118.

stop the loose motions brought on by cholera (*moḍasī*);<sup>17</sup> and finally the saint's blessings (*āśīrvād*) and sacred ash (*udī*) put an end to Dattopant Harada's fourteen-year-long grapple with colic (*pośāḷū-vyādhī*).<sup>18</sup>

In composing the thirteenth chapter around Sai Baba's cures for Bhimja Patil, Balaji Ganapat, and Bapusaheb Buti, perhaps the hagiographer Dabholkar opted to conclude the chapter with these short episodes because they resemble the former thematically with regard to Sai Baba's unconventional cures for various illnesses. Their inclusion effectively expands the resume of the saint's miraculous healing abilities. Alternatively, the inclusion of these stories at the end of the chapter might stem from Dabholkar's writing process, which he describes as following his stream of consciousness.<sup>19</sup>

### **No Charms, No Spells: Shirdi Sai Baba Cures Madhavrao's Snakebite**

In general, there are many medical defenses in South Asia for diseases small and serious alike. Whereas the first recourse might be a home remedy of variable effectiveness, a local medical specialist, such as the ayurvedic doctor (*vaidya*) or the Muslim physician (*hakim*), could provide a wider array of concoctions made from roots, leaves, and herbs. Notably, this is the initial reputation assigned to Sai Baba in the first few decades after he permanently settled in Shirdi in the late 1850s: "In the beginning he practiced medicine... [And] became well-known as a *hakīm*" (*ārambhīm gāmvīm vaidyakī karīt... hakīm*

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 13:120-147.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 13:148-156.

<sup>19</sup> For example, see *Satcarita* 35:197 where Dabholkar writes: "While I was singing the praises of the saint's sacred ash (*udī*) during this tale about [the Sai Baba devotee named] Nevaskar, I am reminded of yet another story about his great devotion, so listen to it" (*aso udīcā mahimā gātām / nevāskarāñcī āṇik kathā / pāhoni tyāñcī bhaktimattā / āṭhavalī cittā tī aikā*). For similar references made by the hagiographer about his stream of consciousness while writing, see Dabholkar, *ŚSSC*, 40:18 and 45:126.

*vikhyāt jhāle*).<sup>20</sup> Some healers – like Amma, the Hyderabadī Sufi *pīrānimā* at the center of Joyce Flueckiger’s ethnography (2006) – distinguish spiritually-curable diseases (e.g., impotency, barrenness, fever) from more serious physical illnesses that require modern allopathic treatments (e.g., typhoid, cancer). This distinction between the curable and incurable is not present in the Shirdi Sai Baba hagiographic tradition. To take but one example, Raj Chopra’s *Shirdi Sai Baba: The Divine Healer* amasses numerous devotional testimonies that attest to Sai Baba having cured essentially anything and everything, from blindness and communicable diseases to epilepsy and paralysis.<sup>21</sup>

Another medical resource in South Asia is the figure of the exorcist or sorcerer, such as the *baiga* in Chattisgarh, the *cami* and *mantiravāti* in Tamil Nadu, and the *devṛṣī* in Maharashtra.<sup>22</sup> To restore physiological and psychological well-being, these figures pacify or expel the presence of ghosts, witches, local deities, prematurely-departed spirits, angry ancestors, and other posthumous presences who have disrupted the life of the individual whom they possess. One of the most common practices of the exorcist in South Asia is the use of a powerful charm or ritual formula, such as a five-syllable incantation (*pāñcākṣar mantra*) or Islamic numerology (*abjad*), and this is precisely what

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<sup>20</sup> Dabholkar, *ŚSSC*, 7:46.

<sup>21</sup> The list of diseases and ailments miraculously cured by Shirdi Sai Baba and/or his sacred ash (*udī*) – both during his lifetime and after his *mahāsamādhi* – include, but are not limited to: complications during pregnancy, breathing trouble, tuberculosis, paralysis, polio, diarrhea, uterine tumor, pneumonia, cholera, lameness, madness or mental illness, plague, blindness, all sorts of aches, dysentery, epilepsy, leprosy, malaria, typhoid, sleeplessness, kidney stones, evil spirits, and bites from venomous snakes and insects. See Raj Chopra, *The Divine Healer*, 117-150.

<sup>22</sup> For further discussion of exorcism, possession, and spiritual healing in South Asia, see Chad Baumann, “Miraculous Health and Medical Itineration among Satnamis and Christians in Late Colonial Chattisgarh,” in *Miracle as Modern Conundrum in South Asian Religious Traditions*, eds. Corinne G. Dempsey and Selva J. Raj (Albany: SUNY Press, 2008), 39-56; Isabelle Nabokov, *Religion against the Self: An Ethnography of Tamil Rituals* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Barbara Schuler, *Of Death and Birth: Icakkīyamman, a Tamil Goddess, in Ritual and Story* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2009); Gunther-Dietz Sontheimer, “The Religion of the Dhangar Nomads,” in *The Experience of Hinduism: Essays on Religion in Maharashtra*, eds. Eleanor Zelliot and Maxine Berntsen (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988), 109-130.

the *Satcarita* maintains that Sai Baba did not use to bring about cures. According to Dabholkar, the saint never told people to do specific yoga postures, practice breath control (*prāṇāpāna*), or subdue the senses (*indriyadamana*). Moreover, he neither made use of charms, spells, or magical diagrams (*mantratantra yantra-bhajana*), nor did he secretly dispense esoteric knowledge, viz. “he did not blow [*mantras*] in people’s ears” (*phuṅkane kān temhī nā*).<sup>23</sup>

To illustrate the difference between Sai Baba’s ability to protect devotees and the work of other spiritual specialists, Dabholkar presents yet another miracle story. In the twenty-third chapter of the *Satcarita*, we read about the time that a poisonous snake bit the little finger of Madhavrao Deshpande, one of the saint’s many Brahmin devotees. After the incident, the other villagers in Shirdi take Madhavrao to the Biroba (Viroba) temple, where one would go to pray for a snakebite’s cure, but another devotee named Nimonkar suggests that they should get some *udī* from Sai Baba’s *dhunī*. However, something unexpected happens when they try to enter the mosque, as Dabholkar narrates:

They came into Baba’s sight – Behold, Baba’s miracle (*camatkār*)! He started to curse them relentlessly and didn’t let him enter [the mosque].

“Don’t come up, *bhaṭurḍyā*! Beware if you enter here. Go down, get out of here,” roared Baba in a booming voice.

It was strange that Baba got angry. It was unexpected (*akalpita*) that the fire suddenly got stoked. Madhavrao was stunned (*cakit*). For what reason was he abused with that harsh language?<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Dabholkar, *ŚSSC*, 10:113.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 23:42-44.



Given that the vocative “*bhaṭurḍyā*”<sup>25</sup> refers to a Brahmin who is void of good qualities, the portrayal of Sai Baba using this caste-specific pejorative term is part of the subtle anti-Brahmin sentiment woven into Sai Baba’s encounters with Brahmins in Dabholkar’s *Satcarita*, a topic further explored in the next chapter. Here, the reader is left with the pressing question: What was the meaning of the saint’s suddenly abusive tone?

Dabholkar argues that the subsequent events hold the key to understanding the meaning of this episode. After his outburst of anger, Sai Baba calms down and assures Madhavrao that the “compassionate fakir will take care of him” (*dayālū fakīr sām̐bhāṭīl*), a statement made by Sai Baba in the third-person wherein he describes himself as a Muslim mendicant.<sup>26</sup> Sai Baba tells the snakebite victim to go home, sit comfortably, not to go outdoors, and remain with “full confidence in me” (*thevīm̐ viśvās̐ majvarī*).<sup>27</sup> He then instructs two other devotees, Tatya Patil and Hari Sitaram Dixit, to take care of Madhavrao by making sure he eats well, keeps moving while at home, and does not fall asleep that night. In due time, Madhavrao fully recovers when the saint’s “grace washes over the devotee” (*kṛpā helāvalī bhaktārtha*).<sup>28</sup>

At this point, the hagiographer Dabholkar explains the connection between the saint’s anger and the devotee’s recovery. The verbal abuse, actually, was not an insult against Madhavrao’s Brahminhood, but rather a command addressed to the poison. Sai Baba told it to stop from entering and spreading throughout the bloodstream – to “get out” of Madhavrao’s body. In this way, the anti-Brahmin sentiment that could be

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<sup>25</sup> This appears to be “a term of anger and contempt for a Brahmin,” an alternative form of *bhaṭugā*, which is a priest (*bhaṭṭa*) void of any good qualities. See G.R. Dabholkar, *Shri Sai Satcharita: The Life and Teachings of Shirdi Sai Baba*, trans. Indira Kher (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1999), 374.

<sup>26</sup> Dabholkar, *SSSC*, 23:53.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 23:54.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 23:59.

conveyed by the pejorative *bhaṭurḍyā* is mitigated by the clarification that the saint's anger targeted not the Brahmin but the venom in the Brahmin.<sup>29</sup>

Upon concluding Deshpande's story, Dabholkar reinserts his voice into the text and frames the significance of the narrative as the comparison of two types of religious resources for managing a health crisis. On one hand, there are Sai Baba's five simple words (*cāl nīgh jā khālīm utar*) that neutralized the snakebite and protected his devotee.<sup>30</sup> On the other hand, there are the techniques that are not part of the saint's repertoire for healing the sick. Dabholkar writes:

It did not take any other means, like it would for an ordinary caster of spells (*mantrī*) or an exorcist (*pancākṣarī*). Instead, this Sai rescued devotees from their crises (*sankaṭem*) in other ways.

He did not cast spells (*mantrāvartan*). He did not use magically-infused rice and water (*tāndūḷ pāñī*). He did not sprinkle water (*pānyācye śikāv*). So, how did the poison wear off?

Is this not indeed a miracle (*camatkār*)? Only the words from the mouth of Sai brought relief to Madhavrao. The grace (*kṛpā*) of Sai has no limit.<sup>31</sup>

This story creates a boundary between the uncomplicated miraculous cures engineered by Sai Baba and the other religious rituals used for healing, especially those of the exorcist. To embellish Sai Baba's efficacy and authority as a religious healer, Dabholkar marginalizes the work of the ritual specialist who recites *mantras* and the exorcist who chases away demons, as well as their use of magically-imbued substances to affect cures. Dabholkar also marginalizes the prognostications of astrologers (*jyotiṣ*) in light of the superiority of faith in Shirdi Sai Baba. Another story in the *Satcarita* features a young

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<sup>29</sup> The next major Sai Baba hagiographer B.V. Narasimhaswami reiterates Dabholkar's point in his commentary on this episode. See Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba*, 274-275.

<sup>30</sup> Dabholkar, *ŚSSC*, 23:63.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 23:64-66.

student named Babu Tendulkar, who becomes depressed when an astrologer describes an unfavorable planetary position around him. The student considers skipping his exam for entry to medical school, but his mother, who is a Sai Baba devotee, brings the problem to the saint's attention in Shirdi. Sai Baba tells her to trash the astrologer's horoscope and tell her son to "have full faith in me" (*thevīm viśvās majvarī*).<sup>32</sup> Ultimately, Babu Tendulkar passes the exam, which, Dabholkar says, "confirmed the child's faith in himself" (*didhalī dṛḍh nijpadīm joḍ*).<sup>33</sup> Whereas the aforementioned stories of diseases healed by Sai Baba position faith in the saint's unorthodox ways above alternative medical resources, including modern medicine, the stories of Madhavrao Deshpande's snakebite and Babu Tendulkar's medical school exam argue that Sai Baba is also a more useful religious resource to fix people's problems vis-à-vis the practices of exorcists and astrologers.

### **The Anthropology of Credibility: An Approach to the Academic Study of Shirdi Sai Baba's Miracles**

In the aforementioned miracle stories drawn from the Shirdi Sai Baba hagiographic tradition, we find Shirdi Sai Baba putting a devotee in a hazardous situation and protecting him from harm; healing apparently incurable diseases with a glance or unconventional instructions (e.g., feeding a black dog); and treating a snakebite with venom-neutralizing words. Reports of such events are commonly found in the religious traditions of South Asia<sup>34</sup> – and elsewhere<sup>35</sup> – and they are matters of basic human, as

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 29:110.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 29:122.

<sup>34</sup> Dempsey, "Introduction," 1.

<sup>35</sup> In 2008, the Pew Forum's US Religious Landscape Survey reported that 79% of the American general population responded positively to the question about their belief in miracles. The percentage was markedly higher among evangelicals, attendants of historically black churches, Catholics, and Mormons. See *U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, Religious Beliefs and Practices: Diverse and Politically Relevant*

well as academic, interest. Nonetheless, the study of events that confound scientific rationality, including cultural determinations of what counts as “common sense,” is still on the margins of academia in the early twenty-first century. It is impossible to ignore the lacuna of scholarship on miraculous phenomena when compared to work ritual, community, mythology, and other dimensions of the academic study of religion. Part of the reason, perhaps, is that each generation of scholars invariably revisits the debate about the direction of the field by using a compass with polarities represented by “Religious Studies” and “Theology” – or rather, the work of critics as opposed to caretakers.<sup>36</sup> Because so much academic discourse in the study of religion defers to secular analysis, topics of study such as the afterlife, medium-ship, and other aspects of paranthropology often suffer from methodologies that pit “our” rational scholarship against “their” irrational belief systems.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, this is to say nothing of the New Atheist discourse of Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and others who regularly criticize religion and religious belief in their literature and public lectures.

What this means for the academic study of miracles is that scholars must develop the methodological tools and perspectives necessary for talking about those topics that typically fall on the outskirts of academia’s secular *weltanschauung*. To clarify my methodological approach to the study of Shirdi Sai Baba miracle stories, I invoke the “anthropology of credibility,” an approach first outlined by Michel de Certeau in *Culture*

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(Washington, D.C.: Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 2008), <http://religions.pewforum.org/pdf/report2-religious-landscape-study-full.pdf>, accessed December 29, 2015.

<sup>36</sup> For more on the methodological discussion of religious studies scholars as critics or caretakers, see Russell McCutcheon, *Critics not Caretakers: Redescribing the Public Study of Religion* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2001).

<sup>37</sup> For a recent example of advocating “an emic interpretive lens” to arrive at “thick description” in one’s scholarship on paranormal phenomena, see Fiona Bowie, “Building Bridges, Dissolving Boundaries: Toward a Methodology for the Ethnographic Study of the Afterlife, Mediumship, and Spiritual Beings,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 81, no. 3 (Sept 2013): 698-733.

*in the Plural*.<sup>38</sup> By asking what determines the credibility of certain beliefs, de Certeau suggests that belief is not only socially-constructed but also an integral part of human ontology – we must believe because we desire, and we desire because we lack fulfillment of various sorts. Recently, Russell McCutcheon has defined his notion of religion as an anthropology of credibility as “examining and explaining the conditions and sociorhetorics that enable a group to portray a piece of social data as meaningful, significant, and credible in the first place.”<sup>39</sup> The anthropology of credibility thus sets the scholar’s search for understanding apart from the search of the practitioner/devotee for stable meanings that orient one’s belief and behavior. In other words, the scholar’s work employs a metafocus that does not seek to determine what constitutes truth or falsehood in any evaluative sense but rather highlights the sociohistorical processes of meaning-making that traffics in these and other epistemological categories.

As a phenomenological approach to the study of religion, the anthropology of credibility has its antecedents in Edmund Husserl (d. 1938), the “father of philosophical phenomenology,” and Gerard van der Leeuw (d. 1950) who applied Husserl’s notion of bracketing, or *epoché*, to the study of religion as a way to separate impartial objective study from the assumptions and judgments stemming from Christian theology. Let’s consider a hypothetical scenario to illustrate the epistemological modesty that comes with bracketing one’s assumptions. Suppose a scholar of South Asian traditions endeavors to study rain rituals, i.e. ritual sacrifices (*yajña*) to the Hindu gods Varuna and Indra that

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<sup>38</sup> Luce Girard, “Introduction” to Michel de Certeau, *Culture in the Plural*, trans. Tom Conley (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), viii.

<sup>39</sup> Russell McCutcheon, “The Study of Religion as an Anthropology of Credibility,” in *Religious Studies, Theology, and the University: Conflicting Maps, Changing Terrain*, eds. Linell E. Cady and Delwin Brown (Albany: SUNY Press, 2002), 17.

have happened, for example, in Gujarat and Tamil Nadu periodically in the last decade or so during severe droughts.<sup>40</sup> If the notion of responsible scholarship in the modern academy requires the bracketing out of one's personal religious convictions, the second set of assumptions that must be eliminated from a proposed study of rain rituals derives from modern, scientific knowledge. If pressed, some scholars will probably articulate their understanding that rainfall does not follow from the ritual recitation of Varuna's name 100,000 times – and even if it does, correlation is not causation. Although precipitation is a meteorological event with atmospheric causes, focusing on the perceived efficacy of rain rituals opens the possibility for scholarly analysis, for example, into the innovative use of Vedic religion in a modern setting and the political decision to fund a (Hindu) religious resource for creating rainfall in lieu of non-religious efforts, like cloud seeding.

More important than scrutinizing the “fact” of a miracle is the study of its meaning in the lives of their experiencers. This requires the scholar to practice the suspension of disbelief, to bracket out the assumptions from the skeptic's epistemological worldview. Doing so is part of an empathetic engagement that aims at “the exposition of a meaning rather than a location of a cause”<sup>41</sup> and mitigates the criticism that scholars marginalize miracles only by “dragging them out of their own bright houses to look at them in our own dim streets.”<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> “Modi's Ministers Perform Rain ‘Yagna’ in G'nagar,” *Times of India*, July 18, 2004, [http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2004-07-18/ahmedabad/27148110\\_1\\_yagna-rain-gods-artificial-rains](http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2004-07-18/ahmedabad/27148110_1_yagna-rain-gods-artificial-rains), accessed December 29, 2015. “A ‘yagna’ to please the rain gods,” *Times of India*, August 6, 2012, [http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2012-08-06/coimbatore/33064497\\_1\\_yagna-rain-gods-ministers](http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2012-08-06/coimbatore/33064497_1_yagna-rain-gods-ministers), accessed December 29, 2015.

<sup>41</sup> Gavin Flood, “Reflections on Tradition and Inquiry in the Study of Religions,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 74, no. 1 (Mar. 2006): 55.

<sup>42</sup> Wendy Doniger, *Other Peoples' Myths: The Cave of Echoes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 155.

Of course, I am not proposing a radically new approach to the study of religion in arguing for the bracketing out of certain sets of assumptions when studying socio-religious data, whether rain rituals or Shirdi Sai Baba miracle stories. In the 1930s, E.E. Evans-Pritchard reflected on the practicality of bracketing as a means to empathetic engagement in his study of witchcraft, magic, and oracles among the Azande in Central Africa: “You cannot have a remunerative, even intelligent, conversation with people about something they take as self-evident if you give them the impression that you regard their belief as an illusion or a delusion. Mutual understanding, and with it sympathy, would soon be ended, if it ever got started.”<sup>43</sup>

Over the last half century, postmodernism has turned scholarship across disciplines and fields away from any sort of “single, privileged narrative of the modern world”<sup>44</sup> and toward the networks and relationships that constantly construct, reconstruct, and deconstruct concepts, narratives, and categories, including the idea that the verbal signifier “religion” has a steady, stable essence or definition. Recent scholarship has reframed “religion” as a second-order term of scholarly analysis,<sup>45</sup> an ideology,<sup>46</sup> and an invention.<sup>47</sup> Further and more biting criticism of the phenomenological approach asserts that if scholars take the statements of “insiders” too seriously, then the phenomenologist errs by doing the work of caretaking without critical examination, just as the

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<sup>43</sup> E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande. Abridged with an Introduction by Eva Gillies* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1976), 224.

<sup>44</sup> Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Disciplines and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 9-10.

<sup>45</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

<sup>46</sup> Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>47</sup> Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions, or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

ethnographer repeats “folk understandings” with no analysis.<sup>48</sup> Another attack on the academic viability of the anthropology of credibility lambasts a particular scholar’s “deferential attitude to the object of his study,” which thus “limits his ability to examine the sociological and political implications of these movements.”<sup>49</sup>

In spite of these critiques of the phenomenology of religion, recent scholarship on saints, saintly figures, and their miracles has enriched our repertoire of emic understandings of religion, while also reading devotional testimonies, both textual and ethnographic, against the grain to highlight the socially constructive dimensions of religion and its attendant categories (e.g., sainthood). While acknowledging the fruitful contributions of scholars on religious experiences (e.g., Anne Taves, Jeffrey Kripal, Fiona Bowiw), I have found most illuminating the work of Lawrence Babb and Smriti Srinivas, two anthropologists of religion who have studied the miracle-working “godman” from South India, Sathya Sai Baba (d. 2011).

Babb explicitly frames his ethnographic fieldwork among Sathya Sai Baba’s urban, upper-class devotees as an “excursion in the anthropology of credibility.”<sup>50</sup> In looking for the appeal of Sathya Sai Baba’s “magic” in the statements of devotee-informants, Babb finds that the miraculous manifestation of material objects, like watches and pendants with the godman’s likeness, as well as sacred ash (*vibhūti*), are central to the godman’s popularity. The miracles of Sathya Sai Baba, like his utterances, matter

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<sup>48</sup> Taking this critique to an extreme leads to confrontational statements like, for example, that the work of phenomenologists is “couch potato scholarship” while some scholars replace theory and public critique by “simply repeating folk understandings by means of nuanced description and reporting.” See McCutcheon, *Critics not Caretakers*, xv and 12.

<sup>49</sup> McKean’s critique refers to the work of Lawrence Babb, whose use of the anthropology of credibility to study the Sathya Sai Baba movement. See Lise McKean, *Divine Enterprises: Gurus and the Hindu Nationalist Movement* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 20.

<sup>50</sup> Babb, “Sathya Sai Baba’s Magic,” 116.



much less to devotees in terms of their purpose, viz. why he does what he does, and much more as the actions and speech of a divine incarnation (*avatār*) in human form. In terms of discourses and ethical teachings, Babb observes: “What really distinguishes Sathya Sai Baba’s discourses is not the philosophy or doctrine expressed therein (which is hardly novel), but the fact that they come from his mouth.”<sup>51</sup> The same holds true for his magical ways when “the very opacity of his acts becomes evidence of his divine omnipresence.”<sup>52</sup> Far from being an obstacle to well-educated and cosmopolitan devotees in Delhi, the unaccountability of a holy man’s actions establishes his divinity.

To illustrate this latter point, Babb refers to a paradigmatic example of a devotee’s resolution of the epistemological conflict between faith derived from experience and skepticism predicated on scientific rationality. This is the devotional testimony offered by Suri Bhagavantham, a former director of the All India Science Institute and a devotee of Sathya Sai Baba. According to Bhagavantham, Sathya Sai Baba once produced a copy of the *Bhagavad Gītā* from a handful of sand on a riverbank. If the rational mind cannot comprehend such an event because there is no scientifically observable or reproducible pattern of cause and effect, the event remains, nonetheless, meaningful to Bhagavantham, whose experience led him to the realization that Sathya Sai Baba must be “beyond science.”<sup>53</sup> Such faith takes a devotee from the point of disbelief, over and beyond the epistemological limits imposed by scientific rationality, and delivers him to the other side, where there is the realization that his training as a scientist cannot account for what

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<sup>51</sup> Babb, *Redemptive Encounters*, 183.

<sup>52</sup> Babb, “Sathya Sai Baba’s Magic,” 121.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

happened on the riverbank. This is a salient example of what I call the “supra-logical” quality of Sai Baba miracle stories, a topic discussed later in this chapter.

Similar to Babb’s approach, Smriti Srinivas takes the accounts of Sathya Sai Baba devotees as “descriptions of the ‘hopeful’ reality that they inhabit.”<sup>54</sup> For example, Srinivas describes the experience of a devotee in Atlanta who went to a retail store to make 500 copies of a Sathya Sai Baba photograph. Upon returning to collect the copies, the devotee was amazed to hear the employee tell him that the machine uncontrollably produced 2,500 copies, an event that illustrates the distribution of a sacred figure’s divine power to everyday technology.<sup>55</sup> Such incidents are part of Srinivas’s argument that Sathya Sai Baba represents an alternative account of modernity, one that “engages with capitalist modernity but projects alternatives, spiritualizes or domesticates it, creates practices and subjectivities that thrive on alterity, and posits a discourse of playful possibility about humans and the divine, things and bodies, or the magical and the everyday.”<sup>56</sup> In this theoretical engagement with devotion to a miracle-working godman, it is not necessary for the scholar to believe that Sathya Sai Baba “actually” manipulated the mechanics of a copier in Atlanta from his ashram in Puttaparthi, thousands of miles away in India. Rather, this is an event that will become a story told and retold to new audiences, a piece of evidence demonstrating the unrestricted accessibility of Sathya Sai Baba’s blessings across the world. For scholars, what should matter more is not the event’s veracity in any kind of objective or scientific sense, but rather how it reveals

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<sup>54</sup> S. Srinivas, *In the Presence of Sai Baba*, 16.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 321-322.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 341.

devotees' perceptions of modernity and sacralization, as opposed to secularization, in a transnational devotional movement.

Thus, to frame the anthropology of credibility as antithetical to a robust theoretical engagement with the politics of religious data, I propose, is itself a political statement that reveals an anxiety about the “theologizing” of religious studies. Staunch adherence to “secular” methodology precludes the possibility for accounting for what the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer describes as the dialectical relationship between inner personhood (i.e., the agency of belief) and the outer physical world (i.e., the inescapable realities of embodied existence).<sup>57</sup> This inner-outer dialectic is particularly relevant to the study of Shirdi Sai Baba. In hagiographic remembrances, we have devotees articulating their experiences of and their faith in a religious figure who performs miracles that manipulate – or “play with” – the limitations of the physical world, for example, when he appears in two places at once, cures incurable diseases, and takes the form of other deities. In other words, dogmatically postmodernist objections to the phenomenological methods like the anthropology of credibility, as outlined in brief here, cannot help us to understand how miracles build faith in a religious figure in late colonial India. What the postmodern critique of phenomenology does contribute, however, is the recognition that advances in the field of religious studies are not so much a teleological journey toward *the* definition of religion or *the* definitive interpretation of religious phenomena (or *the* definitive study of Shirdi Sai Baba, for that matter), but instead, it suggests that scholars and devotees alike are part of a conversation, and sometimes a heated debate, about multiple meanings and significances. In this pluralistic

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<sup>57</sup> See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Crossroads, 1989).

endeavor, I propose that the anthropology of credibility is a useful and appropriate methodology to engage the miraculous in the Shirdi Sai Baba hagiographic tradition, and further, this methodology contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the saint's rapid popularization in India over the twentieth century.

### **The Supra-Logical Quality of Sai Baba's Miracles**

As with Dhumal's testimony in *Devotees' Experiences*, so too do many of the miracle stories in the *Satcarita* grapple with a particular question: At a time of crisis, should I rely on the "common sense" and the "medical opinion" of trained professionals, or do I surrender this impulse by exercising faith and forbearance in Sai Baba's inscrutable ways? In *Devotees' Experiences* and the *Satcarita*, it is not a choice between two equals because Sai Baba always succeeds where and when other recourses fail. Other scholarship, for example, on interactions between Christians and Hindus in colonial India and encounters between American Protestant evangelicals and Roman Catholic Filipinos in the Phillipines in the early twentieth-century, has spoken to a similar question of evaluating the efficacies of different medical systems, including new allopathic treatments introduced by foreign missionaries and new sources of curative power (e.g., the Christian God) that exist alongside indigenous healing resources.<sup>58</sup> The result of this type of evaluation in the Shirdi Sai Baba hagiographic tradition invariably holds that the "local healer" in Shirdi's mosque is capable of doing the impossible and curing the incurable, thereby exposing the limits of other recourses for medicine and healing. Here, miracle stories in the *Satcarita* and devotional testimonies in *Devotees' Experiences*

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<sup>58</sup> See Chad Baumann, "Miraculous Health and Medical Itineration," 39-56; Arun W. Jones, *Christian Missions in the American Empire: Episcopalians in Northern Luzon, the Phillipines, 1902-1946* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003).

function as “evidence” in supporting the hagiographically constructed argument that well-placed faith and forbearance in Sai Baba never go to waste, even when the saint’s instructions and actions seem beyond comprehension.

Let’s consider one final testimony from *Devotees’ Experiences* in which Sai Baba performs the ultimate healing miracle. M.G. Pradhan, a clerk in the Collector’s Office of the Revenue Department, relates an event that happened in 1932. Pradhan’s son had contracted a fever and died suddenly. The family doctor, a certain “Mr. J.” – who, we are told, holds an M.B.B.S. degree – arrived at Pradhan’s home and pronounced the child deceased. Pradhan, however, applied some *ūdī* to the child’s forehead, a move that the doctor purportedly called “superstitious.” Forty-five minutes later, the boy regained consciousness and got up to play.<sup>59</sup>

There are two noteworthy aspects of this story. First, like the *barakat* at Sufi tombs and the *āśīrvād* at Hindu shrines, blessings from Sai Baba can reach people, like Pradhan’s son, in the form of *camatkārs* after the saint’s physical death in 1918. Among Sai Baba’s “eleven assurances” to devotees is the promise that “my bones will speak from my tomb and give you comfort” (*mājhīm hāḍem turvatīmadhūn / detīl aśvāsana tumhāms*).<sup>60</sup> Another assurance from saint to devotees flashes on screen at the conclusion of Bhushan’s hagiopic *Shirdi ke Sai Baba*, just as the skeptical doctor has his spiritual breakthrough: “If you look to me, I’ll look to you.” In this way, Sai Baba miracle stories in text and film function as evidentiary proofs regarding the saint’s imminently accessible

<sup>59</sup> Narasimhaswami, *Devotees’ Experiences*, 202.

<sup>60</sup> Dabholkar, *ŚSSC*, 25:105. The original Marathi in the *ŚSSC* is *turvat* (Persian: *turbat*), an Islamic term for a saint’s tomb. The contemporary and more popular version of this assurance replaces it with *samādhī*.

blessings. All that is required of a petitioner is an initial investment of faith and forbearance, and the imaginative capacity to put probability ahead of improbability.

Second, disbelief, which is the default epistemological position of those predisposed to relying on “common sense” and “medical opinion,” is represented in the M.G. Pradhan’s devotional testimony when the degree-holding doctor calls the application of sacred ash “superstitious.” The reader does not receive this devotional testimony from the doctor’s perspective but from the Sai Baba devotee Pradhan. The doctor’s comment addresses the incredulity that naturally follows an epistemological worldview informed by the work needed to earn an advanced degree in modern medicine. Just as Dhumal is protected despite his initial skepticism and just as sick devotees are cured when all other medical resources have been exhausted, so too does the resurrection of Pradhan’s son occur after the doctor’s pronouncement of death. Consequently, the devotional testimony of M.G. Pradhan makes the point that faith in the miracle-working Sai Baba pays dividends that other medical recourses cannot.

Of course, not everyone wishes to dissect miraculous events to discover their causes. In Flueckiger’s study of a female Muslim healer in Hyderabad, she writes: “Why and how religious healing works across religious boundaries is implicitly assumed and understood by patients; these issues are of more concern to scholars and students outside this local context than to Muslim and Hindu participants who interact with Amma.”<sup>61</sup> While ethnography can reveal the implicitness with regard to the inherent efficacy of religious healing, I suggest that hagiography – or at least, the Shirdi Sai Baba hagiographic tradition – reflects the intellectual labor required to make sense of the

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<sup>61</sup> Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger, *In Amma’s Healing Room: Gender and Vernacular Islam in South India* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 9.

saint's *camatkārs*. Recall that Dabholkar remarks in the *Satcarita* on the wonder (*kautuk*) felt in heart while he tried to discern how the saint protected the village from an outbreak of cholera by grinding wheat into flour and spreading the flour at the village's boundary. Dabholkar asks the reader, as well as himself: "How does one connect the cause and the effect? How does one find the correspondence?"<sup>62</sup> He deduces that its cause is *atarkya*, or "supra-logical." Reflection on this event, Dabholkar says, inspired him to compile a history of the saint, which eventually became the *Śrī Sāī Satcarita*.<sup>63</sup>

At the outset of the *Satcarita*, Dabholkar alerts the audience that pushing beyond logical reasoning is necessary in the case of Sai Baba because "the tricks of logic will not work" (*yukti-juktīcēṃ pramāṇ / tethēṃ jāṇ cālenā*) when it comes to the greatness (*mahimān*) of a saint.<sup>64</sup> Logical reasoning (*tarkavād*), translation (*anuvād*), assertion (*pravād*), discussion (*saṃvād*), and all other tools of discursive argumentation are meaningless (*itar vād teṇ vyārtha*) when one has access to a figure who can bestow divine grace (*īśvarkṛpā*).<sup>65</sup> Notably, Dabholkar often uses privative adjectives to describe Sai Baba's actions: "unprecedented" (*apūrvā*), "unfathomable" (*agādha*) and "impossible" (*aghaṭit*). In Das Ganu's *Bhaktalīlāmṛt*, the lamp lighting miracle exemplifies the saint's "unfeasible" (*agamya*) manipulation of the physical world, or *līlā*. I suggest that the consideration of another privative adjective used by Dabholkar is particularly useful for understanding the rhetorical structure of Sai Baba miracle stories, and this is *atarkya*, an adjective for something that lacks logical or rational reasoning (*tarka*). Thus, some might translate *atarkya* as "illogical" or "irrational," that is,

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<sup>62</sup> Dabholkar, *SSSC*, 1:137.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:138 *kaisā kāryakāraṇabhāv juḷvāvā / tāḷā mīḷvāvā hā kaisā*.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:48.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 17:37.

something in opposition to the science of logic (*tarkaśāstra*). There is no logical reasoning that explains, for example, the connection between Sai Baba yelling at a violent rainstorm and the rainstorm's cessation, as we read in the *Satcarita*.<sup>66</sup> Nor is there any logical or syllogistic connection between the act of feeding a black dog and the cure of malarial fever. This is because, according to Dabholkar, the science of logic and the life of a saint inhabit two dialectically-opposite epistemological worldviews; one simply cannot understand the other. He writes:

The biography of a saint (*santacaritra*) is a guide to the path of righteousness. It is neither *nyāya*, nor *tarkaśātra*. Thus, to the one worthy of saintly grace (*santakṛpā*). Nothing would seem strange (*vicitra*).<sup>67</sup>

The cleverness of logical reasoning (*tarka*) will not work here. The minds of logicians (*tarkajñamati*) are confounded. Unquestioning faith (*bhoḷā bhāv*) succeeds. This is the novelty (*navalāī*)!<sup>68</sup>

For Dabholkar, there exists a gulf between the two worldviews: logic (*tarka*, *tarkavād*, *tarkaśāstra*) on one side and religious/spiritual sources (*mahimān*, *īśvarkṛpā*, *santacaritra*) on the other. I frame this as an epistemological conflict given that Dabholkar, Das Ganu, and devotees like Dhumal reiterate both the necessity and the superiority of faith and forbearance in Sai Baba, while simultaneously highlighting the limits of logical reasoning and its attendant points of reference, such as “common sense” and “medical opinion.”

However, I want to call attention to a point of translation that relates to our understanding of stories and testimonies about Sai Baba's miracles. Translating *atarkya* as “illogical” or “irrational” restricts our understanding of descriptions of Sai Baba

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 11:126-131.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 2:7.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 17:38.



miracle stories. In her recent English translation of the *Satcarita*, Indira Kher takes *atarkya* as “inscrutable,” which faithfully retains the privative sense of the original Marathi.<sup>69</sup> To complement Kher’s rendering, I argue that another translation of *atarkya* will nuance our understanding of the epistemological conflict within many Sai Baba miracle stories. By taking *atarkya* as a reference to something that is not only “non-logical” but also “supra-logical,” it is possible to understand the necessity of not only suspending but transcending disbelief in the context of the miraculous deeds performed by Sai Baba. The suspension bridge rhetorically built through calls to have faith and forbearance thus encourages the audience of the story or testimony, likewise, to transcend the dichotomous gulf between the logical and the illogical, thereby accessing the third category, the supra-logical, where miraculous experiences reside.

### **Shirdi Sai Baba and the Middle Classes in Late Colonial India**

Hagiographers and scholars alike have noted the affinity between Shirdi Sai Baba and the new middle classes that emerged in Maharashtra during colonial rule, which includes urban-dwelling, well-educated, degree-holding professionals like the lawyer Dhumal and those employed in the colonial administration, such as the former first-class magistrate Dabholkar and the revenue clerk M.G. Pradhan. In this regard, Narasimhaswami’s *Devotees’ Experiences* provides an invaluable ethnographic snapshot of the Sai Baba

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<sup>69</sup> In her translation of the *Satcarita*, Kher renders several privative adjectives in Marathi as “inscrutable” throughout the text. For example, she translates the original Marathi terms *aghaṭit* (173), *agādh* (252, 282, 294), and *atarkya* (176) as “inscrutable.” Elsewhere, *atarkya* describes the saint’s *līlās* as “inconceivable” (295) and something “beyond one’s imagination” (14). The mechanics of the world are also mysterious and “inscrutable,” viz. “In short, mysterious and inscrutable are the strings that control the great sport of this Universe” (*sārāṃśa hā jagācā kheḷ / sūtreṃ gupta āṇi akaḷ*) (246). Again, my point is not to criticize Kher’s translation but rather to emphasize that the translation of *atarkya* as “supra-logical” helps to understand Shirdi Sai Baba, his miracles and the conflict between two epistemologies, as it appears in the hagiographical rhetoric.

devotional community in the 1930s. Some exceptions notwithstanding, each of the text's seventy-nine testimonies is prefaced with the devotee's age, gender, caste, residence, profession and religion. Twenty-three interviewees, or about one-third of the overall total, identify as Brahmin, and another fifteen are from upper castes (e.g., Kayastha or Kayastha Prabhu, Maratha). There is only one Mahar: a 40-year-old landlord named Tukaram Barku who lives in Shirdi. Hindus comprise the significant majority alongside only five Muslims, three Parsis, and two Christians. Geographically, nearly half of the interviewees are from Mumbai and surrounding areas, such as Thana, Bandra, Dadar, Andheri, and Santa Cruz. Fourteen are from Shirdi village, while twelve are from Pune and a few others are from Nasik and Ahmednagar. Twelve devotees state that they hold B.A., M.A., Ph.D., L.L.B., or M.B.B.S. degrees. Many of the devotees' professions are from the newly-emergent middle classes in colonial India: lawyer, professor, medical practitioner, engineer, civil engineer, magistrate, inspector and sub-inspector in the police force, and clerks in various departments in the colonial bureaucracy. These middle classes significantly outnumber the devotional testimonies given by landholders, merchants, painters, shopkeepers, and moneylenders.

Partha Chatterjee theorizes that people in these newly-emergent middle classes experienced an "identity crisis" from the "middleness" of hanging between social classes as neither upper class nor low class, as well as the feelings of "middleness" brought on by values perceived as being in competition, viz. the "foreign/modern" and the "indigenous/traditional."<sup>70</sup> More specifically, Sanjay Joshi shows that the middle classes in colonial Lucknow developed a "fractured modernity" that reflected an amalgam of

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<sup>70</sup> Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, 35.

liberal, progressive aspirations circumscribed by adherence to tradition.<sup>71</sup> Although there are no obvious references to the Empire or colonialism, the miraculous experiences recorded in the *Satcarita* and *Devotees' Experiences* took place in the midst of the colonial encounter between European and Indian intellectual (and medical) traditions. I suggest that the rhetoric of middle and upper-middle class devotees of Sai Baba, like the lawyer S.B. Dhumal and the clerk M.G. Pradhan, indicate that miraculous experiences orchestrated by the saint caught them in a type of “middleness” brought on by the epistemological conflict between the explainable and the unexplainable, or rather, between natural and supernatural etiologies.

Importantly, these miracle stories and devotional testimonies also provide devotees with the solution for preventing the irreparable fracturing of their modernity on account of Sai Baba's inexplicable miracles. Sai Baba hagiographers and devotees draw on their subjective, embodied experiences of the saint's miracles to position the faith-forbearance tandem ahead of rival hegemonic epistemologies, like scientific rationality. In the foreword to M.W. Pradhan's 1933 English tract on Shirdi Sai Baba, Ramachandra Atmaram Tarkhad – a wealthy and well-educated individual, who was the secretary of Bombay's Khatau Mills and also a member of the Prarthana Samaj – synthesizes several instances of the saint's “manifestations of divine attainments,” many of which involve the saint's clairvoyant abilities. Tarkhad notes that “the western minds and thoughts of men and young women imbued with the present day teachings of the West” will deride reports of such incidents, reducing them to the level of chicanery or hypnosis. But Tarkhad further contends that there is a hermeneutic key (i.e., personal experience) for

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<sup>71</sup> See Sanjay Joshi, *Fractured Modernity: The Making of a Middle Class in Colonial North India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1-22.

overcoming allegations from non-devotees and doubts in one's own mind: "Sceptics will naturally make light of these [miraculous] experiences. Having graduated in science the writer was a sceptic himself and can well understand the working of the minds of people in the same position as he was in, till he had the great and good fortune of sitting at the feet of this wonderful Shri Sai Baba of Shirdi in 1910."<sup>72</sup>

I have approached such bold declarations of religious faith, which are essentially what these stories and testimonies are, with Dipesh Chakrabarty's ontological statement that "being human involves the question of being with gods and spirits."<sup>73</sup> Materialist or otherwise reductionist perspectives that hold the human being as an entirely autonomous, psychologically-bounded entity will consider miraculous experiences (e.g., dreams, visions, cures) as having a locatable cause. Miracles either have psychosomatic causes that lead to self-delusion, or they are fabrications invented by certain groups or individual for the purposes of social or ideological manipulation. In contrast, what we see in these accounts in the Shirdi Sai Baba hagiographic tradition is the articulation of a religious self that is porous and receptive to being influenced by and interacting with otherworldly power, like the kind wielded by Sai Baba. We also see a type of self-reflexive discursiveness in miracle stories and devotional testimonies from the early twentieth century, stories and testimonies that are as hagiographical about Shirdi Sai Baba as they are autobiographical about the devotees' crises, doubts, and thought-processes. This synthesis of literary genres – the hagiographic account of a saint and the autobiographical memoir of a devotee of that saint – relates to one of the findings in Maya Warrior's study

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<sup>72</sup> See Pradhan, *A Glimpse of Indian Spirituality*, 18-23.

<sup>73</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 16.

of devotees of the female saint Mata Amritanandamayi. In cataloguing the ways that devotees relate to the saint known popularly as Amma, or “Mother,” Warriar says that the experiences of devotees “are not merely a sign of the *guru*’s love for them. Equally they are devotees’ expressions of their absolute faith in their *guru*.”<sup>74</sup> In studying the rhetoric in the experiences of Sai Baba hagiographers and devotees, their expressions of faith provide an interpretive frame with which to understand how they make sense of miracles in modernity. It is not a matter of logically explaining the mechanics of a miracle in a way that accords with the epistemological worldview predicated on scientific rationality. Instead, Sai Baba’s miracles both reveal the limits of human comprehension and also enable devotees to achieve a sense of fullness or completeness through the firmness of faith and forbearance in the power of a divine figure whose ways are supra-logical.

Although the *Satcarita* talks about the strength and success of “simple, unquestioned faith” in Sai Baba, this chapter has endeavored to show that the process of building and solidifying faith requires intellectual muscle. Making meaning out of the opaque actions of an inscrutable saint requires great interpretative effort. Here, the articulation of the epistemological conflict between faith and non-faith based approaches to healing and protection reveals how Sai Baba devotees navigate “tradition” and “modernity,” particularly in the context of colonial India. These stories and testimonies about the saint’s miracles instruct their audiences to bifurcate their understanding of causality into two categories, a sort of hierarchy of epistemologies. The lower order is “common sense,” “medical opinion,” and “rules of prudence,” to use Dhumal’s

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<sup>74</sup> Maya Warriar, “Guru Choice and Spiritual Seeking in Contemporary India,” *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 7, no. 1/3 (February 2003): 46.

terminology, and the higher order refers to supernatural causation that only makes sense through faith in a world perceived to be enchanted by the saint's supra-logical ways.

### **Postscript: A Confirmation of Faith in Mississauga, Canada in 2014<sup>75</sup>**

#### **a. The Miracle in Mississauga**

Sai Baba's miracles did not cease with his physical death in 1918. Hagiographic texts and films have recounted the many ways that the saint's miraculous blessings have reached and continue to reach devotees in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries – blessings that come to a devotee, for example, through seeing Sai Baba in a dream, applying (or imbibing) the sacred ash produced by the saint's ever-burning *dhunī* in Shirdi or another Sai Baba temple, or encountering a mysterious and helpful stranger who bears a striking resemblance to the saint from Shirdi.<sup>76</sup> Moreover, Sai Baba's miracles are not restricted to India but have followed devotees wherever they have settled throughout the world.

For example, in April 2014, the face of Shirdi Sai Baba appeared on the wall of a temple known as Sai Dham Canada in Mississauga, Ontario, Canada.<sup>77</sup> According to Sai

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<sup>75</sup> This section is a revised version of “If You See Shirdi Sai Baba’s Face on This Wall, Don’t Worry... It’s Normal,” which was written in May 2014 for the web magazine *Sacred Matters*. The original article is available here: <https://scholarblogs.emory.edu/sacredmatters/2014/05/19/if-you-see-shirdi-sai-babas-face-on-this-wall-dont-worry-its-normal/>.

<sup>76</sup> For two recent accounts of devotees’ encounters with Shirdi Sai Baba in the form of a mysterious and helpful stranger, see Rajshri Bapat-Deshpande, “Ghāṭāt vācavile bābāñnī,” *Sakal*, June 14, 2010, <http://www.esakal.com/esakal/20100614/5428592482178616499.htm>, accessed December 30, 2015; Murali Balaji, “Bidi-Smoking Muslims and Miracles: How Hindus Affirm the Divine in Life,” *Huffington Post*, July 29, 2015, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/murali-balaji/bidi-smoking-muslims-and\\_b\\_7898140.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/murali-balaji/bidi-smoking-muslims-and_b_7898140.html), accessed December 30, 2015. Bapat-Deshpande’s account, which was published in the “citizen journalism” (*muktapīth*) section of the Marathi newspaper *Sakal*, describes how a man wearing a bright white robe protected her and her family from stone-throwing robbers when their car broke down in the remote district of Jhabua (Madhya Pradesh). In the article for *Huffington Post*, Balaji, who is the education director of the advocacy group known as the Hindu American Foundation, tells the story of his mother’s fortuitous meeting with a “bidi-smoking Muslim taxi driver” who took her from Mumbai to Shirdi when all of the other drivers refused the hazardous journey due to monsoon rains.

<sup>77</sup> Rachel Mendelson, “Face of Indian Saint Spotted on Mississauga Temple Wall,” *The Star* [Toronto, Canada], April 19, 2014, [http://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2014/04/19/face\\_of\\_indian\\_saint\\_spotted\\_on\\_mississauga\\_temple\\_wall.html](http://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2014/04/19/face_of_indian_saint_spotted_on_mississauga_temple_wall.html), accessed December 30, 2015.

Dham's website, the miracle was discovered by devotees on April 12 during Ram Navami, one of the festivals that the saint celebrated when he was alive.<sup>78</sup> Following the discovery of the face on the temple's wall, the caretaker and priest Vishal Khanna posted videos on a YouTube channel to document the image's continued presence. Khanna's videos focus on an area of plaster with unusual contours and swirls where the face is said to have suddenly become visible. Word of Sai Baba's miracle in Mississauga spread quickly, and Sai Dham was flooded with requests to see the image. "Anyone can actually come and take [Sai Baba's] blessings," said Khanna.<sup>79</sup>

As attested in this chapter and the preceding and forthcoming chapters, Sai Baba's reputation as a powerful and efficacious miracle-worker stems from his purported ability to offer real, tangible answers to the prayers of whomever turns to him. In B.V. Narasimhaswami's *Sri Sai Baba's Charters and Sayings* (1939) – a compilation of the saint's teachings and aphorisms, some of which come directly from earlier hagiographic sources (like the *Satcarita*) while others are original to Narasimhaswami's hagiographic works – Sai Baba speaks about the profundity of his miraculous power: "My business is to give blessings."<sup>80</sup> (Notably, this is one of the statements that is original to Narasimhaswami's *Charters and Sayings*). The historicity of this statement notwithstanding, the manifestation of Sai Baba's face on a temple wall in Mississauga is an indication that the saint's blessing-giving business is robust today.

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<sup>78</sup> According to Sai Dham's website, the face of Shirdi Sai Baba first appeared on the wall during the celebration of Ram Navami on Saturday April 12, 2014. The account reads: "While the Shej Arati ended, Bhai (Vishal Khanna) was doing his last prayers to Baba and I was closing the curtains; one devotee (Babita) shouted at me, 'Didi, Baba is here.' Once Bhai came and confirmed, I broke down in tears. I could not believe in my own eyes that really 'Baba is here.'" This account is available online: <https://saidhamcanada.org/babas-miracle-continues-on-18th-day/>.

<sup>79</sup> Mendelson, "Face of Indian Saint Spotted on Mississauga Temple Wall," n.p.

<sup>80</sup> Narasimhaswami, *Charters and Sayings*, 8.

The appearance of the saint's face at Sai Dham in Mississauga is far from the first instantiation of Sai Baba being posthumously active and vigorous in the lives of his devotees. In *Devotees' Experiences of Sri Sai Baba* (1940), the hagiographer Narasimhaswami presents a collection of seventy-nine devotional testimonies from people who experienced Sai Baba's miraculous blessings during and the after the saint's lifetime. Narasimhaswami's most ambitious work – the four-volume English text *Life of Sai Baba* (1955) – adds several entries to the catalogue of Sai Baba's miracles under the heading, "Baba's Recent Lilas in the South and Their Purpose." In 1943 in the Indian city of Coimbatore (in present-day Tamil Nadu), people were stunned when a cobra entered the small hut where they were singing hymns to Shirdi Sai Baba. According to the devotional hermeneutics brought to bear on this event, the fact that the cobra crawled next to the saint's picture in the hut without harming anybody led to the conclusion that this was an appearance of Sai Baba in the form of a snake (*nāga*).<sup>81</sup> Today, the small hut in Coimbatore has become the spacious temple known as Sri Sai Naga, which serves a large devotional community with the full set of standard rituals (e.g., the four-daily *āratis*, Thursday evening *pālkhī* processions) and festival celebrations (e.g., Guru Purnima, Ram Navami) that one finds in other Shirdi Sai Baba temples.<sup>82</sup> Whether or not Sai Dham Canada follows a similar pattern of expansion due, in part, to a visible manifestation of the saint's blessings, however, remains to be seen.

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<sup>81</sup> Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba*, 768-769.

<sup>82</sup> See the Sri Sai Naga Temple website: <http://www.srinagasai.com/dailyprogramm.html>.



**b. Is It Normal to See Sai Baba (or Jesus) on a Wall (or in Toast)?**

A common iconographic representation of Shirdi Sai Baba is a close-up of the saint's bearded, somewhat rough-looking yet kindhearted face. Although one might be familiar with its general shape and structure, it is difficult to make out the saint's face in the videos posted on the temple's YouTube channel by Sai Dham's caretaker Vishal Khanna. Particularly helpful is a video accompanying a report by Toronto's City News, in which Khanna points out the image's eyes, nose, and beard on the corresponding areas of the wall.<sup>83</sup> Upon viewing, one cannot un-see what devotees have seen.

Around the time that Sai Baba's face miraculously appeared on a temple wall in Mississauga, researchers at the University of Toronto published a study stating that the perception of human faces, including those of religious figures, in inanimate objects is "perfectly normal." Their findings in the April 2014 issue of *Cortex*, a journal for the study of cognition, show that the human brain is "uniquely wired" in a way that engenders face pareidolia, "the illusory perception of non-existent faces" where they do not exist – or rather, where they have not been purposely crafted by human hands (e.g., seeing the man in the moon).<sup>84</sup> In the study, twenty participants, aged eighteen to twenty-five, were shown "pure-noise images," which are computerized pictures with no identifiable shapes. Some participants were told to expect to see faces in the images; other were told to expect to see letters of the English alphabet. More than a third of participants in each group reported seeing faces (34%) or letters (38%) amidst the

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<sup>83</sup> "Religious Image Appears at Mississauga Hindu Temple, Worshippers Say," *City News* [Toronto, Canada], April 21, 2014, <http://www.citynews.ca/2014/04/21/religious-image-appears-at-mississauga-hindu-temple-worshippers-say/>, accessed December 30, 2015.

<sup>84</sup> See Jiangang Liu, Jun Li, Lu Feng, Ling Li, Jie Tian, and Kang Lee, "Seeing Jesus in Toast: Neural and Behavioral Correlates of Face Pareidolia," *Cortex* 53 (April 2014): 60-77.

indiscernibleness. In contrasting the perception of faces and letters in pure-noise images, the researchers argue that face pareidolia, as opposed to letter pareidolia, stems from a network of interactions between the front cortex (the brain's generator of expectations) and the posterior visual cortex (its image processor). The study also suggests that instead of the conventional wisdom that "seeing is believing," more than a third of us live such that "believing is seeing."

Lead researcher Dr. Kang Lee says that the demystification of face pareidolia will contribute to understanding how and why certain mental illnesses, like schizophrenia, induce strong hallucinatory experiences. It will also make the case, Lee says, that face pareidolia does not warrant mockery:

Most people think you have to be mentally abnormal to see these types of images, so individuals reporting this phenomenon are often ridiculed... But our findings suggest that it's common for people to see non-existent features because human brains are uniquely wired to recognize faces, so that even when there's only a slight suggestion of facial features the brain automatically interprets it as a face.<sup>85</sup>

If there were any doubt about the attitude toward face pareidolia in American popular culture, one might consider the irreverent portrayal of Catholics hoodwinked into venerating a water stain as the Virgin Mary in the *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* episode, "The Gang Exploits a Miracle." The May 13, 2014 episode of the *Daily Show* used its "Moment of Zen" – the pithy segment that features a wacky clip or quote from the day's news – to poke fun at the Fox News Question of the Day: "Do you think it's perfectly normal to see Jesus in a piece of toast?"

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<sup>85</sup> University of Toronto, "University of Toronto Researchers Find Seeing 'Jesus in Toast' Phenomenon Perfectly Normal," Toronto: University of Toronto, May 6, 2014, <http://media.utoronto.ca/media-releases/university-of-toronto-researchers-find-seeing-jesus-in-toast-phenomenon-perfectly-normal/>, accessed December 30, 2015.

At first glance, the University of Toronto study provides some measure of reassurance to individuals who see the face of a sacred figure in an unusual or unexpected place as a materialization of the divine. The study argues that these faces are not the result of brain anomalies or overactive imaginations but rather part of a natural, neurological process. However, it is important to examine the secular hermeneutics undergirding the study's findings, which describe the faces as ultimately "illusory" and "non-existent."<sup>86</sup> On this point, the devotee seeing the face as divine and the scholar studying the people who see the face as divine will diverge in their interpretations of the same data. Secular, scientific discourse that explains how the brain closes the gap between absence and expectation reduces the faces of religious figures to being *only* the products of neurochemistry. The devotional worldview might accommodate the perception of such a face as stemming from what someone, consciously or unconsciously, wants to see, but for Sai Baba devotees, the miracle in Mississauga is *also* a tangible, material response to their worshipful activities. One woman interviewed in the City News Report describes the miracle as a "confirmation of our devotion" – a return on the faith that they have invested in the saint, emotionally and spiritually.

I conclude this chapter by simply highlighting these two interpretive frames brought to bear on the phenomenon of face pareidolia as a way to acknowledge that responsible scholarship in the academic study of religion requires engaging religious categories – like the "miracle" – from multiple vantage points. The nature of the face on the wall of Sai Dham Canada raises lively philosophical and theological questions about human experience, which are best left to be answered by the well-informed reader rather

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<sup>86</sup> Liu et al., "Seeing Jesus in Toast," 60.

than the author. However, one final observation is noteworthy. Setting aside the goal of determining which interpretive frame is more or less authoritative than the other reveals that the two are not as different as they seem. Certainly, the Toronto study demonstrates the power of suggestion on the neurology of perception. Lee observes: “It depends on your personal experience and your personal expectations... So for example, if you are religious and you want to see Jesus, then you’re going to see Jesus. If you want to see Mary, you’re going to see Mary.”<sup>87</sup> That onlookers will see what they want to see or what they hope to see is actually quite similar to another one of the assurances given by Sai Baba to his devotees before his death in 1918: “If you look to me, I will look to you.”<sup>88</sup> This is the saint’s version of the Toronto study’s dictum that “believing is seeing” – and it predates the findings in *Cortex* by a century or so.

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<sup>87</sup> Sheryl Ubelacker, “Seeing Jesus or Virgin Mary on a Slice of Toast Just Part of Normal Brain Functioning, Toronto Researchers Say,” *National Post* [Toronto, Canada], May 7, 2014, <http://news.nationalpost.com/health/seeing-jesus-or-virgin-mary-on-a-slice-of-toast-just-part-of-normal-brain-functioning-toronto-researchers-say>, accessed December 30, 2015.

<sup>88</sup> Narasimhaswami, *Charters and Sayings*, 3.

## Chapter 7

### **Miracles and Caste Critique in Encounters between Shirdi Sai Baba and Brahmins in Hagiographic Text and Film**

This chapter is about the impact that the enigmatic Shirdi Sai Baba has on those who perceive him to be what he is not. Recall that early hagiographic sources in Marathi maintain that when Sai Baba arrived in Shirdi as a teenager in the late 1850s, no one knew where he came from; who his parents were; or what caste and religion he belonged to. As we saw in Chapter 3, these questions pertaining to the saint's earliest years would be answered in later hagiographic works, but it is G.R. Dabholkar's *Śrī Sāī Satcarita* (1929) – the closest thing to a “central scripture” in the world of Sai Baba devotion – where we find the portrayal of Sai Baba as a saint who conflates the boundaries between “Hindu” and “Islamic” vocabularies and practices. Dabholkar's *Satcarita* tells us that Sai Baba lived in Shirdi's dilapidated mosque in which he kept a sacred fire, or *dhunī*. The saint either read or had someone else read passages from the *Qur'ān*, but also once demonstrated his knowledge of Sanskrit grammar by interpreting the *Bhagavad Gītā* for a Hindu devotee. He sometimes spoke about Hindu metaphysical concepts like *brahmajñāna*, *caitanya*, and *māyā*, while the name that was always on his lips was Allah. He also had pierced ears and was circumcised, a combination of Hindu and Muslim physical attributes that leads to the conclusion in the *Satcarita* that Sai Baba is a categorical conundrum, a saint who is “neither Hindu nor Muslim”<sup>1</sup> and who has “neither *āṣrama* or *varṇa*.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For instances where Dabholkar's *Satcarita* describes Shirdi Sai Baba as “neither Hindu nor Muslim,” see Dabholkar, *ŚSSC*, 5:24, 7:13, and 10:119.

<sup>2</sup> Dabholkar, *ŚSSC*, 10:119.

Also recall that another major characteristic of Sai Baba's sainthood is his reputation as a powerful and efficacious worker of miracles (*camatkār*, *līlā*).<sup>3</sup> Chapters 5 and 6 examined some of Sai Baba's most well-known miracles, namely, the many iterations of the lamp lighting miracle (re)told over a century's worth of hagiographic tradition and miracle stories that render faith in the saint as capable of curing what modern medicine cannot. In this chapter, I examine another selection of miracle stories, which highlight the intersection of Shirdi Sai Baba's egalitarian vision of religious unity and his miraculous ability to instigate profound transformations in people's lives. In particular, I focus on two major hagiographic works: G.R. Dabholkar's *Satcarita* and Ashok Bhushan's 1977 Hindi film *Shirdi ke Sai Baba*. These miracle stories drawn from hagiographic text and film feature encounters between Sai Baba and Brahmins, each of whom is stereotypically proud about his high-caste status and anxious about maintaining the distinction between purity and impurity. These stories are part of a longstanding pattern in South Asian hagiographic traditions: the conflict between saints and Brahmins as representatives of two types of religious authority.<sup>4</sup> On one side, there is Sai Baba, the miracle-working saint who disregards the perceived impermeability of social and religious categories. On the other side, there are the Brahmins, the socioreligious elite whose power and privilege rely on sustaining the hierarchy of mutually exclusive categories defined by caste and religion.

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<sup>3</sup> Recall that the two emic terms used interchangeably by hagiographers writing in Marathi, Hindi, and other Indian languages to describe Sai Baba's miracles are *camatkār* (lit. "that which is surprising or astonishing") and *līlā*, a term that refers to the playfulness of deities – typically Hindu deities – whose actions create intimate relationships with the world and the people around them. See Chapter 5 for further discussion of the two terms, *camatkār* and *līlā*.

<sup>4</sup> See Chapter 12 of W.L. Smith's *Patterns in North Indian Hagiography* (2000) for a chapter-length catalogue of conflicts between Brahmins and saints in South Asian hagiographic traditions.

This chapter unfolds in two main sections, each anchored by miracle stories featuring encounters between Sai Baba and Brahmins in Dabholkar's *Satcarita* and Bhushan's *Shirdi ke Sai Baba*, respectively. I argue that these encounters in hagiographic text and film are interesting for two primary reasons. These miracle stories help us further understand the phenomenology and tautology of Shirdi Sai Baba's thaumaturgy – or rather, what Sai Baba's miracles look like and how they contribute to the construction of Sai Baba as an egalitarian saint. In addition to memorializing the times when Sai Baba made proud, purity-minded Brahmins see the error of their ways, these miracle stories are models that demonstrate how Brahmins can fit into the Sai Baba devotional community, a setting in which one's high-caste status would be more of a liability than an asset. As we will see, Sai Baba functions as the catalyst for each individual Brahmin to undergo self-reflection with regard to their Brahminhood, and the miracles that emerge from their interaction lead to the Brahmin's transformation from opponent to devotee.

I also argue that the close reading of these miracle stories reveals the utilitarian purpose of anti-Brahmin sentiment in the Shirdi Sai Baba hagiographic tradition. Indeed, these miracle stories in text and film problematize a Brahmin's Brahminhood and critique its excesses. However, this critique of Brahminhood is more about portraying Sai Baba as an egalitarian saint who rehabilitates his opponents and less about interrogating Brahminical prejudices in a direct, assertive manner. Anti-Brahmin sentiment is a rhetorical strategy used by hagiographers to construct Sai Baba as a saint who can “convert” anyone and everyone – even the Brahmin “bad” guys – through miraculous means. (Of course, the designation “bad” is relative to the devotional worldview of the

Shirdi Sai Baba hagiographic tradition, in which a Brahmin could be marked as “bad” inasmuch as he opposes Shirdi Sai Baba for personal or doctrinal reasons).

For now, let’s begin with some miracle stories in Dabholkar’s *Satcarita* that involve Shirdi Sai Baba, Brahmin interlocutors, and miraculous visions that dismantle the notion that a mosque-dwelling holy man is different from Hindu gods and gurus.

### **Sai Baba and Brahmins in Dabholkar’s *Śrī Sāī Satcarita***

In the twelfth chapter of Dabholkar’s *Satcarita*, we find two miracle stories featuring encounters between Sai Baba and proud Brahmins fixated on their purity. As a prelude to these stories, Dabholkar begins the chapter with several verses that establish an anti-Brahminical tone. He tells his audience to avoid becoming like the “hypocritical priests” (*pākhaṇḍapaṇḍit*) and those who display “excessive pride in their *varṇa*” (*varṇābhimān*) and “cockiness about the *varṇa* system” (*varṇāśramadharmalaṇḍa*).<sup>5</sup> Dabholkar also contrasts individuals of two types. On one hand, there is the scholar who is “well-learned in the Veda and other religious scriptures” (*vedavedāṅgapāraṅgat*) but also “figuratively intoxicated with pride rooted in [his] knowledge” (*jñānagarveṃ madonmat*). On the other, there is the naïve person, the *ajñānī*, whose faith (*viśvās*) in a saint like Sai Baba is the same as the wisdom (*jñāna*) necessary to overcome the cycle of death and rebirth.<sup>6</sup> Such language is not extraordinary in the *Satcarita*. Elsewhere in the text, Dabholkar comparatively puts devotion to Shirdi Sai Baba ahead of Vedic scriptures, which “fall silent” in comparison with the saint’s greatness.<sup>7</sup> In the third chapter, Dabholkar also echoes the precedent set by Tukaram and other saints when positing the non-necessity of

<sup>5</sup> Dabholkar, *ŚSSC*, 12:16.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 12:17-18.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:48 *tayāceriṃ vānāvayā mahimān / vedaśāstrīm dharileṃ maun.*



religious practices, such as making vows and fasting, in light of the soteriological power accessible by hearing the stories recorded in the *Satcarita*.<sup>8</sup> But it is the twelfth chapter where Dabholkar illustrates how faith in Shirdi Sai Baba trumps the pride rooted in a Brahmin's Brahminhood by spotlighting two instances where Brahmins initially skeptical of the saint have a change of heart.

### a. Shirdi Sai Baba Appears as Guru Gholap

In the first story, a Brahmin priest from Nasik, whose surname is Mooley, comes to Shirdi to see his friend from Nagpur, who also happens to be a Sai Baba devotee.<sup>9</sup> (Dabholkar suggests that Mooley's visit is actually due to the strength of his previously accumulated merit). This Brahmin priest named Mooley is very "rigid" (*karmath*) and "purity-minded" (*sovalē*).<sup>10</sup> He is also quite the scholar, having studied the six *śāstras*, as well as the sciences of astrology and palmistry. Mooley offers to interpret the lines on Sai Baba's hand, but the saint curtly refuses, saying: "For someone who has spent his entire life in the service of God (*īśvar*), what use is palmistry?"<sup>11</sup> When Mooley goes off to attend to his purification rites, Sai Baba tells a devotee to bring some *gerū*, an ochre-colored chalk used for dying clothes, and then announces: "Today, I'm going to wear ochre-colored clothes."<sup>12</sup> This is a surprising statement, the hagiographer tells us, because the saint never wore such clothes.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 3:182 *nalage vrat udyāpan / nalage upavās śarīraśoṣaṇ / nalage tīrthayātrāparyātan / caritraśravaṇ ek pure*.

<sup>9</sup> Most properly, the English transliteration of the Brahmin's surname is Mule (मुळे). However, I have opted to use the phonetic spelling "Mooley," which is also the rendering founding in Sai Baba hagiographic literature in English.

<sup>10</sup> Dabholkar, *SSSC*, 12:23.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 12:106 *ājanma īśvarārtha jhijavilā kāy / tayāsī sāmudrikīm kartavya kāy*.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 12:109 *bhagaveṁ ambar paridhānūm*.

Meanwhile, Mooley’s friend invites him to Sai Baba’s mosque for afternoon worship, the *madhyan āratī*. Mooley agrees to go, but he is worried about stepping into a space that will compromise his Brahminical purity, viz. his *sovaḷepaṇā*. In the mosque, Sai Baba motions for Mooley to come forward, out from the crowd of devotees, and he asks him for alms (*dakṣiṇā*). This request makes the Brahmin even more apprehensive. He thinks to himself, “For what reason should I give? I’m an unsullied *agnihotrī*... I’m pure and the mosque is impure. How can I go near Baba?”<sup>13</sup>

Immediately following this thought, there is a miracle – a *camatkār*. In his vision, Mooley sees Sai Baba disappear, and in Sai Baba’s place, he sees a Brahmin wearing ochre-colored clothes whom he immediately recognizes as his deceased spiritual teacher, the Brahmin figure known as Guru Gholap.<sup>14</sup> Importantly, Mooley is the only person to witness Sai Baba’s manifestation as Guru Gholap. Everyone else in the mosque sees Sai Baba sitting normally, without any change in appearance or behavior. Mooley begins to think about what could have caused this vision. Perhaps it is a dream, but he knows he is awake. Perhaps it is some kind of trick, but he is in the company of others. Would not they be tricked, too? The Brahmin priest Mooley, known for being “accomplished in knowledge of the Veda, Vedanta, and other religious scriptures” (*vedavedāṅgaśāstrasampanna*),<sup>15</sup> is left wonderstruck upon seeing Guru Gholap in a mosque in Shirdi.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 12:121 *dakṣiṇā kimartha myām dyāvī tarī / mī agnihotrī nirmaḷ*; 12:127 *āpaṇ sovaḷe maśīd ovaḷī / jāveṃ kaiseṃ bābāñjavaḷī*.

<sup>14</sup> To the best of my knowledge, Guru Gholap was a religious figure who lived in the late nineteenth/early twentieth century with a following localized in the western Deccan. Guru Gholap is generally unknown in the wider context of religion in Maharashtra, save for this episode in the *Satcarita*.

<sup>15</sup> Dabholkar, ŚSSC, 12:134.

This miraculous vision, like so many miraculous visions, is momentary. When Mooley blinks, Guru Gholap disappears and Sai Baba reappears in the same place and in the same posture, asking for alms. Mooley’s reality is rattled because he is experiencing Sai Baba’s *atarkya-śaktī* – the power (*śaktī*) that transcends logical thought (*atarkya*, “that which has no discernible logic”).<sup>16</sup> This encounter also affects Mooley physically. With tearful eyes and a clenched throat, Mooley drops to the floor of the mosque at Sai Baba’s feet, and he gives the alms that the saint had requested.

It is important to keep in mind that the preceding account of Mooley’s miraculous vision comes to us through the hagiographer Dabholkar, whose job is not only to create a record of events but also to identify the significance of each event and amplify its message for the sake of the audience. In this regard, Dabholkar identifies the epistemological effects of Mooley’s realization that Guru Gholap and Sai Baba are one and the same. It “broke the excessive pride [Mooley has] in his highborn status” (*tuṭalā ucca-varṇa-abhimān*), and it opened him up to a new and higher religious truth – literally “collyrium was applied to his eyes” (*paḍālem ḍoḷiyānmājīm añjana*), a Marathi idiom that describes how a spiritual teacher’s instruction removes misunderstanding.<sup>17</sup> It also “relieved the swelling of his purity-mindedness” (*sovalyācī sāṅḍilī sphītī*) and “eradicated his awareness of the difference between the ‘touchable’ and the ‘untouchable’” (*sparśāsparśācī virālī sphūrtī*).<sup>18</sup> Dabholkar concludes this miracle story

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 12:144. See Chapter 6 for further discussion regarding the supra-logical (*atarkya*) nature of Sai Baba’s miracles and how they challenge or supersede the limits of logical thought.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 12:137. On the idiomatic usage of collyrium, see Molesworth, *A Dictionary, Marathi and English*, 11.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 12:142.

by noting that the puzzling reference to *gerū* and ochre-colored clothes was Sai Baba's way of foreshadowing the *camatkār* that would change a Brahmin's perception of him.<sup>19</sup>

### b. Shirdi Sai Baba Appears as Rama

The second story in the twelfth chapter of the *Satcarita* is about a physician, or *ḍakṭar*, who is brought to Shirdi by one of his friends.<sup>20</sup> The *Satcarita* does not give the doctor's name, but it does give three details about him. He is Brahmin by caste (*jñātem brāhmaṇ*); he is a devotee of the Hindu god Rama (*rāmopāsak*); and he has "a proclivity for observing the purification rites prescribed [for his caste] in scripture" (*snānsandhyāvihitācaraṇa / nemnirbandhanīm āvaḍ*).<sup>21</sup> Like Mooley the Brahmin priest, the Brahmin doctor also feels uneasy about visiting the saint. He thinks to himself: "Sai Baba is a Muslim. I'm already bound by affection to my titular deity, Ram. I'm not bowing down [to Baba]."<sup>22</sup>

When brought to the mosque by his friend, the Brahmin doctor shocks those in attendance by falling immediately at Sai Baba's feet. According to the account of events in the *Satcarita*:

Then the doctor explained the wondrous event,  
 "The dark-blue form of Ram (*rāmṛūp*) appeared before me  
 And I immediately worshipped  
 The beautiful, tender, ornamented one.

"See, he's the one sitting in his posture!  
 He's the one speaking to everyone!"

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 12:149.

<sup>20</sup> Without belaboring the point, it is significant to note that the doctor in this story is not a traditional medical practitioner like a village's *vaidya* or *hākīm*. Rather, the use of the English-derived term *ḍakṭar* indicates that this person perhaps received medical training in a college or college-like educational setting. If this is the case, the principle character of this story represents Sai Baba's ability to recruit devotees from the professional classes of colonial Indian society, including modern medical doctors.

<sup>21</sup> Dabholkar, *ŚSSC*, 12:152.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., *sāibābā musalmān / āpalem ārādhyā jānakījīvan / ādhīnc snehyāmsī sāṅgūn / nāhīm mī naman karaṇār*.

As he was speaking, in half an instant,  
The form of Sai (*sāirūp*) started to appear.

Then the doctor, wonderstruck,  
Said, “What kind of dream is this?”  
He said, “What kind of Muslim is this?”<sup>23</sup>  
This is a divine incarnation (*avatārī*), one skilled in yoga (*yogasampanna*).<sup>24</sup>

After seeing Sai Baba as his favorite deity, the doctor resolves to stay away from the mosque and fast until receiving the saint’s grace. On the third day of fasting, one of the doctor’s friends unexpectedly arrives in Shirdi, an occasion that provides the opportunity to visit the village’s resident saint. When the doctor enters the mosque, Sai Baba knowingly asks him if there is a reason for the visit, that is, if someone had brought him into the mosque and caused him to break his vow. Hearing this, the doctor is overcome with sadness and regret for having kept his distance from Sai Baba. That night, the doctor experiences the saint’s grace, and he leaves the next day for his village where he enjoys fifteen days of the highest bliss, which “ripened his devotion to Sai” (*vāḍhalī bhakti sāīpadīm*).<sup>25</sup> Given that the Brahmin doctor’s story concludes the twelfth chapter of the *Satcarita*, Dabholkar summarizes its gist (*tātpāryārthatā*) and instructiveness (*bodhakatā*) thus: “Whoever is one’s guru, one should place full faith in him. It should not be placed elsewhere. Take this deep meaning to heart.”<sup>26</sup>

<sup>23</sup> In the original Marathi of Dabholkar’s *Satcarita* 12:162, this question – “*he kaiñce musulmān*” – is most properly translated in English: “What kind of Muslim is this?” However, in the very first English adaptation of the *Satcarita* by N.V. Gunaji, this question is rendered more polemically: “How could He be a Mahomedan.” See Gunaji, *The Wonderful Life and Teachings of Shri Sai Baba*, 70. As discussed in Chapter 3, Gunaji’s text problematically omits parts of Dabholkar’s *Satcarita* that connect Sai Baba to Islam. In this instance, Gunaji uses “how” instead of “what kind,” thereby inserting a sense of categorical clarity to the doctor’s realization and invalidating the possibility that the saint could be a Muslim holy man.

<sup>24</sup> Dabholkar, *ŚSSC*, 12:160-162 *mag te ḍāḱṭar kathitī naval / rāmrūp myām dekhileṃ śyāmal / teṃ mīm tātkāḷ vandileṃ nirmal / sundar komal sājireṃ // 160 // teñci pahā heṃ āsanasthit / teñci heṃ sarvāmseṃ bolat / mhanatām mhaṇatām kṣaṇārdhānt / disūm lāgat sāirūp // 161 // teṇeṃ ḍāḱṭar vismayāpanna / mhaṇāveṃ tarī heṃ kāy swapna / mhaṇe he kaiñce musulmān / yogasampanna avatārī // 162.*

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 12:172-173.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 12:176 *jo jo jayācā guru asāvā / tyāceci thāyīm ḍṛḍh viśvās basāvā / anyatra koṭhemhī to nasāvā / manīm thasāvā guhyārtha hā.*

In the midst of telling the doctor's story, the hagiographer Dabholkar interrupts the narrative right after the doctor's miraculous vision of Sai Baba as Rama and inserts several verses to contextualize its significance. He names several saints from low-caste backgrounds who came before Sai Baba – saints like Chokhamela the Mahar and Ravidas the Chambhar – and rhetorically asks: “Who thinks about saints in terms of caste?”<sup>27</sup> The implication of this question, Dabholkar says, is the realization that saints abandon their quality-less, formless (*nirguṇa*) state of being when they enter the world, taking on markers of socio-religious identities in the process.<sup>28</sup> In the case of Sai Baba, many of these markers are those that would make one think that he is a Muslim. He lives in a mosque; he talks about Allah; he looks like a fakir; and so on. These aspects of Sai Baba's religious practice make the proud, purity-minded Brahmins like Mooley and the doctor feel uncomfortable and hesitant to go near him. In the hagiographic hermeneutics in Dabholkar's *Satcarita*, their anxiety arises from the misperception of Sai Baba as *only* or *essentially* a Muslim, and this misperception evaporates when Sai Baba manifests in a form that is more familiar and meaningful to each individual. Mooley sees *his* guru; the doctor sees *his* deity. Seeing these divine personages disappear and then seeing Sai Baba reappear in their place, the Brahmins are epistemologically jarred into the realization that a Muslim-looking saint is no different from the gods and gurus whom they and other Brahmins venerate. Here, Dabholkar's *Satcarita* employs Mooley and the doctor to argue that the garb of the fakir is only a veneer.

There are no encounters in the *Satcarita* or other hagiographic sources in which Muslims experience the same or similar transformative miracles as Mooley and the

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 12:163 *jātīcā vicār kāy yāñcyā*.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 12:164.

doctor do. There is no Muslim whose reality is rattled by a miraculous moment revealing that Sai Baba is not *only* or *essentially* a Hindu holy man, or that Sai Baba is non-different from other Muslim figures (e.g., a Sufi saint). Typically, Sai Baba only appears in miraculous visions as other religious figures when his interlocutor is Hindu.<sup>29</sup> One way to account for the one-sidedness of these visions pertains to the different cosmological and theological frameworks of Hindu and Islamic traditions. In Hindu traditions, the boundary between the human and the divine realms is very porous, and the middle ground is populated with numerous miracle-working figures and entities, including gurus and saints (both living and dead), deified heroes from the ancient past, and a host of ancestors, ghosts, and spirits whose lingering presence can affect people's lives for better or worse. In contrast, Islamic traditions must grapple with the danger of conflating any source of religious power (e.g., a living saint/*pīr*, a saint's tomb/*dargāh*, a spirit-being/*jinn*) with the uncompromised singularity of God's power and authority.<sup>30</sup> Another factor is that the vast majority of Shirdi Sai Baba devotees, both historically and presently, have been Hindus, and all of the major hagiographers have been Hindus – or

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<sup>29</sup> While the Shirdi Sai Baba hagiographic tradition typically ascribes miraculous visions of Sai Baba appearing as other religious figures to Hindus, there are (very few) instances of non-Hindus associating Sai Baba with non-Hindu religious figures. For example a Muslim devotee named Abdul Baba kept an Urdu notebook of the saint's teachings, many of which evidence familiarity with Islamic, particularly Sufi cosmology and vocabulary. In *Unravelling the Enigma*, Marianne Warren argues – rather problematically, in my view – that this unpublished, uncirculated notebook proves that Shirdi Sai Baba was “actually” a Sufi saint. Here, it is pertinent to note that Abdul's notebook contains theological equivalences purportedly made by Sai Baba: “Vishnu is equal to the *Bismillah ar-Rahim*, *Allah* the Merciful the Pardoner. Ali is equal to Brahma. Mahadev is equal to Mohammed and *Malik al-maut*, the angel of death.” See Warren, *Unravelling the Enigma*, 308. However, the point made in this chapter is that miraculous visions typically associate Sai Baba with Hindu religious figures and that they typically happen to Hindus.

<sup>30</sup> For more on the tension between two types of Islamic miracles – those that can make someone into a saint and those that can brand someone a heretic – see Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger, “The ‘Deep Secret’ and Dangers of Karamat: Miraculous Acts, Revelation, and Secrecy in a South Indian Sufi Tradition,” in *Miracle as Modern Conundrum in South Asian Religious Traditions*, eds. Corinne G. Dempsey and Selva J. Raj (Albany: SUNY Press, 2008), 167-186.

more specifically, Brahmins. That there are more miracle stories about Hindus having miraculous visions than non-Hindus is not terribly surprising.

Moreover, in the *Satcarita*, many of these miraculous visions involve Brahmins, the human embodiment of religious power and authority in Hindu religious traditions. In chapter twenty-eight, we find a Gujarati Brahmin and devotee of Shiva named Megha who becomes dejected when he first hears some people call Sai Baba a Muslim (*avindha*). Later, in Shirdi, Megha receives the saint's rebuke: "Be warned, if you put your foot on [the mosque's] step! This is the residence of a Muslim (*yavana*)!"<sup>31</sup> Sai Baba's anger reminds Megha of Shiva in his angrier form of Rudra, thereby setting in motion the Gujarati Brahmin's realization that Sai Baba is not as different from Shiva as he previously thought. When a pot of water spills all over Sai Baba and the saint remains completely dry except for his head, Megha is convinced that he has just witnessed the reenactment of a mythological moment for his benefit: Shiva catching the release of the Ganges River from heaven in his matted locks and guiding it safely to the earth below.<sup>32</sup>

Not all stories of miraculous visions recorded in the *Satcarita* feature Brahmins<sup>33</sup> – but many of them do. This pattern should raise questions about the political undertones of encounters between Sai Baba and Brahmins that essentially reassure Brahmins fixated on notions of purity that devotion to Sai Baba will not compromise their Brahminhood.

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<sup>31</sup> Dabholkar, *ŚSSC*, 12:134 and 12:138 *khābardār pāyarīvar pāṭh ṭhevileṃ / yavanēṃ vasileṃ hēṃ sthān.*

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 28:117-183.

<sup>33</sup> For example, Dabholkar records how Sai Baba appeared as Rama to some greedy members of a troupe of devotional singers (*bhajanī meḷā*) who visited Shirdi in 1916. See Dabholkar, *ŚSSC*, 29:2-93.



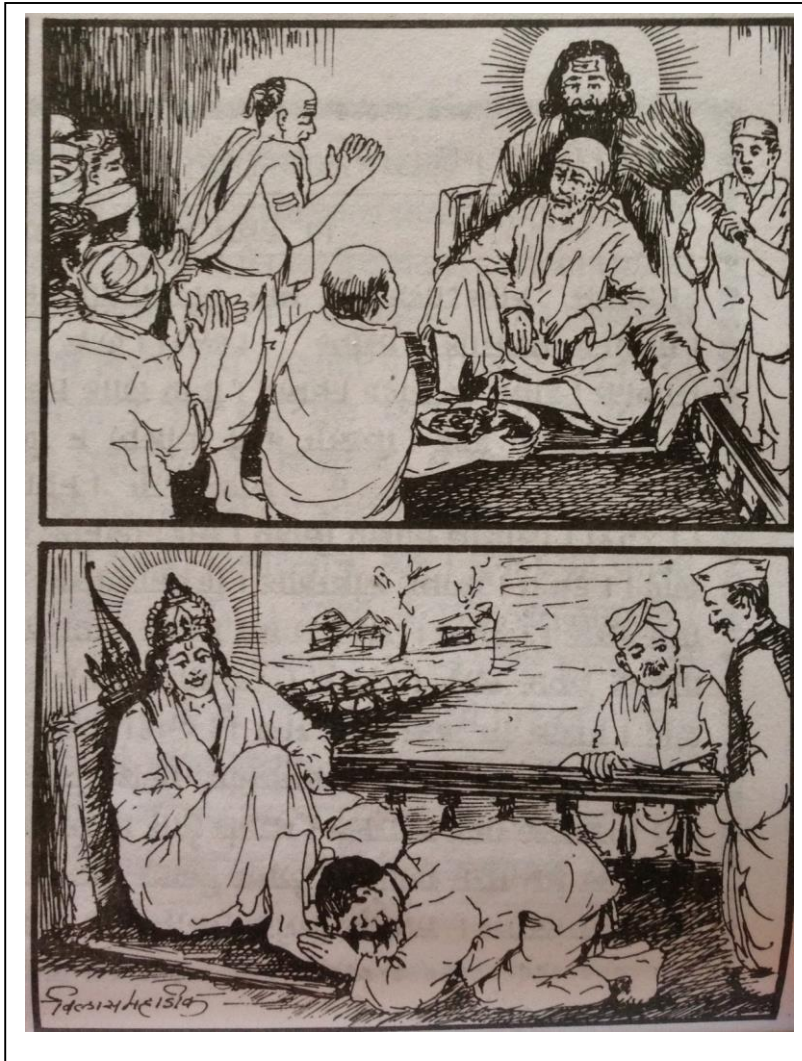


Fig. 7.1 – An illustration, which introduces Chapter 12 of Dabhoklar’s *Satcarita*, depicting Sai Baba appearing as Guru Gholap to Mooley (above) and as Rama to the Brahmin doctor (below). Source: G.R. Dabholkar, *Śrī Sāī Satcarita* (Shirdi: Shri Sai Baba Sansthan and Trust, 2008), 148.

### c. H..S. Dixit: The Doubly “Good” Brahmin

One common trope in the encounters between Sai Baba and Brahmins in the *Satcarita* is the problematization of the Brahmin’s Brahminhood as an obstacle in the path of devotion to the saint. Interestingly, Brahminhood is the only caste-based identity that comes under such scrutiny throughout the hagiographic tradition. One does not find miracle stories that specifically critique the ideas or values attached to other castes (e.g., Maratha, Kayasth Prabhu, Mahar).

Furthermore, Brahminhood is not only problematized when it comes to proud, purity-minded Brahmins like Mooley and the doctor. Consider one story in the twenty-third chapter of the *Satcarita* about Hari Sitaram Dixit, a lawyer from Bombay and ardent devotee of the saint. This story opens with the sudden appearance of an old, feeble goat in Shirdi. First, Sai Baba asks a Muslim named Fakir Baba to kill the animal in an act of mercy, but Fakir Baba refuses, saying that there is no cause for bloodshed. Next, he seeks out Madhavrao Deshpande to put the animal out of its misery, but the Brahmin purposefully avoids him. Finally, Sai Baba turns to Dixit, affectionately known as “Kaka” and an especially “good” devotee, whose goodness, Dabholkar opines, is like “gold purified fifty-two times over.” Sai Baba commands Dixit to kill the goat as a test (*parīkṣā*) to discover if the gold is genuine or counterfeit.<sup>34</sup>

As in the previous examples of Mooley and the doctor, we are privy in the *Satcarita* to Dixit’s thought process as he contemplates the bind that he is in. He knows it is wrong to disobey Sai Baba, but he is part of the “unsullied lineage of Brahmins who, from birth, observe the vow of nonviolence (*janma nirmaḷ brāhmaṇvaṁśā / janmādārabhya vrat ahimsā*).”<sup>35</sup> Ultimately, Dixit picks up the knife and checks one last time with Sai Baba, who tells him to proceed. The onlookers are stunned – a Brahmin is about to do what a non-vegetarian *musalmān* could not! At the last second, Sai Baba stops him, saying: “Okay, okay, Kaka turn back. What is this hardheartedness? You’re a Brahmin and still you kill?”<sup>36</sup> Relief washes over Dixit as he realizes that this to-kill-or-not-to-kill drama was the saint’s means to impart a lesson about loyalty to one’s guru

<sup>34</sup> Dabholkar, *SSSC*, 23:135-136.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 23:151 *janma nirmaḷ brāhmaṇvaṁśā / janmādārabhya vrat ahimsā*.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 23:168 *hām hām kākā hoy paratā / kāy re tujhī hī niṣṭhūrṭā / brāhmaṇ hoūni himsā karitām / vicār cittā nāhīm kā*.

over loyalty to one's caste. In the text, Dabholkar expresses Dixit's realization thus: "We do not know violence or nonviolence; but the feet of the true guru are salvific. We do not know in our hearts the purpose of a command; but it is our duty to follow it."<sup>37</sup>

What happens to the goat? After Dixit's realization, Fakir Baba suggests that the goat should be taken to the village's *takyā*, a gathering spot for mendicants. The goat dies en route. For Dabholkar, this episode is yet another example of Sai Baba's didactic playfulness, viz. "Baba played a game (*kheḷ*)."<sup>38</sup>

Notably, Dixit emerges from this "playful" test of loyalty in the best possible way, showing that he is ready and willing to execute Sai Baba's order, even if it means violating his Brahminhood. But it is very important that he never actually violates the nonviolent principle of his Brahminhood. This story thus portrays Dixit as a doubly "good" personage – one whose loyalty to Sai Baba is paramount and whose Brahminhood remains intact.

#### **d. G.D. Kelkar: Did Sai Baba Make a Brahmin Eat Meat?**

Another story featuring a Brahmin's test of loyalty focuses on the large metal cooking vessel (*hāṇḍī*) used by Sai Baba to prepare the vegetarian and non-vegetarian food that he gave out freely to petitioners. According to the *Satcarita*, Sai Baba would stir the boiling contents with his hand, miraculously without pain or injury, and he would invite an Islamic teacher (*maulvī*) to say prayers (*fātihā*) over the meal. In this story, Sai Baba asks G.D. Kelkar, a "Brahmin who respectfully observes the religious duties of a Brahmin," if the mutton *pulao* is ready to be served.<sup>39</sup> When Kelkar replies that it is very good, Sai

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 23:175 *hiṃsā ahiṃsā āmhī neṇūm / āmhāmsī tārak sadgurucaraṇū / ājñā kimartha hem manīm neṇūm / pratipālanu kartavya.*

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 23:199 *kelā hā kheḷ bābānnīm.*

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 38:53.

Baba calls him a liar. How could he say so without tasting it? The saint thrusts a ladle into the Brahmin's hand, telling him to try some without worrying about what is and is not pure (*sovala*).

At this point, the narrative stops abruptly. Does the Brahmin eat the meat in front of him? The *Satcarita* offers no explicit answer, but the following verse penned by the hagiographer Dabholkar suggests that Sai Baba did not force Kelkar to violate his caste: "That saints will tell a disciple to sully himself is a ridiculous idea. Saints are dense with compassion; their ways are only known to them."<sup>40</sup> But, then again, Dabholkar concludes Kelkar's story pregnant with the possibility that the Brahmin could have done something transgressive: "The determination [on the part of devotees] to follow the commands [of Sai Baba] sometimes went to such lengths that a lifelong conviction not to touch meat would falter."<sup>41</sup> The main point to extricate from this story, I contend, is that Dabholkar is comfortable leaving ambiguities in his account of Sai Baba's life and interactions with devotees in Shirdi, even when it comes to the theoretical violation of Brahminhood.

And it is precisely these ambiguities that become flattened in later hagiographic works, such as N.V. Gunaji's problematic 1944 adaptation of the *Satcarita* in English. Gunaji's English rendering of Kelkar's story ends with his translation of *Satcarita* 38:102, the verse that dismisses the notion that a saint would harm a disciple/devotee vis-à-vis the regulations of ritual purity: "Really no saint or guru will ever force his orthodox disciple to eat forbidden food and defile himself thereby."<sup>42</sup> The following verse on the faltering convictions of against touching meat (i.e., *Satcarita* 38:105), however, does not

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 38:102.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 38:105.

<sup>42</sup> Gunaji, *The Wonderful Life and Teachings of Shri Sai Baba*, 207.

appear in the Gunaji text. By deleting this verse that hypothetically posits the existence of devotees who would prioritize their faith in Sai Baba over their caste-based prohibitions regarding meat, Gunaji alters this story about the saint and his Brahmin devotee. Here, Sai Baba becomes a saint who simply never made “orthodox” devotees violate their dietary principles. It removes the possibility that “orthodox” devotees, like Kelkar, would ever transgress those principles, even in the context of devotion to Sai Baba. Such alterations to the saint’s life story, small as they may seem, can significantly impact his legacy. Kelkar’s story is yet another example of the way that Gunaji traffics the saint more toward the “Hindu” and the “Brahmin” and further away from the “Islamic/Muslim.”

**e. G.R. Dabholkar: Hagiographer and “Bad” Brahmin Made “Good”**

So far, this chapter has highlighted several stories in the *Satcarita* featuring Sai Baba’s encounters with Brahmins like Mooley, the anonymous doctor, Megha, H.S. (“Kaka”) Dixit, and G.D. (“Dada”) Kelkar. However, this list does not exhaust the number of prominent Brahmins mentioned in the text.<sup>43</sup> In the history of the Sai Baba devotional community, two Brahmin devotees receive special recognition: the Deputy Collector of Ahmednagar District N.G. Chandorkar and G.D. Sahasrabuddhe, the *kīrtankār* and hagiographer better known as Das Ganu Maharaj. Hagiographic works, such as B.V. Narasimhaswami’s *Life of Sai Baba* (1955) in English and A.Y. Dhond’s *Sāi Bābā: Avatār va kārya* (1955) in Marathi, portray Sai Baba’s acquisition of Chandorkar and Das

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<sup>43</sup> Among other notable Brahmins who became Sai Baba devotees in the early twentieth century (i.e., before Sai Baba’s death in 1918) were H.S. Dixit, a solicitor by profession and a member of the Bombay Legislative Council G.G. Narke, a professor at the College of Engineering in Pune; and G.S. Khaparde, a member of the Indian Legislative Council and acquaintance of the nationalist figure B.G. Tilak.

Ganu Maharaj as crucial for raising awareness of the saint in different strata of society.<sup>44</sup> Chandorkar had contacts in the new middle classes in colonial India (e.g., lawyers, professors, judges, clerks). Das Ganu's *kīrtans* attracted economically and socially diverse audiences, and his hagiographic writings appealed to those interested in and capable of reading Marathi hagiography. Through the work of these two Brahmins embedded in different segments of colonial society, Sai Baba's fame spread in multiple directions, throughout the administrative and professional classes, the rural literati, and the "masses" more generally.

We would be remiss not to mention another very prominent Brahmin in the early Sai Baba devotional community: Govindrao Raghunath Dabholkar, the composer of the *Satcarita* and the voice narrating these encounters between Sai Baba and Brahmins. In short, Dabholkar was working as a first-class magistrate in the Bandra suburb of Bombay when one of his friends, Deputy Collector Chandorkar, convinced him to travel to a remote village in the Deccan and meet its resident saint. In his text, Dabholkar reflects upon his first sight of Shirdi Sai Baba, describing how he experienced the same emotion felt by the other Brahmins about whom he writes. Dabholkar says that his eyes filled with tears; his throat clenched; and his senses ceased to work. So powerful is his encounter with Sai Baba that he moves to Shirdi in 1916 and begins to write the saint's life story.

Accordingly, parts of the *Satcarita* are as autobiographical about Dabholkar's Brahminhood and transformation into a devotee as they are hagiographical about Shirdi

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<sup>44</sup> Dhond interprets the connection between Shirdi Sai Baba and the well-educated (*suśikṣit varga*) of collectors, magistrates, solicitors, doctors, etc. as the saint's means of gathering recruits who could spread his work (*kārya*) throughout society more broadly. See Dhond, *Sāi Bābā: Avatār va kārya*, 89. Narasimhaswami portrays Chandorkar as the "first and foremost of Baba's apostles" and "Baba's St. Paul" and Das Ganu as the "modern Mahipati" who introduced the saint to audiences throughout Maharashtra with his *kīrtans*. See Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba*, 249, 311, and 325.

Sai Baba. In particular, Dabholkar is frank about addressing his personal shortcomings and painting himself as a “bad” Brahmin. Self-deprecating remarks target his ignorance of linguistics (*nāhīm maj vyutpattijñān*), his unfamiliarity with the tales of gods and saints (*nāhīm ghaḍaleṃ satkathāśravaṇ*), his inexperience with scholarly studies (*nāhīn kele granthapārāyaṇ*), and his inability to perform rituals attentively (*kadhīn na kelī ananyabhāveṃ upāsanā*).<sup>45</sup> Dabholkar’s self-assessment as a “bad” Brahmin is most evident when he reflects on the nickname given to him by Sai Baba. The saint calls him “Hemadpant,” which Dabholkar deduces to be a reference to Hemadri Pandit, the thirteenth-century Brahmin scholar and minister to two kings in the Yadava dynasty. Dabholkar interprets his comparison with Hemadri Pandit as the saint’s method of demolishing the self-pride that characterized his pre-Sai Baba personality.<sup>46</sup> Dabholkar writes: “[There is] the present writer who is crabby and gabby, given to reviling and vilifying, and completely lacking in knowledge... [and then there is Hemadri Pandit] the composer of a treatise on *dharmasāstra*... a sourcebook for fasting, ritual offerings, pilgrimage, and liberation called the *Caturvargacintāmaṇī*.”<sup>47</sup> In terms of lineage, Dabholkar notes that Hemadri Pandit’s family was of the Vatsa lineage and learned in the Yajur Veda, while his family is of the Bharadwaj lineage and learned in the Rig Veda,

<sup>45</sup> See Dabholkar, *ŚSSC*, 1:40 and 52:75.

<sup>46</sup> According to the *Satcarita*, Dabholkar’s nickname (Hemadpant) stems from the time that Sai Baba overheard a debate between Dabholkar and a Sai Baba devotee named Balasaheb Bhata. In their debate, the former had argued that true knowledge derives from the individual’s capacity to act self-responsibly (*nijakartavyadaksatā*), not from surrendering oneself to the authority of another (*pāratantratā*). Later in the mosque, Sai Baba gestures toward Dabholkar and asks the others in attendance, “What did this Hemadpant say [earlier on]?” This nickname causes Dabholkar to reflect on the self-pride that led him to reject the necessity of a guru. See Dabholkar, *ŚSSC*, 2:150ff.

<sup>47</sup> Dabholkar, *ŚSSC*, 2:98 *ādhīm hā lekhaḥ khatyāḷ / jaisā khatyāḷ taisā vācāḷ / taisāci ṭavāḷ āṇi kuṭāḷ / nāhīm viṭāḷ jñānācā*; 2:173-174 *to dharmasāstragranthakār ... vratadānatīrthamokṣakhāṇī / nāmeṃ caturvargacintāmaṇī*.

but the more relevant difference, Dabholkar says, is that his predecessor was a *dharmaśāstrī*, while he is an “ignoramus” (*mūḍha*).<sup>48</sup>

In light of this comparison, we might say that Hemadri Pandit and Hemadpant are – to quote the kitschy adage – “same, same but different.” Both are Brahmins; both work with words in the production of religious texts; and both of their subjects are religious resources for obtaining religious goals, including liberation. The nature of each subject, however, is as dissimilar as a legal compendium of prescribed religious practice and a hagiographic account of a miracle-working saint. More importantly, we should note that Dabholkar’s interpretation of this comparison plays with the typologies of the “good” Brahmin and the “bad” Brahmin such that the “good” Brahmin is the one whose devotion to Sai Baba makes him cognizant of his “bad” qualities. Perhaps, then, we can see the *Satcarita* not only as a hagiographic text intended for widespread circulation but also as its composer’s devotional testimony – a public declaration to the world that he is a “bad” Brahmin made “good” through devotion to Sai Baba.

#### **f. Dabholkar’s *Satcarita* – A Brahmin’s Response to Anti-Brahminism?**

Additionally, it is important to see the *Satcarita* in its historical context. Dabholkar was writing at a time of heightened anti-Brahmin sentiment in the Bombay Presidency in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Many Sai Baba devotees who worked as magistrates (like Dabholkar), lawyers (like Dixit), and civil servants in the colonial bureaucracy (like Chandorkar) came from Pune, Nashik, Bombay, and other major cities surrounding Shirdi. In these cities, one of the topical issues discussed in newspapers, pamphlets, and speeches focused on whether India’s religion and society needed to be

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 2:176 *parī to vatsa mī bhāradwāj gotrī / to pañca mī tīn pravārī / to yajur mi ṛgvedādhikārī / to dharmāśāstrī mī mūḍh.*



reformed before independence from the British could be achieved, or vice versa. While ardent nationalist figures like Bal Gangadhar Tilak in Maharashtra and Lajpat Rai in Punjab made the case for independence as the first and foremost goal of patriotic Indians, proponents of the “reform first” line of thought like the Marathi writer and activist Jyotirao Phule argued the need to redress centuries of social, religious, and economic oppression from Brahmins and other privileged castes. (Notably, Tilak and Rai belonged to non-marginalized castes, viz. Brahmin and Aggarwal, respectively).

In both his literature and social activism, Phule, who was born into the Mali caste, encouraged revolutionary action. He dedicated his 1873 Marathi tract *Gulāmgirī* (Slavery) to the “Good People of United States” and “their sublime disinterested and self-sacrificing devotion in the cause of [the abolition of] Negro Slavery” with the hope that Indians would be inspired by the American Civil War to emancipate “their Sudra brethren from the trammels of Brahmin thralldom.”<sup>49</sup> Several years later, in his 1881 tract *Śetkāryācā Āsūḍ* (The Cultivator’s Whip), Phule targeted the ruling elite – the Maratha families, such as the Shindes and Bhosales – and argued that their prioritization of wealth and pleasure over education and responsible rule enabled their Brahmin ministers to seize power and assert their authority in the political realm.<sup>50</sup> Phule also harshly criticized the very Brahminical perspective of the social and religious reform advanced by organizations like the Brahma Samaj and the Prarthana Samaj, the latter of which was founded in Bombay in 1867. Phule’s response was to champion the formation in Pune in 1873 of the Satya Shodhak Samaj, a “society of truth-seekers” whose animating principle

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<sup>49</sup> See Jotirao Phule, *Collected Works of Mahatma Jotirao Phule*, trans. P.G. Patil (Bombay: Mahatma Jotirao Phule Death Centenary Central Committee, Maharashtra Education Department, 1991).

<sup>50</sup> Rosalind O’Hanlon, *Caste, Conflict, and Ideology: Mahatma Jotirao Phule and Low Caste Protest in Nineteenth-Century Western India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 266.

was the liberation of India's oppressed castes, viz. the *sūdras* and *atiśūdras*, from the intellectual slavery imposed on them by Brahmins and other privileged castes. The Satya Shodhak Society pushed the idea of reform to greater lengths than other organizations with high-caste leaderships; Phule and his followers sought to demonstrate, for example, the non-necessity of Brahmins as ritual specialists by performing Hindu weddings without officiating *paṇḍits*.<sup>51</sup> This split in the 1870s in Maharashtra's "social reform movement," viz. the Brahmins in the Prarthana Samaj and the non-Brahmins in Phule's Satya Shodhak Samaj, continued to reverberate throughout the late colonial period and into the years following India's independence in 1947. Amidst a variety of late nineteenth/early twentieth-century voices critiquing caste-based oppression from above (e.g., Gopal Ganesh Agarkar and Gopal Krishna Gokhale), critics from below persistently identified Brahmins and the history of Brahminical oppression as coterminous with traditional Hinduism in wholesale fashion.

To be clear, Dabholkar does not explicitly engage in contemporary debates about politics, religion, and social reform in the *Satcarita*. However, hagiography – like any act of storytelling – is an activity that involves the selective assemblage of events and episodes in the construction of a saint's life story. It is a narrative performance, each instantiation of which does not encapsulate or exhaust the story's fullness. Dabholkar knows this, too. In the second chapter of the *Satcarita*, he likens himself to a tiny *ṭiṭvī* bird on the vast ocean of Sai Baba's life story (*caritra*), an author/bird incapable of

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<sup>51</sup> For more on Phule and the Satya Shodhak Samaj, see O'Hanlon's *Caste, Conflict, and Ideology* (1985), as well as Gail Omvedt, *Cultural Revolt in a Colonial Society: The Non-Brahman Movement in Western India, 1873-1930*. (Bombay: Scientific Socialist Educational Trust, 1976).

getting to the bottom of the whole story/ocean.<sup>52</sup> Dabholkar writes further: “The *caritra* of Sai is deep (*agādh*), and it is impossible to describe it in one telling (*varṇan*). So, one should tell the story [to the best of one’s ability] and be content with it.”<sup>53</sup> This statement, I propose, is useful for understanding not only the *Satcarita* but the history of the development of the Shirdi Sai Baba hagiographic tradition. While some texts indubitably receive more veneration by Sai Baba devotees (e.g., Dabholkar’s *Satcarita* vis-à-vis the works of Das Ganu Maharaj), even the author of the most reputed hagiographic text humbly acknowledges its inability to plumb the depths and comprehend the entirety of the enigmatic saint’s life story. In these verses, Dabholkar sanctions the production of other hagiographic works by other hagiographers who will also tell the story to the best of their abilities. From its inception, the Shirdi Sai Baba hagiographic tradition thus presents itself as something organic and accumulative, and Sai Baba as someone capable of being (re)imagined and (re)constructed by posterity.

To train our focus back onto Dabholkar and his *Satcarita*, the acknowledgement that hagiography is reiterative should alert scholars to engage the content of each hagiographic account with a healthy hermeneutics of suspicion – or rather, with an inquisitiveness to explore why certain stories and patterns within those stories make their way into the *Satcarita*. For instance, Dabholkar writes in the *Satcarita* that people of “all castes and creeds” visited Shirdi Sai Baba and sought his blessings, an assertion found in almost every contemporary book, film, and website on Sai Baba.<sup>54</sup> The number of not

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<sup>52</sup> Dabholkar, *ŚSSC*, 2:34 *sāi-caritra mahāsāgar / ananta apār ratnākar / mī ṭiṭvī to ritā karaṇār / ghaḍaṇār hem kaisenī*.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:35 *taiseṁ sāiṅcem caritra gahan / aśakya kadhīmhi sāṅga varṇan / mhaṇūni karavel tem kathan / teṅeñci samādhān mānāvem*.

<sup>54</sup> Here, Dabholkar uses the Marathi idiom *aṭharā pagaḍ jāṭī*, which Molesworth defines as “a comprehensive term for the people” (13).

only low-caste but non-Brahmin devotees in the *Satcarita*, however, is miniscule with respect to the number of stories featuring encounters between Sai Baba and Brahmins, many of which have been detailed in this chapter. This disparity is evident in other early hagiographic sources, too.<sup>55</sup> Given that a Brahmin atop the social hierarchy has the most to lose in becoming a devotee of a casteless saint proffering an egalitarian vision of religion and society, we can begin to see that these stories are not just examples of Sai Baba transforming people's hearts through miraculous means. They are also stories that demonstrate how Brahmins can fit into social contexts in which their privileged birth is more of a liability than an asset, something that warrants scrutiny and criticism.

The simplest explanation is that Dabholkar, a Brahmin, has assembled his hagiographic account of Shirdi Sai Baba with many episodes involving fellow Brahmins who, like himself, have scrutinized their Brahminhood as part of their transformation into a Sai Baba devotee. In this interpretive framework, one concludes that Brahmins tend to write about Brahmins. To further strengthen the point of similarity between Dabholkar's self-criticism of his Brahminhood and the other stories in the *Satcarita* in which Sai Baba criticizes Brahminhood, one might examine the *Satcarita* in light of what Christian Novetzke calls the "Brahminical construction of anti-Brahminism." Novetzke identifies the act of Brahmins writing about and critiquing other Brahmins as a rhetorical strategy used to carve out a place for Brahmins in typically non-Brahminical spaces and contexts, like devotion to a *bhakti* saint. Even before the advent of British rule in India, Novetzke argues that Brahmins successfully transferred their authority as knowledge specialists and

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<sup>55</sup> Out of the seventy-nine testimonies collected by Narasimhaswami in *Devotees' Experiences of Sri Sai Baba* (1940), twenty-three (29%) are explicitly identified as Brahmins. Including those with Brahmin surnames like L.B. Joshi and Minathai Kulvalekar who are not identified as "Brahmin" raises the number to nearly 40 percent.

literati to their public performance of *bhakti* through *kīrtans* and *tamāshas*. To enter socially and culturally heterogenous public settings, Brahmins sympathetic to self-criticism “offered a ‘double,’ a discursively constructed ‘Brahmin,’ thus deflecting or diffusing criticism, and enabling the Brahmin performer or composer to maintain a position of importance as a Brahmin in the world of *bhakti* and the larger premodern public sphere.”<sup>56</sup>

Similarly, Patton Burchett reminds us to think of hagiography not as a static instantiation of storytelling but as a product of particular authors and their particular agendas underwriting the telling of a saint’s life. Burchett examines several hagiographies of “untouchable” *bhakti* saints written by Brahmin hagiographers in various regions and centuries during India’s long medieval period, and he suggests that while some Brahmin hagiographers were indeed open to critiques of Brahminhood, they simultaneously portrayed “untouchability” as something that can be transcended, thereby making an “untouchable” saint “like a Brahmin through the power of devotion.”<sup>57</sup> For example, in Mahipati’s eighteenth-century *Bhaktavijay*, we find a story about temple entry and Chokhamela, a fourteenth-century Varkari saint who was a Mahar. The

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<sup>56</sup> Christian Novetzke, “The Brahmin Double: The Brahminical Construction of Anti-Brahminism and Anti-Caste Sentiment in the Religious Cultures of Precolonial Maharashtra,” *South Asian History and Culture* 2, no. 2 (April 2011): 232. Novetzke finds evidence of the “Brahmin double,” for example, in the hagiographic accounts of the thirteenth-century poet-saint Jnaneshwar, which were purportedly authored by the saint’s contemporary and friend, Namdev. In these accounts, Jnaneshwar and his siblings have been harassed for having a father who violated his ascetic vows (*sannyās*) by having children. After the parents’ suicide, Jnaneshwar and company travel to Paithan, the seat of Brahminical power, to petition for the return of their family’s reputation as pure and righteous Brahmins. In Namdev’s account of what happens in the assembly of religious leaders in Paithan, Jnaneshwar insists that God permeates all living beings without exception, and when one of the Brahmins challenges the boy to prove his point, he makes a nearby buffalo recite the Vedas with proper Sanskrit intonation. The Brahmins of Paithan apologize and give Jnaneshwar the requisite *śuddhipatra*, or letter of purity, attesting to his legitimate Brahminhood. Novetzke sees the Jnaneshwar who emerges victorious from Paithan as a different kind of Brahmin – a “vernacularized” Brahmin who is a friend to all, Brahmin and non-Brahmin, and who proceeds to use the regional language Marathi to make the *Bhagavad Gītā* available to non-Sanskrit audiences.

<sup>57</sup> Burchett, “Bhakti Rhetoric,” 122.

Brahmin caretakers of the Vithoba temple in Pandharpur initially prohibit Chokhamela from entering, but the head priest experiences a miraculous confirmation of the god Vithoba's affection for the saint. The "untouchable" saint crosses the temple's threshold – but he is led by the hand of the newly enlightened Brahmin.<sup>58</sup> Burchett concludes that the persistence of caste-based discrimination, which includes the issue of temple entry/prohibition, in modern India is not a failure of putting the devotional ethos of *bhakti* into practice. Rather, he argues that the "messages in these hagiographies are themselves far less democratizing and socially progressive than they might at first appear."<sup>59</sup>

One might see Burchett's work as a response to the question posed by David Lorenzen with regard to the social ideology of the Varkari movement, a tradition of singer-saints in Maharashtra that emphasizes the power of devotional religion (i.e., *bhakti*) to unite people across boundaries, such as gender, caste, and sectarian affiliation. Indeed, the movement's four most prominent saints reflect the movement's diversity of castes: Jnaneshar and Eknath, two Brahmins; Namdev the tailor/Shimpi; and Tukaram, the agriculturalist/Kunbi. However, Lorenzen further notes that a broader purview of twenty-one Varkari saints and singers reveals a much more Brahminical profile of sainthood: ten Brahmins and eleven non-Brahmins, including two of ambiguous

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 122-123. Here, Burchett draws from Zelliott and Punekar's translation of the *Bhaktavijay*. See Eleanor Zelliott and Rohini Mokashi-Punekar, *Untouchable Saints: An Indian Phenomenon* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2005), 189-194.

<sup>59</sup> Burchett, "Bhakti Rhetoric," 116. For similar studies on *bhakti* and caste critique, see Karen Pechilis, *The Embodiment of Bhakti* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); David Lorenzen, "The Social Ideologies of Hagiography: Sankara, Tukaram, and Kabir," in *Religion and Society in Maharashtra*, eds. Milton Israel and N.K. Wagle (Toronto: University of Toronto, Centre for South Asian Studies, 1987), 92-114. Pechilis notes the impossibilities of low-caste and Dalit peoples to rise above their social status through *bhakti*, while Lorenzen argues that the opposition to caste-based discrimination in Vaishnava *bhakti* movements and the Kabir and Ravidas communities is more a position in ideology than a practice in reality.

provenance.<sup>60</sup> Consequently, Lorenzen pointedly asks: “Is the movement better characterized as the product of a great upsurge of devotional religion among the common people of Maharashtra, or as the product of an effort of the upper castes, specifically the Brahmins, to broaden their base of social support through religious reform ‘from above?’”<sup>61</sup> It seems from the works of Burchett and Novetzke that the involvement of Brahmins in perpetuating the lives and legacies of saints, particularly non-Brahmin *bhakti* saints, points toward the second part of Lorenzen’s question – a hermeneutics of suspicion that highlights how Brahmins have developed strategies for inserting themselves into spaces and contexts where they would be otherwise marginalized.

It is significant that Lorenzen’s question about the Varkari movement’s social ideology is “either/or.” Such phrasing implies that only one of the two possibilities is correct, or at least that one is more correct than the other. Toward the end his article, Burchett picks up on this hermeneutical exercise when he addresses the “thorny” issue of authorial intention.<sup>62</sup> He clarifies that his goal is not to explain why *bhakti* hagiography conveys mixed messages regarding the ultimate importance of caste but to show that these contradictions exist and to suggest why caste remains relevant in social praxis in contemporary South Asia despite centuries-old traditions of *bhakti* hagiography. Yet the question persists: Why are there mixed messages in Brahmin-authored *bhakti* hagiography? Burchett entertains two scenarios. On one hand, perhaps Brahmin hagiographers were genuine in their efforts to extend their Brahminhood to *bhakti* saints and other communities, thereby blurring the boundary between spiritual and sociological

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<sup>60</sup> G.A. Deleury, *The Cult of Viṭhobā* (Poona: Deccan College, Postgraduate and Research Institute, 1960), 222. Cited in Lorenzen, “The Social Ideologies of Hagiography,” 98.

<sup>61</sup> Lorenzen, “The Social Ideologies of Hagiography,” 127.

<sup>62</sup> Burchett, “Bhakti Rhetoric,” 131-132.

concepts of Brahminhood. On the other hand, there is the view supported by scholars like Ranajit Guha that *bhakti* is an “ideology of subordination”<sup>63</sup> that seemingly valorizes the experiences of low-caste saints but actually reinscribes the power and privilege of the Brahminical elite. Burchett concludes by asserting what most well-reasoning scholars will assert when confronted with two likely possibilities: “The historical reality – if such a thing exists – almost certainly lies somewhere in between the two poles of interpretation.”<sup>64</sup>

In his recent intellectual history of the idea of the “*bhakti* movement,” John Stratton Hawley addresses the issue of Brahmins and their intentionality contexts in similar fashion:

The *bhakti* mirror shows Brahmanical Hinduism in a cruel light – or rather, some would say, shows it for the cruel thing it actually is. No wonder, then, that on more than one occasion the servants of Brahmanical religion have reached for that *bhakti* mirror and tried to change its angle of vision, co-opting *bhakti* and making it their own. And yet, there is more to the story than co-optation. Other Brahmin actors felt the *bhakti* impulse deeply enough to train its mirror willingly on the regressive habits associated with the class to which they themselves belonged.<sup>65</sup>

Hawley’s interpretive frame skillfully engages the hermeneutics of suspicion regarding how Brahmins asserted themselves in non-Brahminical contexts (e.g., *bhakti* egalitarianism), while also acknowledging that many Brahmins did not like their reflections in the “*bhakti* mirror.” In reading against the grain of these miracle stories in the *Satcarita*, I do not intend to close off the possibility that they reflect the genuine experiences of devotees, Brahmin or otherwise, who came into contact with Shirdi Sai

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<sup>63</sup> Ranajit Guha, *Dominance without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 54.

<sup>64</sup> Burchett, “*Bhakti* Rhetoric,” 132.

<sup>65</sup> Hawley, *A Storm of Songs*, 7.



Baba. Moreover, I also do not wish to preclude the possibility that these stories recorded in the *Satcarita* can generate similar experiences of self-reflection on the “regressive habits” of individuals, Brahmin or otherwise. In doing so, I aim to follow Hawley in dealing with the thorniness of authorial intention regarding the Shirdi Sai Baba hagiographic tradition by engaging in the hermeneutics of suspicion that is nonetheless open to a hermeneutics of intersubjectivity that maps onto the ever-new, ever-fresh relationships between saints and their devotees, between texts and their audiences.<sup>66</sup>

In other words, my interpretive frame is that we can see Sai Baba’s interactions with Mooley, the doctor, and other Brahmins as instantiations of the transformative effects that Sai Baba has on people’s hearts and the miraculous lengths to which the saint goes to make skeptics see the error of their ways. This is one dimension of Shirdi Sai Baba miracle stories. To balance this phenomenological approach to Sai Baba’s encounters with Brahmins, the work of scholars of South Asian hagiographic traditions like Novetzke, Burchett, Lorenzen, Hawley, and others encourage us to see that these stories – like any and all stories – are not simply what they seem to be about, viz. miraculous visions that transform proud Brahmins into devotees and tests of loyalty to Sai Baba’s commands that Brahmin devotees pass with flying colors. More than the content of the stories in the *Satcarita*, we know that the text’s author is a Brahmin who writes about many other Brahmins. We know that these Brahmins, including the author, come from cities where the social and intellectual climate was thick with anti-Brahmin discourse. And we know that these stories in the *Satcarita* criticize Brahminhood but in a

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<sup>66</sup> See Rita D. Sharma, “A Hermeneutics of Intersubjectivity,” in *Woman and Goddess in Hinduism: Representations and Re-envisionings*, eds. Rita D. Sharma and Tracy Pintchman (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 1-16.

much softer way than Phule, Ambedkar, and other Dalit social activists. I suggest that the Brahmin hagiographer Dabholkar writes the *Satcarita* with numerous encounters between Sai Baba and Brahmin devotees as a response to the anti-Brahmin sentiment circulating throughout colonial Indian society. That being the case, the most generous reading of Dabholkar is to view him as an “elite reformer,” which is not unlike what has been said of his predecessor Mahipati.<sup>67</sup>

In sum, the miraculous visions of Mooley and the doctor, the tests of loyalty endured by Dixit and Kelkar, and the self-reflections of Dabholkar narrating these encounters reveal Shirdi Sai Baba’s methods of scrutinizing Brahminhood. The examples of Mooley and the doctor demonstrate how Shirdi Sai Baba uses miracles to transform proud, purity-minded Brahmins into epistemologically upgraded versions of themselves (i.e., their realization that a Muslim-looking holy man is non-different from Hindu religious figures). But I also contend that the Baba-Brahmin encounters are also models showing other Brahmins – those who might read or hear these stories recorded in the *Satcarita* – that Brahminhood can be interrogated and that the undesirable facets of Brahminhood can be subtracted by the miracle-working Shirdi Sai Baba. The *Satcarita*’s lightly crafted anti-Brahmin sentiment thus serves a particular moral agenda, which emphasizes the individual’s moral and spiritual rehabilitation through Sai Baba and shows that a change of heart is possible for everyone, including representatives of religious power and authority. As we now turn to the hagiographic film, or hagiopic,

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<sup>67</sup> Lorenzen, “The Social Ideologies of Hagiography,” 132. See also Eleanor Zelliot, “Chokhamela and Eknath: Two *Bhakti* Modes of Legitimacy for Modern Change,” in *Tradition and Modernity in Bhakti Movements*, ed. Jayant Lele (Leiden: Brill, 1981), 136-156.

*Shirdi ke Sai Baba*, we will find new instances of this message – that the Brahmin “bad” guys are never beyond redemption.

### **Brahmin Villains in Bhushan’s *Shirdi ke Sai Baba***

Recall that the first hagiographic film, or hagiopic, in Hindi that tells the saint’s story to India’s movie-going public is *Shirdi ke Sai Baba*, which was directed by Ashok Bhushan and released in 1977.<sup>68</sup> Notably, Bhushan’s hagiopic does not highlight many stories involving Sai Baba’s Brahmin devotees who are mentioned in Dabholkar’s *Satcarita*. In the film, the most prominent characters with a prior basis in hagiographic tradition are the caretaker of Shirdi’s Khandoba temple Mhalsapati and two of Sai Baba’s earliest devotees, Tatyapa Patil and his mother Bayjabai. Meanwhile, Brahmins like Madhavrao Deshpande (“Shyama”) and H.S. Dixit (“Kaka”) have much less screen time, while the most prominent and influential Brahmin devotees only appear in cameos: N.G. Chandorkar, who stands beside his daughter Mina as she receives the saint’s sacred ash (*udī*) that protects her during a life-threatening childbirth; and G.R. Dabholkar, whose brief scene depicts the saint giving him permission to write the *Satcarita*. The one exception is Das Ganu Maharaj, whose tale of transformation from skeptical police constable to hagiographer and devotee undergoes reconstruction in Bhushan’s film vis-à-vis the devotional testimony provided in *Devotees’ Experiences* (see Chapter 2). In the film, colonial officials dispatch Das Ganu to suss out whether or not Sai Baba is a threat to local peace and stability. Das Ganu’s plan is to expose the saint as an ordinary human being with ordinary temptations, and his means to do so is a dancing girl. The plan,

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<sup>68</sup> See Chapter 4 for further introductory information about Bhushan’s hagiographic film *Shirdi ke Sai Baba*.

however, fails when Sai Baba successfully “converts” the girl into a devotee by inspiring her to take up nobler, less sinful pursuits. Sai Baba then asks Das Ganu to do the same, and the constable experiences his breakthrough up on seeing streams of water miraculously flowing from the saint’s feet.

Although there is a dearth of Brahmins with a prior basis in hagiographic tradition in *Shirdi ke Sai Baba*, the film’s director Ashok Bhushan taps into the precedent set in the *Satcarita* to create a new version of the conflict between Sai Baba and proud Brahmins fixated on their purity. Also recall that one of the particularly interesting features of this hagiographic film is its disclaimer, which foreshadows the insertion of “new characters (*nae nām*) and new issues (*naī bāteñ*)” into the film’s presentation of Sai Baba’s life story as a means to convey the saint’s main message to humanity, viz. religious inclusivity.<sup>69</sup> Two of the film’s “new characters” are the saint’s primary antagonists, both of whom are Brahmins: a village priest, or *paṇḍit*, named Mangloo and an apothecary, or *vaidya*, named Kulkarni.

In addition to being stereotypically proud and purity-minded, these “bad” Brahmins are much more villainous than anyone in the *Satcarita*. Mangloo and Kulkarni hate Sai Baba because he has hurt their livelihoods. Mangloo is upset because people are seeking Sai Baba’s blessings instead of coming to him to perform religious rituals.

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<sup>69</sup> The fact that hagiographic traditions evolve over time as hagiographers “emplot” – to borrow phrasing of historiographer Hayden White – their hagiographic subjects in new narratives is not terribly “new” to the wider field of sainthood studies, especially in the study of South Asia. For example, W.H. McLeod has shown that a verse attributed to Guru Nanak in the *Ādi Granth* gives rise to a new figure who appears in later hagiographic literature: “They who fraternize with merchants (*kirārā*) squander their affection. Foolish one (*mūliā*)! None knows whence Death shall come.” McLeod explains that Sikh commentators developed an “anecdote” to contextualize this verse, one that involves an encounter between Nanak and Mula the Khatri, that is, Mula of the shopkeeper caste who once refused to give alms to the guru and subsequently died from a fatal disease. See W.H. McLeod, *Early Sikh Tradition: A Study of the Janam-sākhīs* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 121.

Kulkarni, who also works as the village doctor, is angry because people are using the sacred ash from the fire kept in Sai Baba's mosque instead of his herbal concoctions. What arises, then, is a Baba-Brahmin conflict informed by competing "products" in the village's marketplace of spiritual wares: a saint's blessings versus a Brahmin's ritual, and a saint's sacred ash versus a Brahmin's medicine.

As a result, Mangloo and Kulkarni devise a number of plans to defame their competitor in the marketplace of spiritual wares in Shirdi. They prevent Sai Baba from receiving the oil necessary for the lamps in his mosque, but the saint nonetheless lights the lamps with consecrated water in perhaps his most well-known miraculous feat. Later, the Brahmins recruit an angry Shaiva ascetic to confront Sai Baba, but the ascetic becomes a devotee after a miraculous vision convinces him of the saint's divinity. Mangloo and Kulkarni even attempt to kill Sai Baba by hiding a cobra in a basket that they give to the saint on the pretense that it contains flowers. But when the saint reaches inside, he pulls out a garland of jasmines. In the end, as we will see, Kulkarni experiences and Mangloo witnesses the saint's miraculous power, which motivates them to ask forgiveness from the saint and join the devotional community. Bhushan's hagiopic thus mirrors what happens in extant hagiographic tradition with regard to the resolution of this conflict of religious authorities.

Neither of these Brahmins with their malevolent characterizations appears in Dabholkar's *Satcarita*, Das Ganu's *Bhaktalīlāmṛt*, Narasimhaswami's *Life of Sai Baba*, or other hagiographic sources preceding the film's 1977 release. This is one of the key features of Bhushan's film – the way it "emplots," to borrow terminology from Hayden White, new Brahmin antagonists in the life story of Shirdi Sai Baba. One might theorize

that Bhushan inserts these two new characters in Sai Baba’s life story to provide some narrative continuity. The encounters between Sai Baba and these “bad” Brahmins certainly intensify as the latter’s schemes become more malicious, ultimately leading to the resolution one should expect: a miraculous moment that transforms the “bad” Brahmins into Sai Baba devotees. But I propose that these Brahmin “bad” guys are more than narrative devices utilized to build drama. They are also the foils invented by the filmmaker-as-hagiographer to add new dimensions to Sai Baba’s legacy, for example, as a saint who opposes caste-based discrimination.

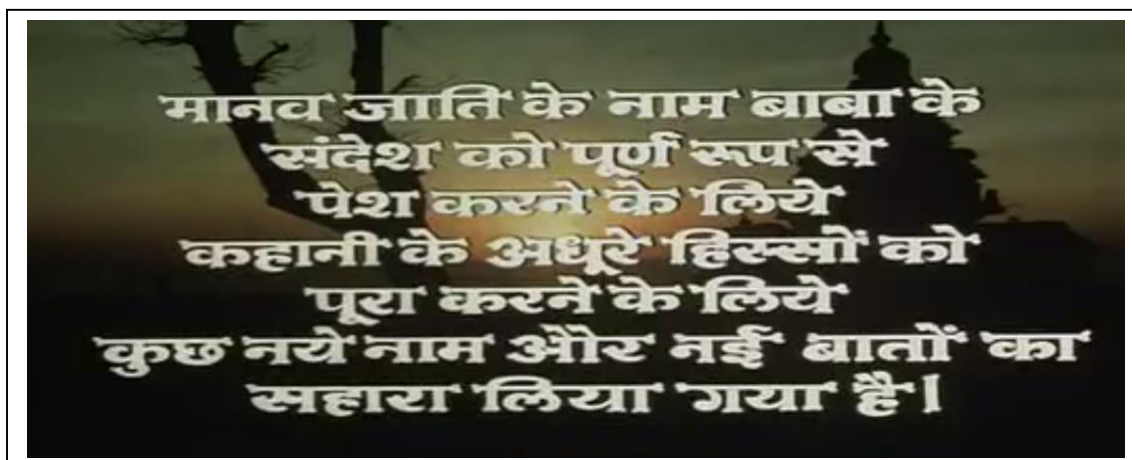


Fig. 7.2 – The disclaimer at the start of *Shirdi ke Sai Baba*: “In order to properly disseminate Baba’s message to all of humanity, [this film] has taken recourse to some new characters (*nae nām*) and new issues (*naī bāteñ*) to round out the story [of Sai Baba].” Source: *Shirdi ke Sai Baba*, dir. Ashok Bhushan.



Fig. 7.3 – Two of the “new characters” added to Sai Baba’s life story in Bhushan’s film *Shirdi ke Sai Baba*: the Brahmin villains Kulkarni (left) and Mangloo (right). Source: *Shirdi ke Sai Baba*, dir. Ashok Bhushan.

#### a. Sai Baba Summons Khandoba and Redefines Untouchability

Consider one scene early in the film’s presentation of Sai Baba’s life story that is entirely original to Bhushan’s film. Here, there are four characters: Sai Baba, the chauvinistic priest Mangloo, and two “untouchables,” Ramiya and his young daughter Vidya. (By placing in quotations the word “untouchable,” I indicate that this is how Ramiya and Vidya are identified in the film). In the previous scene, after curing Ramiya’s illness brought on by alcoholism, Sai Baba tells the father and daughter to offer coconut and flowers at the Khandoba temple in Shirdi, a gesture of gratitude for the divine

intervention that saved his life.<sup>70</sup> When the “untouchables” go to the temple, Mangloo angrily shoos them away, worried that their polluting presence will defile sacred space. He mockingly suggests that they go to the local “miracle-working guy” (*vo camatkārī puruṣ*) and ask him to summon the god.

Despondent, Ramiya and Vidya visit Sai Baba, who tells them to place their offerings on the ground alongside the wall of his dilapidated mosque. The father and daughter close their eyes, and their prayers are answered when they see the face of the god Khandoba in the coconut’s husk. This miraculous manifestation circumvents the Brahminical regulation on temple entry enforced by Mangloo. Even though the “untouchables” are not allowed to go to the god, the god comes to them through the intermediary agency of a miracle engineered by Sai Baba. Furthermore, this scene does what the *Satcarita* does not. It brings the issue of temple entry into Sai Baba’s social ideology as an issue to which he responds. However, one cannot overlook the depiction of the saint approaching the issue from the side. After all, we never see Ramiya and Vidya being allowed to go inside the temple. We also do not see Mhalsapati, the Khandoba temple’s caretaker and a member of goldsmith/Sonar caste. His absence does not detract from the scene’s main purpose, which is to show Sai Baba’s ingenuity in creating a loophole for his devotees around Mangloo’s prejudice

An interesting conversation also takes place just before Sai Baba enables his petitioners to see their deity. Sai Baba asks Ramiya and Vidya why they have been

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<sup>70</sup> Khandoba is a horse-riding incarnation of the Hindu god Shiva and a popular folk deity in Maharashtra. Historical and contemporary worship of Shirdi Sai Baba has many Shaiva overtones like, for example, the manner of addressing the saint as “Sai Nāth” and the presence of sacred ash, a substance associated with Shaiva ascetics. Moreover, one of the most common offerings to Khandoba is turmeric, a substance with numerous health benefits. The common Shaiva link and the association between Khandoba and the curative power of turmeric helps contextualize why Sai Baba instructs Ramiya to make offerings at the Khandoba temple in Shirdi after being cured by Sai Baba’s *udī*.



prohibited from entering the Khandoba temple, and Vidya responds that it is because people call them “untouchable” (*achūt*). Sai Baba gently explains to the young girl that they do so because “they cannot serve humanity the way you do. And in the Lord’s eyes, the one [who] serves humanity is so great that a common person cannot even touch him. That is why they call you untouchable.”<sup>71</sup> In short, Sai Baba reframes the very real problem of casteism and its effects on low-caste communities in Indian society as a virtue that valorizes these communities above others. This dialogue attributed to Sai Baba, which, to reiterate, is original to Bhushan’s hagiopic, represents Sai Baba as an ally of “untouchables,” both of whom receive scorn from Brahmins. Whether or not actual “untouchables” – or rather, Dalits – will find this argument convincing is an entirely separate matter. It suffices to say that many Dalits will rightly regard such spiritualized notions of “untouchability” as both disingenuous and dismissive of their social realities, as well as the history of caste-based oppression. Just as this film shows Sai Baba’s miracle bypassing the issue of caste and temple entry, so too do we see Sai Baba in his exchange with Vidya offering a sympathetic redefinition of “untouchability” instead of confronting caste-based oppression in a more assertive manner.

It is beyond the scope of this chapter to establish a direct link between Bhushan’s 1977 hagiopic and subsequent hagiographic films on Shirdi Sai Baba, other than noting the popularity of the former certainly influenced the emergence of the latter. Nonetheless, another comparative approach considers the similarity of content in different

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<sup>71</sup> The transliterated text of Sai Baba’s dialogue is: “*Tum jaise mānav sevā ve kar nahīn sakte. aur bhagvān kī nazaron meñ mānav sevā karnevālā itnā ūñcā hotā hai jise ām ādmī chū nahīn sakte. isīliye ve log tumheñ achūt kahte haiñ.*” For more on the history of recovered meanings of *acchūt*, see Ramnarayan S. Rawat, *Untouchability Reconsidered: Chamars and Dalit History in North India* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011).

hagiographic films, and on this latter note, we find that one of these subsequent hagiographic films – Deepak Balraj Vij’s *Shirdi Saibaba* (2001) – follows Bhushan’s emplotment of “untouchables” in the life story of Shirdi Sai Baba. Among other innovations to the saint’s story as it is told in Vij’s film, one scene features Sai Baba alongside a girl named Jipri, who tells the saint to stay away from her because she is “untouchable” (*achūt*). With his arm around the girl’s shoulder and looking straight ahead, as if speaking to the film’s audience, Sai Baba reframes the condition that makes one untouchable: “It is not by birth but rather according to one’s deeds that one is untouchable” (*koi bhī insān janm se nahīn karm se achūt hotā hai*). Furthermore, this hagiopic shows Sai Baba actively transgressing ritual purity taboos by drinking water from Jipri’s water bucket, despite her initial protests. Vij’s *Shirdi Saibaba* thus inherits the trend initiated several decades prior in Bhushan’s *Shirdi ke Sai Baba* – the portrayal of Sai Baba as an opponent of caste-based discrimination and a friend of the oppressed who reinterprets “untouchability” as a positively valued quality (as in Bhushan’s film) or a state of being theoretically applicable to everyone instead of a marginalized segment of the social hierarchy (as in Vij’s film).

#### **b. Sai Baba Appears as Krishna to a Shaivite Ascetic**

Another new antagonist brought to life in Bhushan’s *Shirdi ke Sai Baba* is a *triśul*-carrying Shaiva ascetic named Somdev who has come to Shirdi after touring various sacred sites (e.g., Rishikesh, Badrinath, Kedarnath). Upon arrival, Somdev sees Sai Baba and his devotees circumambulating the village and singing a devotional song that praises the saint as a form of the god Shiva – Sai Nath, an earthly incarnation of Bholenath. As

Somdev watches disapprovingly, the manipulative Mangloo and Kulkarni encourage him to confront Sai Baba.

That night, Somdev storms into Sai Baba's mosque and angrily accuses him of self-aggrandizement. Sai Baba responds by revealing intimate knowledge of Somdev's checkered past: his decision to flee to the mountains after his wife's death and abandon his children. These accusations of weakness of character further enrage Somdev, as he repeats that the mosque-dwelling saint is the truly egotistical one, a fraud posing as a simple holy man and duping gullible villagers into worshipping him. Sai Baba's gentle riposte is to invoke his trademark aphorism, "Allah Malik" (God is King) and "Allah *bhalā karegā*" (God will make it all right). The saint then strikes the ground with his walking stick, which causes smoke to emerge from the mosque's floor. Out of the haze, the Shaiva ascetic Somdev sees alternating kaleidoscopic images of Sai Baba and Krishna – a cinematographic effect that creates the impression that the two are one in the same. This miraculous vision, which resembles the visions of Mooley and the doctor described in the *Satcarita*, makes Somdev fall to the ground, saying: "Forgive me, Baba, forgive me" (*kṣmā kījiye, bābā, kṣmā kījiye*).

The filmmaker's decision to portray a Shaiva ascetic having a miraculous vision of Sai Baba as Krishna is indeed noteworthy. One might expect Sai Baba to take the form of Shiva or a deity associated with Shaiva mythology (e.g., Khandoba). I would suggest, however, that this encounter between Vaishnava god and Shaiva ascetic, which is engineered through the miracle-working Sai Baba, underscores the trans-sectarian nature of Shirdi Sai Baba's sainthood. Also, this scene depicts Sai Baba's victory over another type of antagonist. While the film does not explicitly identify Somdev as a Brahminical

figure, he certainly symbolizes another generalized field of religious power and authority: the ascetic – the *sādhū* or *sannyāsin* – who has withdrawn from society, mastered the senses and religious scriptures, and acquired a vast store of merit, or *punya*, through practices like fasting and pilgrimage. Traditionally, the figure of the ascetic has been a major point of criticism in devotional traditions in South Asia, especially in the poetry attributed to *bhakti* saints like Kabir (15<sup>th</sup> c.) and Tukaram (17<sup>th</sup> c.). For example, poems attributed to Kabir criticize yogis, like “creeping creatures,” inevitably follow their desires and remain tied to the world of pleasure.<sup>72</sup> In Bhushan’s *Shirdi ke Sai Baba*, the addition of the Baba-Somdev encounter thus perpetuates the criticism of the ascetic that is common to many South Asian hagiographic traditions, but Bhushan also innovates upon this well-established theme. Here, Sai Baba’s miracle depicts the harmonization of Shaiva and Vaishnava figures, and contributes to the image of Sai Baba as a saint capable of instigating a profound transformation in people mired in egotistical thinking.

### c. Sai Baba Resurrects His Brahmin Antagonist

The final scene to bring to consideration is the turning point for the film’s “bad” Brahmins, Mangloo and Kulkarni. Remember that their most malicious scheme involves putting a cobra in a basket and sending it to Sai Baba with the pretense that it contains flowers. After the saint indeed pulls flowers out of the basket, Mangloo and Kulkarni return to the snake vendor to get their money back. However, they are stunned to find that every basket in the store is now full of flowers. When Kulkarni begins to utter a curse on the vendor, the garland in his hand turns into a cobra, which proceeds to chase the villains

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<sup>72</sup> Kabir, *The Bijak of Kabir*, trans. Linda Hess and Shukdeo Singh (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 75.

around the village in comedic fashion. Then, the mood darkens when it fatally bites Kulkarni on the foot.

Kulkarni's wife, an ardent believer in Sai Baba's miraculous powers, begs the saint to bring her husband back to life. He initially refuses, saying that there is nothing he can do: "The cycle of *karma* cannot be avoided" (*karm-gati ṭālī nahīn jātī*). Mrs. Kulkarni persists in imploring for divine intervention because he is the only one with the power to revive the dead. Again, Sai Baba refuses and says that he has no such power because "Baba is under the control of his devotees" (*bābā bhaktoṅ ke bas meṅ hai*). This exchange, however, is a rhetorical setup to relay the real message that in the end, Sai Baba never leaves his petitioners without some sort of recourse. He tells Mrs. Kulkarni: "If you have such staunch belief in your devotion, then awaken the strength of your inner soul (*antarśakti*) to such a height that you are able to attain whatever you want."<sup>73</sup> Here, the individual simply needs to recognize that she has the power to use prayer focused on Sai Baba to bring about what she wants.

Sai Baba's statement about marshalling internal resources to affect external realities segues into the film's final song, a devotional number in which the refrain addresses Sai Baba as the "savior of the helpless" (*dukhiyoṅ ke dātā*). Whereas the previous scenes have already linked Sai Baba with Khandoba and Krishna, the cinematography in this scene superimposes Sai Baba's face on an image of Shiva, one of the Hindu deities associated with protection from poisons. The intensifying pace of the music and singing parallels Mrs. Kulkarni's fervent prayers for sacred ash from Sai

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<sup>73</sup> This translation comes from the film's subtitles, which glosses *antarśakti* – literally "inner strength" – as "soul." In transliterated Hindi, Sai Baba says: "Aur agar tumheṅ apnī bhakti par itnā viśvās hai, to apnī antarśakti itnā jagṛt karo ki jo cāho vahī ho."

Baba's *dhunī* to become the life-restoring herb, *sañjīvanī*. On screen, we see the visible result of Mrs. Kulkarni's singing, as the snake's venom is forced out of the wound on her husband's foot. At the crescendo, Kulkarni opens his eyes in a miraculous moment of resurrection. For the Brahmins, their doubt gives way to devotion and their enmity transforms into supplication, as they clutch Sai Baba's feet. Mangloo also smears the saint's sacred ash on his forehead in a visible act of contrition.

In the following scene, we see post-resurrection Kulkarni refusing to start a big feast "until my Sai arrives." An old man gets in the way of his preparations, and he crudely shoos him away. When the old man turns around and looks back at Kulkarni, we – the audience – see that it is Sai Baba, simply shaking his head with a slight smile on his face, as if to acknowledge that old habits are hard to change. This short, simple interaction represents the overall tone and tact of Sai Baba's encounters with Brahmins in hagiographic text and film. Indeed, we see that Dabholkar's *Satcarita* and Bhushan's *Shirdi ke Sai Baba* highlight stories that critique the stereotypical "bad" Brahmin who is proud, purity-minded, and capable of villainous actions. But it is important to contextualize this critique as part of the construction of Sai Baba as a saint through whom the problematic segments of society can be cleansed of their prejudices – or, in the case of Kulkarni and those like him, that the "bad" guys can be made better, if not yet entirely "good," devotees.

#### **d. Sai Baba and the Politics of Caste Critique in Bhushan's Hagiopic**

In citing the French film director Abel Gance, the philosopher and critic Walter Benjamin agreed that the emergence of film as a new medium of storytelling would lead to the "celluloid resurrection" of our age-old mythologies, legends, and other stories in new and

innovative ways.<sup>74</sup> With an eye turned toward many outlets for “sacred seeing” (*darśan*) in the history of Indian religious traditions, Phillip Lutgendorf finds the Benjamin-Gance hypothesis applicable to South Asia’s “heroes and heroines [who have been] indeed eagerly waiting cinematic reincarnation.”<sup>75</sup> To these scholarly observations regarding cinema’s ability to make sacred stories anew, one might add that the general trend in postmodern scholarship across fields and disciplines highlights multiplicity instead of singularity, thereby giving us many resurrections and reincarnations for a single story or figure. Even a casual survey of popular films about a major religious figure (e.g., Jewison’s *Jesus Christ, Superstar*; Scorsese’s *The Last Temptation of Christ*; Gibson’s *The Passion*) will reveal the existence of multiple Jesuses, who have resonated with different audiences and reflected different filmmakers’ approaches to theological matters, such as divinity and suffering. In the academic study of religion, this type of work has been done on various religious figures like Jesus (Prothero 2003), the Prophet Muhammad (Ali 2014), the “Scientific Buddha” (Lopez 2012), Swami Rama Tirtha (Rinehart 1999), and medieval north Indian *bhakti* saints like Kabir, Mirabai, and Surdas (Hawley 2005). However, it has not yet been done on Shirdi Sai Baba, a relatively recent figure in historical memory whose hagiographic tradition is nonetheless already populated with different re-constructions of his life and legacy – or, in other words, with many Sai Babas.

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<sup>74</sup> Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version,” in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings* Vol. 3, eds. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 104.

<sup>75</sup> Philip Lutgendorf, “Is There an Indian Way of Filmmaking?” *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 10, no. 3 (December 2006): 250.

I open this concluding section with Benjamin's point about cinema's ability to reimagine old stories in new ways to call attention to the innovative storytelling evident in Bhushan's *Shirdi ke Sai Baba*. In addition to Sai Baba's encounters with newly imagined Brahmin antagonists, Bhushan's hagiopic shows Sai Baba addressing social issues about which he gave no opinion in prior hagiographic sources. For example, halfway through the film, Sai Baba talks with a young woman who happily tells him that she now has two children in her family. Sudhir Dalvi, the actor playing Sai Baba, turns away slightly from his interlocutor, fixing his gaze straight ahead as if directly addressing the audience and saying: "When the family is small, it is good" (*ghar-samsār jab choṭā ho, to acchā lagtā hai*). Recall that Bhushan's hagiopic was released in 1977, a time when the Indira Gandhi's Congress-led government had initiated a public campaign to valorize two-child families as a means to curb India's growing population. The slogan emblazoned on posters in public places and broadcast over the radio portrayed "the small family as a happy family" (*choṭā parivār, sukhī parivār*). By pointing out the anachronistic intersection of a saint who died in 1918 and a 1970s social issue, I do not mean to imply that Bhushan's film obscures the "real" Sai Baba, who, as far as extant hagiographic works go, never voiced his opinion on population control. Rather, the dialogue attributed to Sai Baba, like the emplotment of Mangloo and Kulkarni in the saint's life story, exemplifies the organic and accretive nature of hagiography – in this case, hagiographic film – to align a late nineteenth-century saint with a late twentieth-century social message.

Who is the woman with whom Sai Baba converses about the virtue of having a small family? It is Vidya, the "untouchable" girl who came to Sai Baba when the



Brahmin Mangloo prohibited her and her father from entering the Khandoba temple. The portrayal of Sai Baba instructing “untouchables” to limit their family size should be seen in light of what was happening politically and socially at the time of the film’s release, particularly the Congress government’s systematic targeting of people from low-caste communities for forced sterilization during India’s period of Emergency.<sup>76</sup>

These scenes, even though they construct Sai Baba as a friendly face for “untouchables,” demonstrate how hagiography can create fertile ground for politicized interpretations of a saint’s response to latter-day social issues. Highlighting the subtle political undertones regarding caste critique in Bhushan’s hagiopic is not coterminous with evaluating them as “wrong” or “illegitimate,” but simply to point out that they exist. Making such observations is part of the job of the historian of religion, the one who illuminates those traditions and transformations that we do not know about yet. In the case of the Shirdi Sai Baba who belongs to Bhushan’s *Shirdi ke Sai Baba*, these observations should help us recognize that the legacy of a saint, even one known for egalitarianism and inclusivity, is not totally immune from being drawn into reassertions of high-caste power and privilege.

In this analysis of Bhushan’s *Shirdi ke Sai Baba*, we have documented how the filmmaker inserts “new characters” and “new issues” into the existing script of the saint’s life story as found in earlier hagiographic sources like, most prominently, Dabholkar’s *Satcarita*. Three of these new characters are the saint’s antagonists: the Brahmins Mangloo and Kulkarni and the Shaiva ascetic Somdev, all of whom become Sai Baba

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<sup>76</sup> For more on the government initiatives during India’s Emergency, see Rebecca Williams, “Storming the Citadels of Poverty: Family Planning under the Emergency in India, 1975-1977,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 73, no. 2 (May 2014): 471-492.

devotees after experiencing the saint's miraculous power. Bhushan's hagiopic, like Dabholkar's *Satcarita*, exhibits a critique of caste-based prejudice and its perpetrators – the excessively proud and purity-minded Brahmins – but this critique is not an end in itself. Rather, I contend that the purpose of Baba-Brahmin encounters in the Shirdi Sai Baba hagiographic tradition is to catalogue examples of the saint transforming the traditional bearers of Indian society's religious power and authority into devotees. Moreover, these stories not only establish Sai Baba's ability to get the best of Brahmins, but they also construct the saint as a figure who brings about moral and spiritual transformation in the troublesome members of Indian society. Thus, we should see the Baba-Brahmin encounters in hagiographic text and film as working towards the construction of Sai Baba as a figure of rehabilitation instead of an anti-establishment revolutionary like the fifteenth-century poet-saint Kabir, whose poetry unabashedly attacks Brahmin *paṇḍits*, Muslim *mullās*, and other religious elites.<sup>77</sup> While the Shirdi Sai Baba hagiographic tradition contains a measured form of anti-Brahmin sentiment, this sentiment is ultimately a rhetorical strategy utilized in the representation of a saint with a *modus operandi* of integration, not alienation. The figure of the “bad” Brahmin, who opposes Sai Baba for personal or doxastic reasons in hagiography, is always only a placeholder for the “good” Brahmin changed for the better through Sai Baba's miraculous agency and brought into the devotional fold.

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<sup>77</sup> Recall that S.P. Ruhela argues that Shirdi Sai Baba is “an improved model of Kabir” who is more tailored to meet the needs of people in modernity. Ruhela's understanding of Sai Baba as an improvement on Kabir's model of sainthood pertains to the former's more compassionate, flexible, and integrative approach to confronting hypocrites and oppressors. Thus, in Ruhela's view, Kabir's criticism of others is its own end, whereas Sai Baba's criticism of others aims for their rehabilitation and inclusion into the devotional community. See Ruhela, *The Universal Master*, 27-28.

### Conclusion

The aim of this dissertation has been to chart the imaginations, constructions, and transformations of Shirdi Sai Baba in hagiographic texts and films. I have built the historiography of the Shirdi Sai Baba hagiographic tradition by drawing on a diverse set of hagiographic sources in different mediums (text, film, and online), languages (Marathi, Hindi, and English), styles (prose and poetry), and time periods (colonial and postcolonial), and I have utilized an intensively historiographical approach to highlight the agents and moments of change in these many sources that (re)tell the saint's life story.

The result of this project is not a simplified, streamlined understanding of the historical Shirdi Sai Baba, the saint who lived in a small hamlet in the Maharashtrian countryside and died in 1918. Rather, what we now have is a more complicated way to draw from and think about hagiography when answering the question: Who was the Sai Baba of Shirdi? My methodological approach to the study of sainthood by way of textual and cinematic hagiography demonstrates that the saint's life and legacy are fluid, contextual, and occasionally contested. To speak of Shirdi Sai Baba's religious identity or critique of caste, for example, requires nuanced engagement with the representations of the saint in particular texts and films. Accordingly, this work makes the necessary and important point that the organic, accretive nature of the Shirdi Sai Baba hagiographic tradition engenders the shaping and reshaping of its subject for new audiences and agendas across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

This dissertation is also a theoretical intervention in the academic study of hagiography about Shirdi Sai Baba. Previous scholarship has focused on recovering the "real" saint from his Brahmin hagiographers. This type of work, I argued, is a form of

scholarly soteriology, which assumes the historian's purpose is to liberate a saint from his/her hagiographers. In contrast, I have focused on understanding the "cultural creation"<sup>1</sup> that goes into the making and remaking of a saint without sacrificing this creation on the altar of historical positivism. Over the course of the present study, I demonstrated how Sai Baba's sainthood has evolved over time, from hagiographer to hagiographer (including filmmakers) and from text to text (including films). This is not to suggest that there is no truth to Sai Baba's life in hagiography, or that the truth does not matter to those who read and write hagiographies. Instead, it is to acknowledge that the growth of a new religious movement, centered on the memory of and devotion to a charismatic figure, adapts that figure's life story as it makes transit through time (e.g., colonial to postcolonial periods) and encounters new audiences (e.g., regional/Maharashtrian to national/Indian).

In what follows, I review the principal arguments made over the preceding chapters, which I thematize around the two critical points that I have revealed through the study of the Shirdi Sai Baba hagiographic tradition. The first is the revelation of many Sai Babas populating the hagiographic tradition, and the second pertains to hagiographically constructed sainthood functioning as an adaptive response to modernity. Toward the end, I will also point toward future avenues of research that build on this dissertation as we approach the eve of the centenary of the saint's *mahāsamādhī*.

### **The Many Sai Babas in the Shirdi Sai Baba Hagiographic Tradition**

This work began with the same authorial purpose recently articulated by Kecia Ali, who explains that her *The Lives of Muhammad* "is not a book about the life of Muhammad but

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine*, 109. Cited in Manring, *The Fading Light*, 8.

about the ways in which his life has been told.”<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Chapters 2 through 4 of this dissertation shed light on the history of hagiographic transformations in the life and legacy of Shirdi Sai Baba over the last century. Recall that Sai Baba promised devotees before his death: “My bones will give you assurance from the tomb” and “You will hear my bones speaking to you of matters of your personal interest.”<sup>3</sup> The operative words in the latter phrase – “matters of your personal interest” (*hitaguj*)<sup>4</sup> – indicate that this is a saint who will speak to individuals about what they want, need, or expect the saint to say to them. Accordingly, these chapters highlighted a number of relationships between Shirdi Sai Baba and different hagiographers, who, in turn, imagined and constructed the saint in their hagiographic works in ways that reflect how he spoke to each one of them.

Chapter 2 initiated the study of the hagiographic tradition with the “philosophizing Sai Baba” whom we encountered in the fifty-seventh chapter of Das Ganu’s *Santakathāmṛt*. Here, we saw that Das Ganu presents Shirdi Sai Baba in deep conversation with another devotee N.G. Chandorkar whom he instructs on Hindu metaphysical subjects, such as *brahmajñān* and *caitanya*. I framed Das Ganu’s Shirdi Sai Baba as a “curiosity” vis-à-vis the majority of other hagiographic sources maintaining that the saint never gave long sermons or philosophical discourses. Given Das Ganu’s statement in a 1936 interview that he expanded upon the Baba-Chandorkar conversation with his own knowledge of Hindu philosophy, I argued that the discursive image of Shirdi Sai Baba in the *Santakathāmṛt* is the product of the relationship between the saint

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<sup>2</sup> Kecia Ali, *The Lives of Muhammad* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 1.

<sup>3</sup> Dabholkar, *ŚSSC*, 25:105 *mājhīm hāḍem turvatīmadhūn / detīl aśvāsan*; 25:107 *mājhīm hāḍem aikāl bolatām / hitaguj karitām tumhāmsaveṁ*.

<sup>4</sup> According to Molesworth, the word *gūj* derives from the Sanskrit *guhya* and means “a secret” (241). Meanwhile, *hitagūj* is “a matter of one’s own interest or concern; one’s private business” (941)

and this particular hagiographer. The “philosophizing Sai Baba” is the saint as Das Ganu saw him – or as he expected to see him, if one adopts a Ricouerian hermeneutics of suspicion. The rarity of Das Ganu’s “philosophizing Sai Baba” thus opened the way toward the different hagiographic constructions of the saint in subsequent texts and films.

Chapter 3 charted the hagiographical transformations in Sai Baba’s life story with regard to his ambiguous religious identity in the works of the hagiographers G.R. Dabholkar, N.V. Gunaji, and B.V. Narasimhaswami, as well as the divine revelations proffered by the self-professed reincarnation of the saint, Sathya Sai Baba. We began with early twentieth-century Marathi hagiographic accounts of Shirdi Sai Baba in Dabholkar’s *Śrī Sāī Satcarita* and Das Ganu’s *Śrī Sāīmāth Stavanamañjarī* as a figure who is “neither Hindu nor Muslim.” Here, Sai Baba is described as a categorical conundrum, whose birthplace, parentage, caste, and religious identity are unknown. We observed that Dabholkar builds his argument by cataloguing Sai Baba’s physical attributes and behaviors – some of which would lead to the presumption that the saint is “Hindu,” while others create the impression that he is “Muslim.” We also saw that hagiographers after Dabholkar alter Sai Baba’s life story in deliberate and noticeable ways. This process begins with Gunaji, who produced the first English adaptation of the *Satcarita* – a work that marginalizes the saint’s connection to Islam by pruning his life story of certain details (e.g., the saint’s circumcision, the saint’s self-assertions of Muslim identity). Then, we saw how Narasimhaswami’s *Life of Sai Baba* remakes the saint into a figure who is “both Hindu and Muslim.” Here, I showed that this reconfiguration of the saint from “neither/nor” to “both/and” stems from Narasimhaswami’s invention of a Brahmin-to-Muslim-to-Brahmin origin story that involves Sai Baba’s birth in a Brahmin

family, tutelage by an unnamed Sufi fakir, and initiation from a Brahmin guru named Venkusha. This new narrative, I contended, is Narasimhaswami's hagiographic strategy to recast Sai Baba in a more pluralistic, integrative mold. In doing so, he circumscribes the saint's connection to Islam within a predominantly Hindu frame, which becomes much more detailed and mythicized in the revelations of Sathya Sai Baba. Ultimately, Chapter 3 revealed the proliferation of many Sai Babas that emerge in the hagiographic transformation from the ambiguity assigned to the saint in early twentieth-century works to his reemergence as a figure of interreligious unity in contemporary hagiography.

The comparative analysis of several hagiographical works outlined above established my argument that hagiography is political – a genre that reflects “the opinions and principles by which people order their participation in larger groups, and the strategizing such participation may entail.”<sup>5</sup> I used Chapter 4 to extend this argument by positioning the Shirdi Sai Baba hagiographic tradition within what I call the politics of compositeness, or the notion that although Sai Baba has become a symbol of Hindu-Muslim unity, the compositeness assigned to the saint by hagiographers contains dominant and subordinate elements, viz. the saint's connections to Hinduism and Islam, respectively. I innovatively approached the politics of compositeness from two perspectives relative to Shirdi Sai Baba, namely, the perspectives of his devotees as well as his detractors.

First, I examined two cinematic portrayals of Sai Baba as a syncretistic saint. I showed that these Hindi films – Manmohan Desai's super-hit *Amar, Akbar, Anthony* and Ashok Bhushan's hagiopic *Shirdi ke Sai Baba* – imbue Sai Baba's compositeness with a

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<sup>5</sup> Manring, *The Fading Light*, 4.

predominantly Hindu element that subtly embraces and subordinates (but never erases) the other non-Hindu elements. For example, when the blind mother of the three eponymous brothers in Desai's blockbuster miraculously regains her eyesight from Sai Baba, the first thing she sees is the superimposition of her children's faces – the Hindu Amar, the Muslim Akbar, and the Christian Anthony – in the face of the saint's *mūrtī*. While this scene depicts Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity as a fraternity of religions, I contended that it is important to view this representation with regard to the film's "soft" Hindutva, one that makes Hinduism into the elder brother of the three siblings. Bhushan's hagiopic similarly traffics Sai Baba's compositeness toward Hinduism through its film songs (e.g., the repetition of the "Sai Shyam, Sai Ram" lyrics) and visual representations of diverse religions brought together (e.g., the shot of the saint's hand on which the fingers have the symbols of Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Zoroastrianism, while the thumb has Hinduism's Om).

Additionally, Chapter 4 detailed the interpretation of Shirdi Sai Baba by his detractors and how they deconstruct his compositeness. Representing this perspective were the Hindu religious leader Swami Swaroopananda, as well as the creators of "Shirdi Sai Baba: The Biggest Hypocrite in the History of India," a Facebook page full of anti-Sai Baba imagery and rhetoric. By examining the arguments put forth to invalidate Sai Baba's Hindu-Muslim compositeness, I showed that these detractors have actually made their own Shirdi Sai Baba – one whom they see as incompatible with Hinduism, or *sanātana dharma*. The impassioned claims against the saint included the allegations that he was "really" an Islamic agent designed to trick gullible Hindus into defiling their religion by worshipping a Muslim holy man. Furthermore, I used the case of Swami



Swaroopananda to make an important point about Hinduism in modernity, namely, the existence of many Hindu religious leaders seeking to define what is and is not the “proper” focus of Hindu devotion. Such religious leaders, however, are not universally acknowledged by all Hindus as having the power to do so – a point underscored by the protests and court cases filed against the swami by Hindu devotees of Sai Baba. Nonetheless, the fact that Sai Baba has detractors is an indication of his level of popularity as a sacred figure prominent enough to be the focus of a feud that occupies India’s media spotlight.

Overall, Chapters 2 through 4 illustrated in the case of Shirdi Sai Baba what Virginia Burrus has found in Christian traditions: “writerly acts of textual recycling – citation, iteration, imitation, mimicry, dislocation, transformation, decomposition, fragmentation, and recombination – through which the Holy Life is produced and ever again reproduced, never quite the same as before.”<sup>6</sup> These acts, which are not just “writerly” but extend to hagiography in textual and cinematic forms, have produced many Sai Babas, each with his own unique characteristic, for example, as a Hindu philosopher, a categorical conundrum, a symbol of national integration, a syncretistic saint, and a threat to the integrity of Hinduism. The hagiographic texts and films that have constructed and reconstructed the saint thus show that the bones of the saint that continue to speak posthumously say different things to different people.

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<sup>6</sup> Virginia Burrus, *The Sex Lives of Saints: An Erotics of Ancient Hagiography* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 12.

### Sainthood as an Adaptive Response to Modernity

This dissertation has also shown that hagiographically constructed sainthood functions as an adaptive response to modernity. Sainthood changes with the times. Hagiography captures these crucial transformations in a saint's sainthood as they happen. Chapters 3 and 4 demonstrated how sainthood can be adapted to address ever-changing social and political realities. Recall that Dabholkar's description of Shirdi Sai Baba as ambiguously "neither Hindu nor Muslim" gave way to Narasimhaswami's integration-oriented interpretation of the saint as "both Hindu and Muslim." The productive aspect of ambiguity (e.g., a saint who is "neither/nor") is that it circumvents hierarchy such that neither side dominates or submits to the other. However, ambiguity is difficult to maintain in a sociocultural reality where narrow, Western-derived definitions of religion and religious communities press people into mutually exclusive categories, thereby enabling the politicization of religious differences. In this context, I argued that we view Narasimhaswami's *Life of Sai Baba* as a means to retell the saint's story in a way that responds to the divisiveness resulting from modern state formation. This is not to say that the "neither/nor" manner of expressing ambiguous identity is antiquated or unmodern. (In contrast, the claim of being unaffiliated is very modern indeed).<sup>7</sup> But it is to observe that Narasimhaswami's Sai Baba evidences the exchange of ambiguity for certainty, liminality for integration, and the saint who is "neither/nor" for one who is "both/and."

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<sup>7</sup> Two salient examples of the unaffiliated in two very different modern sociocultural contexts are the rise of the "nones" in the United States and the lyrics of the self-described Sufi rock band Junoon's song "Bulleya," viz. "Bulleya, who am I? I am no believer in a mosque and I have no pagan ways. I am not pure, I am not vile. I am no Moses, and I am no Pharoah. Bulleya, who am I?" Moreover, Junoon's song is a poem originally composed by the eighteenth-century Sufi saint Baba Bulleh Shah – an example of "modernity [or modernization] of tradition" (Rudolph and Rudolph 1967).

Chapters 5 through 7 focused on Sai Baba's reputation as a worker of various sorts of miracles to examine sainthood as a response to modernity, and each chapter focused on a different aspect of miracle-working repertoire. In Chapter 5, I set out a historiographical study of the multiple iterations of Sai Baba's most well-known miracle: the time that he lit lamps with water instead of oil, or what I refer to as the lamp lighting miracle. In comparing early hagiographic texts (e.g., Das Ganu's *Bhaktalīlāmṛt*, Dabholkar's *Satcarita*) and later works (e.g., Sunit Nigam's book *Sāī Bābā ke camatkār*, Ashok Bhushan's film *Shirdi ke Sai Baba*), I noted how the audience of this miracle changes over time. Earlier sources describe the lamp lighting miracle as taking place in front of a public audience in Shirdi, and they maintain that the miracle was aimed at delivering a moral message to the grocers (*vāṇī*) who lied to the saint about the oil's availability. Contemporary sources, however, situate the miracle in the context of the relationship between Sai Baba and another individual. For Nigam, this individual is an anonymous *paṇḍit* whose plan to expose Sai Baba as a fraud is unsuccessful, while Bhushan innovatively situates the lamp lighting miracle as the result of a young girl's love for and faith in Sai Baba. Is the divestment of the miracle's public audience in more recent hagiographic sources the result of the contentiousness that accompanies the notion of a "miracle" in modernity – something that can either inspire faith, or court ridicule? Indeed, the tact of refocusing the lamp lighting miracle on the saint's ability to function as an individual communicator suggests an innovative solution to the conundrum of the modern miracle in South Asia. Nonetheless, this chapter's most salient contribution to my argument is that the many iterations of this miracle story produce yet more Sai Babas – each of whom lights the lamps miraculously but not always in the same way.

In Chapter 6, I identified a common theme in hagiographic descriptions of several Sai Baba miracles of protection and healing: the epistemological conflict between faith and reason, as expressed by the person experiencing or describing the miracle. This chapter highlighted Sai Baba's abilities – whether through his words, the sacred ash from his *dhunī*, or simply his presence – to cure a variety of diseases when all other forms of treatment failed. Recall that the hagiographer Dabholkar remarks with astonishment in the *Satcarita* that Bala Ganapat's malarial fever was cured after feeding a black dog at a nearby temple, per Sai Baba's instructions. Similarly, the devotee S.B. Dhumal describes the difficulty he had following the saint's command to remain in a plague-infested house because it would contravene his understanding of “medical opinion” and “common sense.” I connected Dabholkar's astonishment and Dhumal's word choice with one of the more common adjectives used in the *Satcarita* to describe Sai Baba's miracles: *atarkya*, or “supra-logical.” Furthermore, I argued that accounts of Sai Baba's miracles not only refer to but provide the resolution for their epistemological conflict, which is the supersession of faith in the supra-logical ways of the saint over the reductionism of logical reasoning. Notably, many of the authors of these accounts of the saint's miracles – like the former first-class magistrate Dabholkar and the lawyer Dhumal – came from the well-educated, urban professional classes produced under the auspices of colonial rule. Given Sonjay Joshi's assertion that “being middle class [in colonial India]... was primarily a project of self-fashioning,”<sup>8</sup> I argued that these hagiographic accounts are

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<sup>8</sup> Sanjay Joshi, *Fractured Modernity*, 2.

indicative of the middle-class navigation of a major feature of modernity: the widened chasm between “religion” and “science.”<sup>9</sup>

Finally, Chapter 7 analyzed a selection of encounters in hagiographic text and film between Shirdi Sai Baba and proud, purity-minded Brahmins. These encounters enabled us to explore the social ideology attributed to Sai Baba in the hagiographic tradition, especially with regard to caste. I argued that Baba-Brahmin encounters require a nuanced reading that takes into account both the softness of the critique of Brahminhood and the common conclusion of each encounter, namely, the Brahmin’s transformation into a Sai Baba devotee following a miraculous event. In this chapter’s analysis of the *Satcarita*, I noted the structural similarity between the work’s representation of proud Brahmins seeing the error of their ways and the autobiographical reflections of the text’s Brahmin hagiographer, G.R. Dabholkar. From this vantage point, I argued that the *Satcarita* can be understood as the response of a Brahmin hagiographer writing about his devotion to a non-Brahmin saint amidst the anti-Brahmin discourse circulating in cities such as Bombay, Pune, and Nashik – cities where a great number of Sai Baba’s Brahmin devotees came from. The purpose of these encounters in the *Satcarita*, I also argued, are twofold. They construct the image of Sai Baba as a saint with the ability to purge Brahmins of excessive pride in their caste, and they send a message to the Brahmins who will read or hear these stories, namely, that devotion to Sai Baba is a way to scrutinize their Brahminical privilege, which is necessary for receiving the saint’s grace.

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<sup>9</sup> See Peter Gottschalk, *Religion, Science, and Empire: Classifying Hinduism and Islam in British India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012). Gottschalk’s monograph implicates the British colonial system in contributing to the classification, rigidification, and antagonization of the mutually exclusive categories, “Hinduism” and “Islam.”

The second part of Chapter 7 turned attention to the conflict between Sai Baba and Brahmins in Bhushan's hagiopic *Shirdi ke Sai Baba*. Here, I showed that the film invents and emplots new Brahmin antagonists in its presentation of the saint's life story. These Baba-Brahmin encounters follow the preexisting formula established in the *Satcarita*, which proceeds from confrontation to a miracle performed by the saint for the Brahmin's benefit to the Brahmin's rehabilitation into a Sai Baba devotee. Additionally, I drew attention to the opportunity afforded by these new encounters to embellish Sai Baba's social ideology, especially with regard to caste-related issues. Recall that this chapter highlighted the relationship between Sai Baba and the young "untouchable" girl Vidya, and the new hagiographic content produced by their interactions: Sai Baba's spiritualized redefinition of "untouchability" as a virtue instead of a burden, and Sai Baba's approval of the adult Vidya's decision to limit her family's size to only two children. Both of these scenes epitomize my earlier proposition about the political nature of hagiography, thereby establishing my argument that the social ideology assigned to Sai Baba in Bhushan's film follows the same top-down critique of caste and caste-based discrimination evident in Dabholkar's *Satcarita*. It is therefore in this chapter that several arguments in this dissertation converge: the organic and evolving nature of a hagiographic tradition; the political dimension of hagiography in general; and the malleability of sainthood as evidenced in hagiographic text and film.

In this way, this dissertation's two principal points – the existence of multiple Sai Babas and sainthood as an adaptive response to modernity – ultimately build off one another. Many Sai Babas populate the Shirdi Sai Baba hagiographic tradition because hagiographically constructed sainthood has functioned as an adaptive response to various

dimensions of South Asian modernity, including the contentiousness of the miracle as something removed from the public and relegated to the private sphere of individual experience; the divisiveness left in the wake of Partition; and persistence of debates over caste as a repressive or redeemable social institution. Such an approach aligns with Hayden White’s call for a postmodernist historiography, one that shows how the presumably objective interpretations of the “facts” are subject to hermeneutic reinterpretations, as subsequent generations reinvent the past to make sense of the present.<sup>10</sup> This dissertation, then, responds to that call in the context of the academic study of the Shirdi Sai Baba hagiographic tradition.

Moreover, the reiterative nature of the telling of Sai Baba’s life story has its narratological basis in Dabholkar’s *Satcarita*, wherein the hagiographer holds all accounts of the saint as authoritative but necessarily partial representations of the truth. In *Satcarita* 2:34-35, Dabholkar writes:

Sai Baba’s life story (*caritra*) is like a vast ocean, a vast and unending repository of gems. I am just a small bird (*ṭiṭvī*) trying to empty it – but how is this even possible?

The life story of Sai is deep (*agādh*), and it is impossible to describe it in one telling (*varṇan*). So, one should tell the story [to the best of one’s ability] and be content with it.<sup>11</sup>

Clearly, Dabholkar sees himself and his text as part of a process of continuous storytelling in which no single version of the saint’s story exhausts its fullness. It follows, then, that other hagiographers will do their best to tell the story as they understand it,

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<sup>10</sup> See Hayden White, “Interpretation in History,” in *Tropics of Discourse* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1978), 51-80.

<sup>11</sup> Dabholkar, *ŚSSC*, 2:34-35 *sāi-caritra mahāsāgar / ananta apār ratnākar / mī ṭiṭvī to ritā karaṇār / ghaḍaṇār heṃ kaisenī // taiseṃ sāīṅceṃ caritra gahan / aśakya kadhīmhi sāṅga varṇan / mhaṇūni karavel teṃ kathan / teṅeñci samādhān mānāveṃ*.

embedded as they are within their own historical horizons. B.V. Narasimhaswami sees his *Life of Sai Baba* as the version that privileges “correct knowledge” and produces a “trustworthy biography.” In *Sai: The God on Earth*, N.M. Das says that his prayers to Sai Baba for his wife’s open heart surgery, which was successful, inspired him “to write something significant on the sayings of Baba in the shape of a booklet to be dedicated to him.”<sup>12</sup> Das adds that even those familiar with Shirdi Sai Baba can learn more: “If you know more about Sai Baba much more remains to be known.”<sup>13</sup> And part of this dissertation’s contribution to the academic study of the saint is the bringing to light of many hagiographic sources, texts and films, as well as the purposes with which their authors approach Shirdi Sai Baba’s life story and the ways in which the story changes over time.

### **The Study of Shirdi Sai Baba on the Eve of the *Mahāsamādhī*’s Centenary**

Shirdi Sai Baba is a very generative subject of study. This dissertation not only focuses on specific hagiographers and hagiographic works, but also uses Shirdi Sai Baba as the point of entry for examining topics such as Brahmins and anti-Brahminism in colonial India, miracles and modernity, the discourse of syncretism and the politics of compositeness. Indeed, this does not exhaust the range of scholarly work on Shirdi Sai Baba.

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<sup>12</sup> Das writes: “It was on Twenty Fourth July Nineteen Hundred Eighty Six (24-7-1986) my wife Smt. N. Ganga Devi underwent open heart surgery at Durgabai Deshmuk hospital, Hyderabad (A.P.) I prayed Lord Sai Nath for her life. The Lord of Events heard my panic voice and came to my rescue, and saved her life. This event of the Lord SAI inspired me to write something significant on the sayings of BABA in the shape of [a] booklet to be dedicated to HIM (My Ishta Devata).” N.M. Das, *Sai: The God on Earth*. This text is available on online repositories of Shirdi Sai Baba hagiography (e.g., <http://www.saileelas.org/books.htm>), but I was unable to find it in print.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.



For example, the conflict in the Indian news media between Swami Swaroopananda and Sai Baba devotees illustrates that the implication of Shirdi Sai Baba in a politics of compositeness will continue to be a relevant and important subject of study moving forward. The relationship between Sai Baba and Muslim devotees – both hagiographically and ethnographically – remains a desideratum. With regard to hagiography, I used Chapter 7 to examine encounters between Sai Baba and Brahmins, but time constraints did not permit me to expand the study to include the saint's encounters with Muslims. Indeed, there are rich stories in the *Satcarita* and testimonies in *Devotees' Experiences*, wherein Sai Baba meets Muslims opposed to the saint because he courts Hindu devotees. Several devotional testimonies, both from Muslims themselves and from Hindus about Muslims – such as Abdullah Jan and Imambai Chota Khan in Narasimhaswami's *Devotees' Experiences*<sup>14</sup> – represent them as hotheaded and as having a violent proclivity against Sai Baba and Hindus in Shirdi. While a closer study of these accounts will occupy my attention in the future, I surmise the following: Just as the hagiographic tradition features many stories of stereotypically proud Brahmins to build up Sai Baba's image as a figure of moral and spiritual rehabilitation, so too does the incorporation of examples of angry, violent Muslims in Sai Baba hagiography contribute to his image as a saint of peace and harmony. That many Muslims in early Sai Baba hagiography – and contemporary Bollywood cinema<sup>15</sup> – are marked by their threat of

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<sup>14</sup> For the devotional testimonies of Abdullah Jan and Imambai Chota Khan, see Narasimhaswami, *Devotees' Experiences*, 89-91 and 301-309, respectively. In *Devotees' Experiences*, the testimonies given by the hagiographer Das Ganu (127-143) and the high court judge M.B. Rege (1-13), both of whom are Brahmins, relate specific examples of orthodox Muslims, who verbally and physically attacked Shirdi Sai Baba on account of his habit of mixing Hindu and Islamic practices.

<sup>15</sup> With regard to the politicized representation of the relationship between Sai Baba and Muslims, I am thinking of Nishikant Kamat's 2008 Hindi film *Mumbai Meri Jaan*, which follows the lives of five individuals in the wake of the serial train bombings in Mumbai on July 11, 2006. One character is Suresh, a Hindu whose anti-Muslim prejudice grows after the terrorist attack. A few days after the attack, Suresh

using violent means is fruitful for further research on representations of Muslims in modern India.

Another topic in my forthcoming work on the history of religion in Maharashtra will focus on the appearance in the nineteenth century of many saints believed to be incarnations of the Hindu god Dattatreya, including Swami Samarth of Akkalkot, Manik Prabhu of Humnabad, Gajanan Maharaj of Shegaon, and Sai Baba of Shirdi. Of course, this dissertation privileged, unarguably, the most well-known of these nineteenth-century *datta-āvatārs*, but a further study of these saints in light of the present work would contribute to the understanding of this particular model of sainthood. What similarities and differences exist in these four models of sainthood, and how might they compare with precedents set much earlier in the history of religion in Maharashtra, particularly in hagiographies of Chakradhar Swami, Gundam Raul, and other early Mahanubhavas? (It should be noted that the similarities between Sai Baba and Mahanubhava figures in terms of behavior and personality are very striking indeed). What interpretive frame might be found in these respective hagiographic traditions that could help us understand why so many *datta-avatārs* began to appear in colonial-era Maharashtra? How does the nineteenth-century *datta-avatār* relate to incarnations that appeared centuries earlier,

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notices that a Muslim man named Yusuf, whom he used to see regularly at a favorite restaurant, has disappeared. The question, then, becomes whether or not Yusuf is linked to violent Islamic terrorism. Toward the end of the film, Suresh and Yusuf finally cross paths in the same restaurant. They strike up a conversation, and Suresh is taken aback when Yusuf offers him sweets from Shirdi, which is where he was for the last few days. “When Baba calls you, you have to go,” says Yusuf, as Suresh – and presumably many in the film’s audience – exhale with relief in the realization that Yusuf is not a terrorist. Here, the implication is that no Muslim who displays devotion to Shirdi Sai Baba could be capable of such terrible and religiously motivated violence. Kamat’s film uses Shirdi Sai Baba as a litmus test for the non-Muslim majority to judge the Muslim minority’s compatibility with the liberal, anti-terrorism ethos of the modern state. Such representations of Sai Baba, now alongside the polemical voices of the saint’s detractors, exemplify how a religious figure, even one who purportedly transcended the strictures of religion and caste, can become enmeshed in the identity politics of modernity.

namely, the figures of Shripad Shri Vallabha and Shri Narasimhas Saraswati, whose lives are recorded in Saraswati Gangadhar's *Guru Caritra* (mid-sixteenth century)?

Additionally, the claim by Rigopoulos that Dabholkar modeled the *Śrī Sāī Satcarita* after the *Guru Caritra* all but demands scholarly attention.<sup>16</sup>

This dissertation is part of the burgeoning body of scholarship on Shirdi Sai Baba. This body of work references hagiography tangentially and instead specializes in other topics and methodological approaches, such as the saint's iconography and visual culture (McLain 2011; Elison 2014), sociological studies of Shirdi's emergence as a new center of religious tourism (Ghosal and Maity 2010; Chavan and Sonawane 2012; Shinde and Pinkney 2013), and ethnographic studies of contemporary Sai Baba devotees in India and beyond (McLain 2016). My work on the Shirdi Sai Baba hagiographic tradition thus fills the lacuna left by previous, less-nuanced scholarship, and it also contributes to the ongoing conversations about this remarkable and remarkably popular saint.

As we approach the centenary of the saint's *mahāsamādhī*, this dissertation shows that Shirdi Sai Baba, hagiographically and historically, has meant different things, to different people, at different times, in different contexts. It advances the understanding of the saint by revealing its complexity through the many Sai Babas in the hagiographic tradition and the ways in which they have been constructed in response to different dimensions of modernity. Hagiographical processes like adding, omitting, glossing over, and reconfiguring the words and deeds, people and events, and overall history of Sai Baba's life and legacy keep our understanding where it should be – perpetually in flux.

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<sup>16</sup> Rigopoulos, *The Life of and Teachings of Sai Baba of Shirdi*, 19; Rigopoulos, *Dattatreya*, 260 n. 5.

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