

*Experiencing  
Sai Baba's  
Shirdi*

*- A Guide*



**Alison Williams**



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Sai Baba's Shirdi  
– A Guide





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**B**aba

is present everywhere in  
all beings. Even though it is the  
aim of Sai devotees to realize the truth  
of this fact, we should not forget that it  
was revealed to us by the form of  
Sri Sai that lived and roamed

in

**S**hirdi

*Sri Sainathuni Sarath Babuji*





*To the beloved Sadguru*



*with reverence and gratitude*

SADGURU SRI SAINATHUNI SARATH BABUJI

*who makes everything possible*

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This guide would not have been possible without the help of numerous *gurubandhus* and Saipatham *satsang* members. I would like to express my deep gratitude to all of them for their practical help, generous sharing and countless acts of kindness, and more than anything, for keeping me afloat in a sea of love and Sai *bhakti*.

# C O N T E N T S

<i>Author's Note</i>	xi
<i>Foreword by Sri Sainathuni Sarath Babuji</i>	xiii
<i>Maps: India, Regional, Shirdi</i>	xix-xxi
<b>Introduction</b>	
<i>The village of Shirdi</i>	1
<i>Who is Sai Baba?</i>	4
<i>How to use this guide</i>	11
<b>The Walking Tour</b>	<b>11</b>
<i>Khandoba Temple</i>	14
<i>Gurusthan</i>	18
<i>Dwarkamai</i>	28
<i>The Chavadi</i>	64
<i>Lendi Gardens</i>	72
<i>The Samadhi Mandir</i>	80
<b>Khandoba Temple</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Gurusthan</b>	<b>17</b>
<i>Takia</i>	26
<b>Baba's Mosque (Dwarkamai)</b>	<b>27</b>
<i>The dhuni</i>	36
<i>Udi</i>	38
<i>Puja pillar</i>	40
<i>The kolamba and the waterpot</i>	41
<i>The nimbar</i>	42
<i>The grinding stone and bag of wheat</i>	43
<i>The chillims</i>	45
<i>Baba's portrait</i>	46
<i>Dakshina box/hundi</i>	50
<i>The bathing stone</i>	51
<i>The tulsi brindavan</i>	51
<i>Baba's photograph and the stone</i>	51
<i>The animal statues</i>	53
<i>The tortoise tile</i>	55
<i>The cooking hearth and the wooden post</i>	56
<i>Padukas where Baba used to stand</i>	57
<i>The storage rooms</i>	57

<i>The bell</i>	60
<i>Shyam Sunder Hall / Old Parayana Hall</i>	61
<b><i>The Chavadi</i></b>	<b>63</b>
<i>The Chavadi Procession (utsav)</i>	66
<b><i>Lendi Gardens</i></b>	<b>71</b>
<i>Nanda Deep</i>	76
<i>The well</i>	78
<b><i>The Samadhi Mandir</i></b>	<b>79</b>
<i>The statue and tomb of Sri Sai Baba</i>	89
<i>Display of Baba's articles</i>	93
<i>Arati</i>	94
<b><i>Other Temples in Shirdi</i></b>	<b>97</b>
<i>Hanuman (Maruti) Mandir</i>	98
<i>The three temples</i>	99
<i>Mahalaxmi Temple</i>	99
<i>Narasimha Temple</i>	100
<i>The Kanifnath and Vittal Temples</i>	100
<i>The five samadhis</i>	101
<b><i>Houses of Sai Baba Devotees</i></b>	<b>109</b>
<i>Location of devotees' houses (map)</i>	110
<i>Sathe Wada</i>	111
<i>Dixit Wada</i>	112
<i>Abdul Baba's cottage</i>	113
<i>Laxmibai Shinde's house</i>	114
<i>Bhagoji Shinde's house</i>	115
<i>Mhalsapati's house</i>	116
<i>Shama's house</i>	118
<i>The houses of the five blessed ones</i>	119
<b><i>Major Festivals in Shirdi</i></b>	<b>123</b>
<i>Ramnavami</i>	124
<i>Guru Purnima, Vijayadasami</i>	126
<b><i>Practical Tips for Visitors</i></b>	<b>127</b>
<i>Suggested reading</i>	133
<i>Appendix 1: Shri Sai Baba Sansthan</i>	137
<i>Appendix 2: Daily Programme</i>	139
<i>Appendix 3: Sri Babuji and Saipatham</i>	141
<i>Glossary</i>	143
<i>Index</i>	149

## Author's Note

This guide to holy Shirdi is laid humbly at the feet of my own “guide” and beloved Guruji, Sadguru Sri Sainathuni Sarath Babuji, who has been the inspiration for it, as for all my endeavours.

When I came to Shirdi I knew very little about Baba, other than that he was a fakir around whom many weird and wonderful events transpired, that millions were finding refuge in him, and that he was adored by my own object of adoration. Since then, Guruji has shown me the path of Sai in countless ways, the greatest one being the moment-to-moment example of his own life.

A passionate and exemplary devotee of Sai Baba, Guruji's entire life is a testimony to the grace and might of Sai. The infinite love which he cherishes for Baba is evident in everything he does, and it is that love and grace which pull so many to him and which he showers on those lucky enough to come within his ambit. He is a peerless authority on Sai's history and literature and living proof of his own comment that “when you love somebody you want to know everything about them”. Guruji encourages a keen spirit of enquiry in devotees and himself demonstrates this, probing assiduously into a subject until he has thoroughly grasped all its intricacies. He astonishes us with his meticulousness and ability to recall even a tiny detail and its exact reference. Guruji has carried out intensive research into Baba's life, as a result of which hitherto unpublished information and even photos were unearthed which have enriched our picture of Sai Baba and of the life and events around him.

Guruji's exposition of the path of Sai inculcated in me a desire to discover more about the life of the saint of Shirdi and the village and fabric of the place which he sanctified with his presence. I became captivated by its magic and spiritual power,

and by a growing sense of the living presence of Sri Sai Baba. As I roamed around Shirdi, all sorts of queries arose that I was unable to find answers to in the books in English on Baba. For example, why is there a marble tile with a tortoise carved on it in the middle of the floor in Dwarkamai? Exactly where in Shirdi had Baba walked on his begging rounds? Why does the *dhuni* seem to have been so important to Baba and did it look the same as it does now? When I regretted the dearth of any guide to Shirdi in English, Guruji suggested that I write one myself. He inspired me with the example of his life and love and imbued me with both the motivation and the means to do it. He graciously supplied the answers to numerous questions – in *satsang*, by information to be found in his own numerous articles, or by referring me to certain books or individuals who would be able to help.

Writing and researching this guide has brought me innumerable blessings – *smarana* of Baba and Guruji, contact with great devotees, much *satsang* with *gurubandhus*, many kindnesses, and an appetite to explore further – to name but a few. This guide is humbly offered with the hope that through the exploration of this holy village of Shirdi, visitors and devotees may gain a deeper sense of the place of Sai and the path of Sai, and experience the joy and blessings that undoubtedly follow such a revelation.

*Alison Williams, Shirdi*



## Foreword

# Why go to Shirdi when Sai Baba is present everywhere?

*Sri Sainathuni Sarath Babuji*

*The following is a free English rendering of an article written in Telugu by Sri Babuji, which was originally published in his book*

*Sai Bhakti Sadhana Rahasyam*<sup>1</sup>

“Baba is omnipresent! Isn't he? He is everywhere. Why does one need to go all the way to Shirdi to worship him? You can do that wherever you are!” This is the “advice” that many Sai devotees who frequently visit Shirdi very often encounter from their elders, friends and relatives. No doubt the advice not only reflects sound philosophical wisdom but also conforms to what Baba used to say, “Those who think that Baba is a person with a three-and-a-half cubit body or that I am present only in Shirdi haven't seen me at all!” The essential purport of Baba's wonderful deeds and dictum is to make us experience his presence shining in all beings everywhere or, to put it in Baba's words, “wherever you look”. To have that “look” should be the object and vision of a Sai devotee.

All religions, however, stipulate in one form or other, that seekers should bathe in sacred waters, make pilgrimages to important shrines and visit saints, their tombs or the places where they dwelled. Indian epic literature is permeated with eulogies to such sacred places. The Islamic tradition dictates that every Muslim should make the pilgrimage to Mecca (*hajj*) at least once in a lifetime. The Sufi tradition places great importance on taking refuge in saints and visiting their *dargahs*

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<sup>1</sup> *Sai Bhakti Sadhana Rahasyam*, by Sainathuni Sarath Babuji, Shirdi: Saipatham Publications, 2001. (Orig. pub 1997.) See p. 135.

(tombs). *Aithareya Brahmanam*<sup>2</sup> says, “There is no happiness for a person who does not make a pilgrimage. Any individual, however noble he or she may be, inevitably errs. Indra is the friend of one who undertakes a pilgrimage. So, go thou on pilgrimage!” The scriptures, on the one hand exhort us to realize the One which is everywhere and present in all living beings, and on the other hand insist on visiting holy places! How could these two seemingly opposite stands be reconciled?

Apart from what is said in the scriptures, going on pilgrimage is also an example set for us by great sages. The Puranas say that saints and even gods used to stay in sacred places for *tapas*. Great teachers of Vedanta such as Adi Sankara, Ramanuja, Madhva and Vallabha travelled at length to various holy places with fervent zeal. It is worth noting that Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, who was blissfully immersed in the ocean of Krishna devotion and saw the form of his Lord everywhere, made enthusiastic and frequent visits to holy places, as did other great ones, such as Meerabai, Jnaneshwar Maharaj, Sant Namdev, Tukaram Maharaj, Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa and others. It is obvious that they undertook pilgrimages not because they were unable to see God otherwise! Not only did these great ones travel to holy places with great enthusiasm, but they counselled others to make a point of frequently undertaking such pilgrimages.

The Varkari tradition, which was instrumental in spreading Panduranga *bhakti*, was established by Jnaneshwar Maharaj and Namdev, and popularized by *sants* such as Eknath and Tukaram. The tradition enjoins that every seeker should undertake a pilgrimage to Pandharpur at least once a year. The Marathi word *varkari* means “one who makes a pilgrimage”. The importance given to pilgrimage is evident in the name given to the tradition. It is a pilgrimage which is both external and internal. The purpose of the external journey is to have *darshan* of Lord Vittal in Pandharpur, and thereby to have his *darshan* inwardly (i.e. to experience his presence) in all beings everywhere.

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<sup>2</sup> A Vedic text.



There is, however, something we should bear in mind here. The scriptures and saints encourage pilgrimage as an aid to self-control and self-realization – not to absolve the pilgrim of his or her sins or to secure a short route to heaven. Many verses in our Puranas appear saying, “*Pāpa parihāraṅbam, punya samupājanāṅbam*” (to wash away sins and gain merit). Several scholars opine that these were the interpolations of the priestly class to popularize pilgrimage. However, the notion that one can blithely continue to commit sins and then go on periodic pilgrimages to counter them has been categorically condemned by the great sages and scriptures. The *Devi Bhagavatam*,<sup>3</sup> for instance, censures such motives: “Only those who keep their hearts pure stand to gain from pilgrimages, others even commit a sin by that.”

On close examination we see that these places of pilgrimage were originally the dwellings of great saints, or where their tombs lie. Over the course of time (thanks to the creative interpretation of Puranic commentators) their origins slipped into oblivion and were gradually replaced with stories connected to various deities. According to the scriptures, the sanctity of the Himalayas, the Ganga and other holy places is due to the spiritual power of the *tapas* performed there over the centuries by great souls. It then becomes clear why even great saints and realized beings visit holy places so devotedly.

Great sages visit holy places and *teerthas* (holy waters) again and again to purify them and enhance their sanctity. Seekers, however, should visit them to free their minds of distractions and to accelerate their inward journey to their destination. It is a thousand times easier and more efficacious to meditate in such places than at home, as they have been sanctified by the presence of the great ones. As soon as seekers go there, their minds are spontaneously drawn into the Presence. Doing spiritual practice at home is like rowing a boat against the wind in a turbulent river, whereas practice in the presence of great sages or in holy places is like sailing with the wind and

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<sup>3</sup> One of the Puranas (ancient Hindu scriptures).

current behind us – effortless and tension-free. Psychotronics recognizes that when a strong resolve or emotion arises in a person, its power is impressed in that space, influencing those who come into its proximity later. Any seeker who has even a little experience in meditation instantly notices such an influence. However, care should be exercised when choosing a place for *sadhana*, especially when the seeker does not have the guidance of a competent guru. Each place has its own effect or influence and the seeker must choose one that is suitable to their *samskaras*. If it is not compatible it will not be helpful to their *sadhana* and at times could even be harmful.

Based on this principle the sages have revealed a secret for successful *sadhana*: seekers who are sincere in their purpose should visit their guru as often as they can, while those who are totally dedicated to *sadhana* should stay with the guru (or at their tomb) until the goal is reached. The great ones have not only shared this counsel with us but many of them lived it too. Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi is a recent and outstanding example of this. An exponent of the *advaita* school who urged all to realize the “I” glowing in the heart and to enquire into the question “Who am I?”, Bhagavan’s devotion, love and affection for Arunachala sometimes puzzles his devotees. He realized the Self at his home in Madurai, but even after that he cherished an intense longing for the *darshan* of Lord Arunachaleswara, which impelled him swiftly to that place and kept him there for the remainder of his life, never leaving it for a moment. Bhagavan used to say that Arunachaleswara was his guru and that Arunachala was his *gurusthan* (the place of his Master).

It is intriguing to see why Bhagavan had to rush to Arunachala and what was there for him that was not available in Madurai. Once a devotee asked Ramana, “Bhagavan, is it not your divine power that is drawing innumerable devotees here from all over the world?” Bhagavan quickly cut him short, saying, “Then what was the power that pulled Bhagavan to this place? It is that same divine power (Arunachala) that is attracting

everyone here.” It was not out of modesty that Bhagavan spoke like this – and if we understand the inner meaning of his words, a great secret of *sadhana* will be revealed. Furthermore, we will also understand why Sri Sai Baba came to Shirdi and settled there, and the example he thus set for us.

Today, millions of devotees are drawn to Shirdi by the divine power of Sai Baba – but what is the power that brought Sai to Shirdi? Baba’s reply was, “It is my Guru’s place. My Guru’s tomb is here,” and that is why he settled there and made it his home. Sri Sai Baba had transcended form and proved that he was one with all beings. He had shown by his numerous acts his state of non-duality and omnipresence. We, on the other hand, are still struggling with a sense of separation and duality. When he who had achieved such perfection and glory stayed so devotedly at his *gurusthan* and sought refuge there, is it not foolish on our part to say, “Is not Baba everywhere? Do we really need to go to Shirdi to see him?” The words are actually a camouflage for our own prevarication and meanness. A trip to Shirdi involves expenditure of time and money and putting our worldly affairs aside for a while, and we lack the resolve to do this. The great *advaita* teacher Sri Adi Sankara has warned, “*Bhāvādvaitam sadākurvat; kriyādvaitam nakarhichit; advaitam trishulokeshu nādvaitam gurunā saba.*” (“Practise non-duality in thought but do not practise it in deed. You may follow non-duality anywhere in the three worlds, but never with regard to your Guru!”) To his devotees Sri Sai Baba is the supreme *sadguru* and it is a fact that he is present everywhere in all beings. Even though it is the aim of Sai devotees to realize the truth of this fact, we should not forget that it was revealed to us by the form of Sri Sai that lived and moved in Shirdi.

Baba once said, “Baba is not this three-and-a-half cubit body. If anyone thinks of me like that they have not seen me at all.” However, he also said, “Whoever steps into this mosque with devotion is freed from their suffering due to karma,” and “I will fulfil the purpose of my incarnation. My dust will speak

for me. I will be vigorous from the tomb as well,” and “My tomb will speak and move with those who make me their refuge.” Baba showed many devotees that no harm would come to them so long as they stayed in Shirdi. He instructed many either directly or through dream-visions to visit Shirdi in order to get their desires fulfilled. Sri Upasani Baba, an expert in yoga practice, was unable to overcome an obstacle in his *sadbana* and approached many sages and saints for relief, but in vain. Finally he came to Shirdi and sought Baba’s grace. Baba gave him only one *sadbana*: to stay in Shirdi for four years. Upasani asked Baba, “What *sadbana* should I do in those four years?” Baba told him, “Nothing. Just eat and be quiet. That is enough. I will do what has to be done.” This means that simply staying in Shirdi with sincerity of purpose is itself a great *sadbana*. Baba also said, “Whatever you buy in Shirdi is my *prasad*,” and “Whoever sweeps and cleans Gurusthan (the abode of my guru) and lights incense on Thursdays and Fridays, will be blessed by God.” All these reveal the immense importance Baba gave to holy Shirdi.

Even today innumerable devotees who visit Shirdi continue to taste the bliss of Sai’s stupendous presence. One can see obvious changes and improvements in their lives after their sojourn in Shirdi.

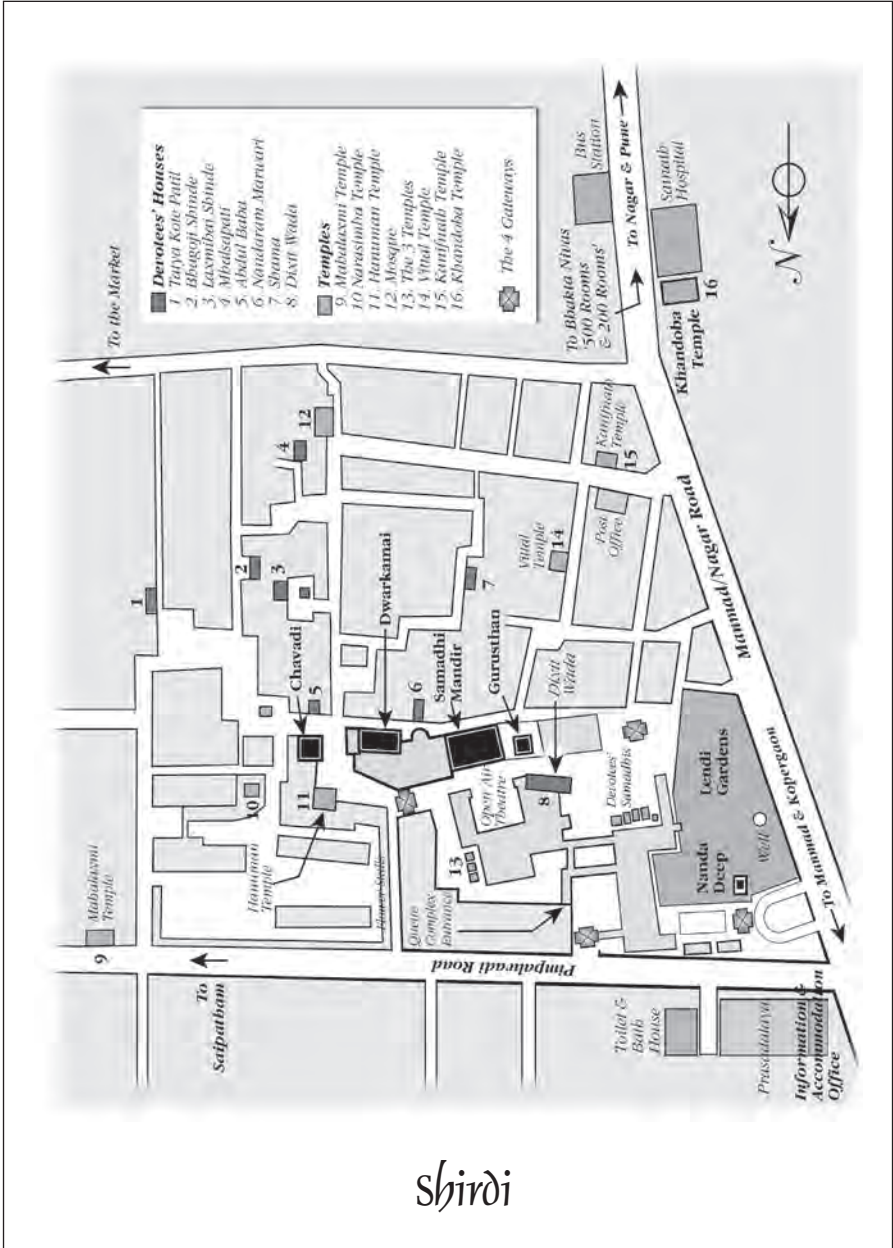
A thorn must be removed with a thorn. If we want to erase the feeling of duality from our hearts or, in Baba’s words, “to demolish the wall between you and me” we must take the help of the contiguous parts of that duality – the form of Sri Sai Baba, his unique presence and the power of holy Shirdi.







Regional Map



shirdi





## Introduction

# The Village of Shirdi

*“Verily Shirdi is my Pandharpur and Sai Baba is Lord Vittal. Pure and unalloyed devotion (which flows at Shirdi) is the River Chandrabbaga; mindful awareness in the hearts of devotees in Shirdi is the holy locus where Bhakta Pundalik is ensconced. Attention one and all! Come, come quickly and make obeisance to Sai Baba!*

Das Ganu Maharaj (Shirdi Noon Arati, psalm No. IV)

Roughly halfway down the Indian subcontinent, in the state of Maharashtra, about 300 kms inland from the state capital of Mumbai (Bombay), lies the small town of Shirdi. Little more than an overgrown village, Shirdi is situated in the heart of the sugar-cane belt of Maharashtra. In the Rahata Taluka of Ahmednagar District, Shirdi is home to about 22,000 people and is the pilgrimage destination of a further eight to ten million a year. It is said to be the most frequented place of pilgrimage in India after Tirupati in Andhra Pradesh. And why do people come to this dusty rural corner of India in such vast numbers? To seek the blessings of Sri Sai Baba, as they have done for more than one hundred years!

Before we explore the Shirdi of the second millennium, let us take a brief look at the village as it would have appeared to a contemporary of Sai Baba.

When Sri Sai Baba came to Shirdi in the mid-nineteenth century, it was a rustic hamlet of about a thousand people



(mostly labourers and artisans), with approximately 200 houses, one village well, a few shops selling basic provisions and some small, rather run-down temples. The village was partially bordered by prickly cactus, and the present Lendi Gardens was an area of wasteland with a grove of trees and two streams running through it. The state of Maharashtra did not exist (it was created only in 1960), the area being divided up under British rule into the Bombay Presidency, and the Nizam's Dominions, which were independent.

By 1910 the village of Shirdi had become slightly more prosperous, though Mrs Tarkhad, a Sai Baba devotee and regular visitor from Bombay, still found it "little more than a neglected hamlet without any lighting, sweeping or other conveniences of civilization... The streets and passages were all dark and unlit at night."<sup>1</sup> By then, Baba's mosque had already taken on the character of a *darbar* (royal court), which it was to retain till the end of his mortal days.

The sacred Godavari River, which has its source a few kilometres away from nearby Nasik, flows not far from Shirdi. Pilgrims coming from the direction of Manmad/Kopergaon have to cross the river near Kopergaon. Visitors to Shirdi often take a dip in its holy waters. Geographically, Shirdi is also linked to the pilgrim sites of Nasik, Pandharpur and Gangapur. Maharashtra itself has a long and rich tradition of poet-saints – Jnaneshwar, Namdev, Janabai, Eknath, Tukaram (several of whose psalms have been incorporated into the Shirdi *aratis*), and Sufi saints, so it is fitting that Sri Sai Baba should have appeared here and further blessed the land.

Any visitor alighting at Shirdi today will find it abuzz with devotional activity and energy, day and night. Moreover, many new buildings have been constructed in the last few years and the Shri Sai Baba Sansthan recently completed its grand

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<sup>1</sup> *Devotees' Experiences of Sri Sai Baba*, by B. V. Narasimhaswami, Hyderabad: Akhanda Sainama Saptaha Samithi, 1989. (Orig. pub. 1934.)



master-plan for the reconstruction of the Temple Complex. What emerged is an elegant and spacious complex, fulfilling the purpose of paying homage to Baba and enabling visitors to experience his presence in a more congenial environment. Though still not much more than a village, Shirdi these days is filled with hotels, lodges, places to eat, travel agencies, booths broadcasting devotional music, and small shops selling flower garlands, incense, puja materials, books on Sai Baba, cards of Sai Baba, pictures of Sai Baba, statues of Sai Baba... and an ever-expanding variety of souvenirs: in short, everything to facilitate a pilgrim's visit – for life in Shirdi revolves almost exclusively around Sai Baba.

Wherever you turn, you are reminded that *this* was where Sai Baba spent his life; it was *here* that the saint settled; it was from *here* that he influenced and moulded the lives of countless human beings; and it was from here that a divine influence has emanated, so powerful, so mysterious and so irresistible, that it drew – and draws – millions to it. Pulled by the magnetic force of Sai Baba, a tangible sense of the sacred, and a thrill of recognition that the divine is immanent and is responding to our prayers and needs, the number of pilgrims visiting Shirdi is increasing at a phenomenal rate. When G. S. Khaparde, one of the prominent contemporary devotees of Sri Sai Baba, remarked, “Sai Baba fulfils my idea of God on earth,” he was expressing the sentiment and experience of many. This continues to be the reality for those who are fortunate enough to come into contact with Sai Baba, and Shirdi is the place where this reality can be most deeply and immediately experienced.

# Who is Sai Baba?

*“The life of Sai Baba is as wide and as deep as the infinite ocean; all can dive deep into it and take out precious gems (of knowledge and bhakti) and distribute them.”*

Shri Sai Satcharitra

Who is Sai Baba? This is not an easy question to answer! Even if we were to assemble all the available information, an adequate explanation is likely to elude us. One might as well ask “what” as much as “who”, for how to describe the indescribable? How to explain the inexplicable? And how to speak about the unspeakably mysterious? As G. R. Dabholkar (alias Hemadpant), the illustrious author of the *Shri Sai Satcharitra*<sup>1</sup> helplessly submitted, “Who can describe Baba’s boundless love and his wonderful natural knowledge and his all-pervasiveness?” In fact, here Hemadpant has given us a clue to Baba’s identity: for many of his devotees, Baba is an embodiment of love, “boundless love”, and once we begin to explore the question of who Baba is, we realize that it is not something to be described, but rather something each of us can experience for ourselves. Then, as Hemadpant says, “Blessed are they who can experience one or all of these!”

Sai Baba is revered as one of the greatest saints ever seen in India, endowed with unprecedented powers and worshipped as a God incarnate. This mysterious being, who

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<sup>1</sup> *Shri Sai Satcharitra, The Wonderful Life and Teachings of Shri Sai Baba*, by G. R. Dabholkar, translated by N. V. Gunaji, Shirdi: Shri Sai Sansthan, 1999. (Orig. pub. 1944.) The *Satcharitra* is the most authoritative account of Baba’s life and teachings (see p. 133).



arrived unannounced in Shirdi as a youth and remained there throughout his long life, transformed the lives of those who met him and continues to do so for those whose hearts are touched by his love.

Baba stated that his mission is to “give blessings” and he proves it in myriad ways: healing the sick, saving lives, protecting the vulnerable, averting accidents, granting offspring, facilitating financial gain, bringing people into harmony with themselves and each other and, above all, in effecting the spiritual evolution and transformation of those who come to him. Baba is, as one of his contemporary devotees put it, “the embodiment of the Supreme Spirit, lighting the *sadbakas’* path by his every word and action.”<sup>2</sup> To his devotees, Baba is nothing less than God.

An outstanding aspect of Sai Baba is that he is beyond distinctions of religion, caste or creed. Some believe him to be Hindu, others see him as a Muslim. He embodied all religions yet was free from all strictures. Hindus and Muslims find their meeting point in Sai, and people from all communities and all walks of life are united by the great love and reverence Baba inspires in them. “I look on all with an equal eye,” said Baba, and he would brook no dispute or religious bigotry among his disparate devotees. As Sri Babuji observes in *Arati Sai Baba*, “Not identifying in totality with any religious community, by steering himself along an unbiased middle path of transcendence, seems to be the constant leitmotif of Baba’s lifestyle. The popular notion is that Baba expressed himself as a Hindu to Hindus and as a Muslim to Muslims. However, in most cases Baba acted vice versa, insisting that the Hindus should accept him as a fakir and the Muslims as a Brahmin!”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Sri Sai Baba’s Charters and Sayings*, by B.V. Narasimhaswami, Mylapore, Chennai: All India Sai Samaj, 1999 (orig. pub. 1939); from the Foreword by Justice M. B. Rege.

<sup>3</sup> *Arati Sai Baba, the Psalm Book of Shirdi Aratis*, by Sainathuni Sarath Babuji, Shirdi: Saipatham Publications, 1996.



Hindus could claim Baba as their own as he responded to their needs and permitted worship according to their rituals, but they could not deny the fact that his dwelling place was a mosque and the name of Allah was ever on his lips.

As for Baba's style of teaching, he did not deliver lectures and rarely gave formal teachings. Rather, he taught by parable, direct experience, and the example of his own life. Baba's way is to cater directly to the needs of each individual and he did not require his devotees to take up any rituals or conventionally prescribed practice, nor did he favour any particular path over another. Baba generally discouraged people from changing their chosen form of worship. Indeed, once when a Hindu devotee converted to Islam, Baba slapped him and exclaimed, "What! You have changed your father?"

The *Sbri Sai Satcharitra* (Ch. 19) reveals an inkling of the infinite variety of methods that Baba used to "teach" his devotees.

"Sometimes Baba observed a long silence which was, in a way, his dissertation on Brahman; at other times, he was Consciousness-Bliss incarnate, surrounded by his devotees. Sometimes he spoke in parables, and at other times, indulged in wit and humour. At times, he was quite unambiguous; and at times he seemed enraged. Sometimes he gave his teachings in a nutshell, at other times he argued at length. Many a time, he was very plain. In this way, he gave varied instructions to many, according to their requirements."

In everyday life, Baba never missed an opportunity to point out something that would benefit an individual's evolution. This could come in the form of direct instruction, or devotees might be put in circumstances where they were forced to realize something: "Like a loving mother forcing bitter but wholesome medicines down the throats of her children for the sake of their health, Sai Baba imparted spiritual instructions to His devotees." (Ch.11)

Baba's "teachings" sometimes appear contradictory, but this is because it was tailored to what a particular individual needed



at a particular time. Thus sometimes he would encourage the reading of specific scriptures, but at other times, also sitting quietly; sometimes doing *japa*, but also ceasing to do *japa*; activity in the world, but also temporary withdrawal from it; puja to one's *ishtadevata* (chosen deity) and *kirtan* (including *namasaptaha* – singing God's name continuously for seven days), but on other occasions he would show that there was no need for such things, and so on. There are also several instances recorded of Baba reinforcing a devotee's faith by manifesting to them in the form of their *ishtadevata*.<sup>4</sup>

Above all, however, Baba taught through an experience of love. The limitless love he extended to his devotees was reflected in their loving devotion and dependence on him. Baba spoke memorably about the great love between himself and his own guru; it was indescribable, he said, all-compelling, and filled them both with unsurpassable bliss. It is this powerful emotion that Baba triggers in his devotees, which then becomes the basis for all his teaching. Thus, more than anything else, Baba advocated trust and dependence on the *sadguru*, who, he repeatedly said, would take care of everything.

Baba's love and protection was such that it is often described as "motherly". The written experiences of the devotees and even the *arati* songs abound with joyful references to this; Baba also often spoke of his "children".<sup>5</sup> As Sri Babuji wrote in *Arati Sai Baba*, "If we are to sum up Sai Baba's life, it is the spontaneous overflow of bounteous grace, in the form of spiritual and temporal well-being, inundating those who take refuge in him." For Sai Baba not only guided spiritual aspirants to the final destination, but he also looked compassionately on those seeking fulfilment of worldly desires. He is the epitome

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<sup>4</sup> For example, to a doctor who worshipped Lord Rama and was apprehensive about visiting Shirdi in case he would have to bow to a Muslim, Baba appeared as Rama himself, and the doctor ran joyfully to him and fell at his feet. (*Shri Sai Satcharitra*, Ch. 12)

<sup>5</sup> He also referred to his mosque as "the mother of the simple devotees, whom she will save in calamities". (*Shri Sai Satcharitra*, Ch. 22)



of Sri Babuji's statement that "the *sadguru* is the bridge which fuses the spiritual with the material". Once when a devotee objected to people going to Baba only for temporal benefit, Baba rebuked him, saying, "Don't think like that! That's what my people come to me for! First they get their desires fulfilled, then once they are comfortably placed in life they follow me and progress further." In what has now become a famous adage, he once said, "I give my devotees what they ask for until they ask for what I want to give." To this day, examples proliferate of how Baba is daily catering to the needs of the millions who worship him. They give us a small glimpse of Baba's unique greatness – his omniscience, omnipresence, his divine identity – and his overflowing love for all beings.

Though we are richly rewarded when we investigate the *leelas* of Baba, in turning to his biography we are faced with a distinct dearth of material – very few facts can be confirmed. When questioned about his origins, Baba gave varying and enigmatic replies, which were sometimes even contradictory. One such exchange was with the local magistrate:

*Magistrate:* What is your name?

*Baba:* They call me Sai Baba.

*Magistrate:* Your father's name?

*Baba:* Also Sai Baba.

*Magistrate:* Your guru's name?

*Baba:* Venkusa.

*Magistrate:* Creed or religion?

*Baba:* Kabir.

*Magistrate:* Caste or race?

*Baba:* Parvardigar (i.e. God).

*Magistrate:* Age, please?

*Baba:* Lakhs of years.<sup>6</sup>

From this we may gather that Baba was in some way connected to the lineage of Kabir, the 14th century poet-mystic

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<sup>6</sup> *Devotees' Experiences*, p.121. A lakh is 100,000.





who was also a catalyst for bringing the Hindu and Muslim communities together. Once Baba said, “I was Kabir and used to spin yarn” (Kabir’s trade was weaving).<sup>7</sup>

We cannot be sure which year Baba arrived in Shirdi, nor how old he was, though it is usually estimated as being between 1864 and 1872, at an age of about thirty. Some biographers aver that Baba was born to poor Brahmin parents and entrusted to the care of a Sufi fakir as a small child. It is generally accepted that Baba came to Shirdi as the guest of a wedding party led by Chand Bhai Patil, who had encountered Baba when looking for his lost horse in the Aurangabad district (Nizam State). On arrival in Shirdi, Baba was hailed by Mhalsapati, a local priest, “*Ya, Sai!*” (Welcome, Saint). Mhalsapati had immediately recognized something saintly in the young fakir and he became, along with a couple of friends, one of Baba’s first devotees (see pp. 14 and 116).

Initially, Sai Baba stayed on the outskirts of the village of Shirdi, then under a neem tree for four to five years at the spot now called Gurusthan, before shifting to an abandoned mosque which later became known as Dwarkamai. Slowly his greatness was revealed and his fame spread far and wide, until by the end of his life he was attracting thousands of people to Shirdi. In the last decade of his life Baba was worshipped with all pomp and ceremony. This he appeared to tolerate, rather than welcome. The mosque was likened to a maharajah’s *darbar*, yet Baba never changed his simple and austere lifestyle. To the end, he continued to beg for his food, wear a patched and threadbare *kafni* (robe), sleep on the floor and share whatever he had or was given.

Sai Baba did not found any religious order, institution, ashram or lineage, nor did he leave a successor or initiate anyone into formal *sannyas*. Baba blessed and served all, saying, “My treasury is open and I can give anyone what they

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<sup>7</sup> *Charters and Sayings* no. 477.



want,” though he added, “but I have to see whether they are qualified to receive my gift.”<sup>8</sup>

Baba took *mahasamadhi* in Shirdi in 1918. Today, the once insignificant village of Shirdi, now sanctified by Baba’s presence, is a major centre of pilgrimage. People flock here in ever-increasing numbers to pay homage to the Divine and to experience the truth of Baba’s promise that he would be active in answering our prayers even from his tomb. Investigating the place where Sai Baba lived and carried out his mission may be a powerful means of becoming more intimate with him. An examination of the stories and events that occurred at the places with which he is associated may kindle our love and understanding and draw Baba deeper into our hearts. Baba said that he was a slave of those who loved him, that he was ever living to help those who turn to him, and that he has to take care of his children night and day. In coming to Baba’s Shirdi, we have come to the concrete source of such promises.



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<sup>8</sup> *Shri Sai Satcharitra*, Ch. 17.

## How to use *this* guide

The guide is arranged in two parts: one is a short walking tour of the six main places in Shirdi (see box, right) and the other gives more information about these and other places. The walking tour is interwoven with the more comprehensive text and runs throughout the book. Each of the two parts may be used independently of the other. This means that some points may be repeated, but we felt that visitors would prefer the option of a brief description while walking through Shirdi, with a separate presentation of more detailed information about these places and events associated with them.

A glossary has been provided at the end of the book for readers not familiar with the terminology of Indian spirituality. Please note that definitions are confined to terms as used in this book.

Works quoted are cited fully on first reference and by title only thereafter. Full citations are repeated in Suggested Reading, p. 133.



### The Walking Tour

The Walking Tour is a short guide which takes you to the main places in Sai Baba's Shirdi and introduces you to the important points of this holy village. These are: Khandoba Temple, Gurusthan, Dwarkamai, the Chavadi, Lendi Gardens and the Samadhi Mandir. With the exception of Khandoba Temple (about half a kilometre from the Samadhi Mandir), the main sites in Shirdi are all within a few metres range of each other.

Throughout the book the Walking Tour is set in this grey tint box for easy reference and may be easily found by flicking through the pages. Carry it with you as you explore Shirdi!



# *Khandoba Temple*



**I**n the sequence of events destined to become famous as part of the early life of a most beloved and very great saint, this small temple is of two-fold importance: first as the spot where Sri Sai Baba halted on his entry into Shirdi



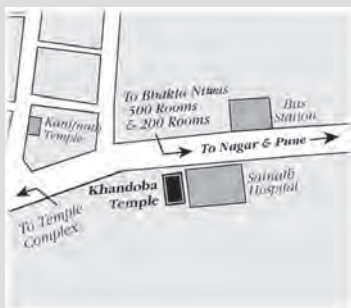
with the wedding party of Chand Bhai Patil, and secondly as the place where he acquired his name.

It is said that a young man, dressed in the Muslim fashion in a *kafni* and cap, arrived in a bullock cart as the guest of the wedding party. As the party approached the temple, the priest, Mhalsapati, on seeing the fakir, called out, "Ya, Sai!" ("Welcome, Sai!") and the name remained ever after. (*Sai* is a Persian word meaning "saint" or "holy", and *Baba* means "father".) In this way, it was Mhalsapati who was responsible for Baba's name, which has since become the sacred mantra of thousands of his devotees.



## The Walking Tour

### **Khandoba Temple**



When Sri Sai Baba arrived in Shirdi in the second half of the nineteenth century, Khandoba Temple was the first place he came to, hence its significance to Sai devotees. So let us also start here and follow his footsteps.

Coming from Manmad/Kopergaon direction, the small Khandoba Temple is on our right on the main Manmad-Nagar road, opposite the bus station near the Sainath Hospital, →

In those days the temple was on the periphery of the village in the midst of a burial ground. The structure was very basic and did not even have a door. However, it seems to have appealed to Baba's temperament as he commented to the incumbent priest, Mhalsapati, that being so quiet and solitary, it would make a good spot for an ascetic like himself to stay.

Here, we may pause to imagine for a moment the impact this must have had



on the pious yet conservative Mhalsapati. A young stranger, stepping down from a cart filled with Muslims, and looking like one himself, was calmly approaching his cherished temple and suggesting he might stay there! Although Mhalsapati had an intuitive respect for Baba and was accustomed to serving visiting holy men, both Hindus and Muslims alike, his orthodoxy would not allow any such personage to enter his temple, and so Baba strolled away. Interestingly, however, this same man was soon to become one of Baba's most earnest and adoring devotees, and was the first to offer worship to Baba.

Khandoba was the tutelary deity of the Mhalsapati family, and Mhalsapati was the temple's hereditary priest. Khandoba – originally a pastoral deity but now worshipped as a form of Shiva – is popular throughout Maharashtra. The temple then was a simple, rural temple; today, it is a small, well-maintained and neatly kept building. The idol of Khandoba – a colourful image – is flanked by his two wives: on the right sits Baanai who, according to tradition, came from a shepherd family; on the left is Mhalsa, who represents the business community. Mhalsa is worshipped as a form of the goddess Parvati and Baanai is venerated as a form of the goddess Ganga.<sup>1</sup>



about ten minutes walk from the Samadhi Mandir (main Sai Baba temple containing his sacred tomb). It is an old construction graced by a large banyan tree.

Apart from being the scene of Baba's arrival in Shirdi, it is also where Sai Baba acquired his name when the temple priest, Mhalsapati, spontaneously uttered, "Ya Sai!" ("Welcome, Sai!").

cont. on p.18

<sup>1</sup> Some scholars maintain that Khandoba has Muslim connections: in the big Khandoba Temple in Jejuri, one of the deity's guards is Muslim; in some places one of his wives is depicted as Muslim and Khandoba is portrayed as a Pathan; and in *Martanda Vijaya* Muslims are said to be among his *bhaktas*.



At the entrance to the temple is a large banyan tree which is mentioned in the *Shri Sai Satcharitra* as the place where the bullock cart halted. It is now commemorated with a small shrine and *padukas* at its base.

Just in front of the temple building is a rectangular sandpit. We might wonder what this is doing in such a location. In fact it is for fire-walking, and although it is rarely used these days, there is still one annual festival when villagers gather for an exuberant night of *bhajan* and express their devotion by daringly walking on hot coals. The festival is known as *champa shashti* and takes place in December – *shashti* means “six” and the festival occurs six days after the new moon.

Baba would sometimes stop at Khandoba Temple on his way back from Rahata (a neighbouring village some five kilometres away). Upasani Maharaj, a prominent devotee of Sri Sai Baba, spent about two years here, on instruction from Baba to stay in Shirdi for four years. Baba told Sri Upasani that he would win the grace of Khandoba on completion of the four years' tenure. Later, in the 1920s, Upasani Maharaj sponsored the renovation of the temple as a gesture of gratitude for the benefit he had derived there.





# Gurusthan



*“In human life, the guru’s place is pre-eminent. By keeping utmost faith in the guru alone, everything is obtained. A devotee’s entire strength is due to his guru. Devotion to the guru is superior to devotion to gods and goddesses. The guru is the supreme being.”*

Sri Sai Baba

**G**urusthan means “place of the guru”. It is where Baba spent most of his time when he first came to Shirdi, and also where, according to Baba, the tomb of his own guru is located, by the neem tree. Gurusthan is



therefore one of the most important places in Shirdi. Once when some villagers were digging the foundations for Sathe Wada (see p. 111) just behind the neem tree, they came across some bricks

in the soil and what looked like the opening of a tunnel. Uncertain whether to proceed or not, they asked Baba what they should do. He told them that this was the site of the tombs of his ancestors and that it would be better not to disturb them.<sup>1</sup>



## The Walking Tour

### Gurusthan



Leaving the temple of Khandoba behind, we turn left onto the main road, cross over, and making our way past the trinket stands and tea stalls which crowd the roadside, continue straight on to Pimpalwadi Road. Easily missed because its rather narrow entrance is usually congested, this is the main thoroughfare in Shirdi. Let us go down here, passing the small shops filled →

There are several references to Baba's guru recorded in the literature, but they are somewhat enigmatic, and it is not clear whether he was referring to a guru in his present lifetime, or a previous one.

We have already seen (in the Foreword) the importance that *mabatmas* give to staying at the place and tombs of saints. In accordance with this principle Baba made Shirdi his base because it was the place of his guru. To really grasp the significance of the *gurusthan* in this tradition, we should understand the importance


<sup>1</sup> Baba once said that there was a tunnel that ran from here to the Chavadi. On another occasion he said that the site contained the tomb of Kabir.



of the guru. Sai Baba has told us that learning and scriptural knowledge are not necessary, but rather, “Trust in the guru fully. That is the only *sadbhava*.” A reading of his life and teachings helps to inculcate this trust and shows us that Baba’s life was itself the epitome of this central truth. As B. V. Narasimhaswami has commented, “Baba’s biography is the practical illustration of what guru and *sisbha* mean, and of the principles that govern their mutual relation.”<sup>2</sup>


Perhaps the first thing that catches our eye at Gurusthan is the huge neem tree. This tree gave shelter to Baba for a few years when he stayed beneath it. Neem has many medicinal properties, though its leaves are notoriously bitter. However, some people once reported that the leaves of one of the branches tasted sweet.<sup>3</sup> For them this was

<sup>2</sup> *Life of Sai Baba*, by B.V. Narasimhaswami, Mylapore, Chennai: All India Sai Samaj, 1995. (Orig. pub. 1934.) One of these principles is reliance on the guru and the consequent sense of peace and security. This was the common experience of devotees of Sri Sai, as Mrs Tarkhad observes in *Devotees’ Experiences*: “Directly we went there, we felt safe, that nothing could harm us. When I sat in his presence I always forgot my pain, nay, my body itself. Hours would pass and I would be blissfully unconscious of their passing. That was a unique experience shared by all his devotees.”

 with garlands and puja paraphernalia. A few metres ahead on the left side is a large building, Prasad-alaya, which houses on the ground floor the enormous dining hall run by the Sansthan. Turning right at the first opening, we now enter the Temple Complex and from here the whole area is pedestrianized. We cross the square and in a minute or so reach the mandir road, turn left, and come to Gurusthan immediately on our right. “Gurusthan” (literally, “place of the guru”) refers to this area west of the Samadhi Mandir where Baba stayed for about four years when he first came to Shirdi. The “guru” in “Gurusthan” refers to Sai Baba’s guru, for Baba told the villagers that this was the place of his guru’s tomb and was what had drawn →



a sign of Baba's grace; others see it as evidence of the tree's exceptional sanctity.

 him to Shirdi. The large and graceful neem tree, which gave Baba shelter during his stay here, is now held in great reverence. It is enclosed by a railing, along with a statue and a portrait of Baba, a small Shivalingam, and a pair of marble padukas ("footprints") on a pedestal. Many people offer incense here and do pradakshina (circumambulation) around the sacred area.

cont. on p.28

tical and down-to-earth Baba could be. In the early 1900s, after Baba had moved to the mosque, construction work on Sathe Wada was hampered by a long branch of the tree. However, nobody wanted to remove it as this tree had been sanctified by Baba's stay under it. When Baba was approached for his advice he told the villagers, "Cut off however much is interfering with the construction. Even if it is our own foetus which is lying across the womb, we must cut it!"<sup>4</sup> But despite this clear

instruction from Baba, none dared meddle with the tree. Eventually Baba himself climbed up and lopped off the branch.

Another reason for the villagers' reluctance to prune the tree may have been that some time previously a boy had climbed the tree to trim it, and had fallen to the ground and died. At that moment Baba, who was in the mosque, sounded a note of distress, blowing *sanka* (the sound a conch shell makes when blown into) with his cupped hands. Baba sometimes did this when a person was in great danger, although he could not have "seen" from the mosque what was occurring at Gurusthan. Villagers linked the boy's death with his attempt to cut the tree, and became afraid to do anything that might have been a sacrilege.

<sup>3</sup> *Charters and Sayings*, no. 74.

<sup>4</sup> *Devotees' Experiences*, p. 113.



Today at Gurusthan, in addition to the neem tree, there is a pair of marble *padukas* on a pedestal, a *Shivalingam* and a statue of Baba. The statue, carved by the grandson of the sculptor of the Samadhi Mandir statue, was donated by Y. D. Dave and installed in 1974; the other items were set up in Baba's time.

The *padukas* were the initiative of a couple of devotees from Bombay. During their visit to Shirdi they became friendly with two local devotees, G. K. Dixit (not to be confused with H. S. "Kakasaheb" Dixit) and Sagun Meru Naik. As they were sitting talking one day, they all felt it would be good if there were some kind of memorial to Baba's advent in Shirdi and his stay under the neem tree. They first thought of laying some *padukas* made of rough stone. Then one of them suggested that if he put the proposal to his employer, Dr Ramrao Kothare (who had accompanied them to Shirdi), he would probably be willing to sponsor something more elegant. Dr Kothare gladly came back to Shirdi from Bombay, drew up a plan for the *padukas* and showed it to Upasani Baba. Sri Upasani made some improvements adding a conch, lotus, and Mahavishnu wheel, and suggested that two of his Sanskrit *slokas* extolling the tree's greatness and Baba's powers be inscribed on the *padukas*' pedestal. These *slokas* constitute part of *Sri Sainatha Mahima Stotram*, which is sung twice a day in Shirdi as part of the noon and evening *aratis*. They translate as follows:

*I bow to Lord Sainath, who by his constant stay at  
the foot of the neem tree – which although bitter and  
unpleasant, was yet oozing nectar – made it better  
than the wish-fulfilling tree.*

*I bow to Lord Sainath, who always takes delight in  
resting under the neem tree and bestowing material  
and spiritual prosperity upon his devotees who  
lovingly attend on him.*

The *padukas* were made in Bombay and sent to Shirdi. When they arrived, Baba said they should be installed on August full moon day. So on 15 August 1912 they were duly taken in



ceremonious procession from Khandoba Temple to the mosque, where Baba touched them and said they were Allah's *padukas* and to put them at the foot of the neem tree.<sup>5</sup>

*Arati* was already being performed every day in Sathe Wada and Dixit Wada, and with the installation of the *padukas* at Gurusthan, a third was started; G. K. Dixit (who had carried them on his head) was employed to officiate.<sup>6</sup>



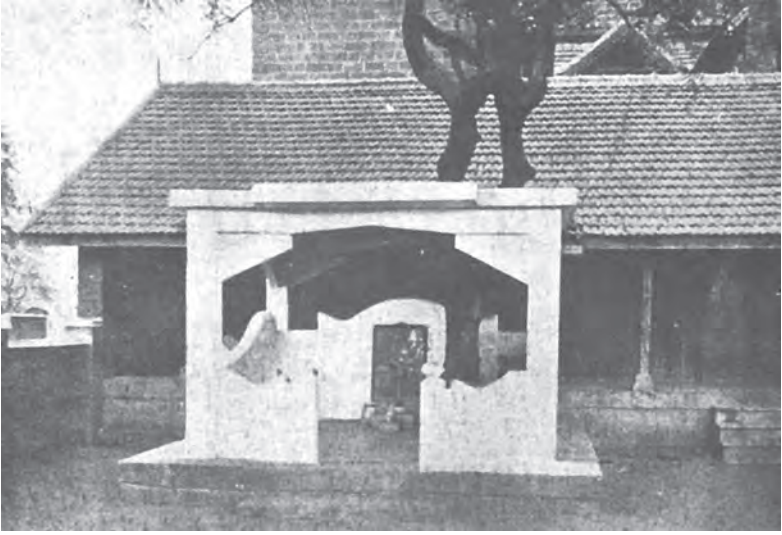
*The padukas at the base of the neem tree in Gurusthan*

A few months after their installation the *padukas* were damaged by a lunatic who also destroyed some of Shirdi's temple idols. The devotees were very distressed, believing it augured ill. Baba, however, took the matter casually and told them simply to repair the crack with cement and undertake a feeding of the poor. Later, the broken *padukas* were replaced and the originals are said to be in the pedestal underneath.

The *lingam* was installed in Gurusthan the same year. It had previously belonged to Megha Shyam, a zealous devotee

<sup>5</sup> The day before the ceremony, Baba received a donation by money order of 25 rupees which he gave towards the costs of the event.

<sup>6</sup> As Sri Babuji points out in *Arati Sai Baba*, "The situation seemed odd because Sathe Wada and Gurusthan are located practically in the same compound. One day Baba made a joke about Sri Jog [who was doing the *aratis* in Sathe Wada]. Pointing at Sri Dixit, he said, 'Look! This boy will surely outdo you. You can't stand in competition with him!' It so turned out that after some time, devotees were →



*An old photograph of Gurusthan before it was enclosed by railings; Sathe Wada can be seen behind*

of Sri Sai Baba, who had taken over officiating at the *arati* in the mosque after the demise of Tatyasaheb Noolkar. How Megha acquired the *lingam* is a beautiful example of Baba's *leela*. Megha was a simple, austere Gujarati Brahmin, who worshipped Shiva but saw his chosen deity in Sai Baba. Characteristically, Baba encouraged his devotee to maintain his worship of Shiva. One day Baba blessed him with a vision, appearing to him early one morning telling him to draw a trident (emblem of Shiva) and leaving behind a few grains of *akshata* (rice that has been coloured red, used in worship). When Megha went to him in the mosque Baba emphatically confirmed the instruction, and Megha returned to his room to carry it out. The next day someone presented a *Shivalingam*

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more attracted to the *aratis* performed at Gurusthan and the attendance at Sathe Wada gradually waned."



to Baba. Baba called Megha over, saying, "Look, Shiva has come for you!" and giving the *lingam* to Megha, told him to use it for worship.

At that time, Megha was staying in Dixit Wada. He took the *lingam* home with him and showed it to H. S. Dixit. Dixit then disclosed a strange coincidence: he had just had his bath

and was thinking of Baba, when he had a vision of a *lingam* arriving at the *wada* – whose exact replica Megha was now bringing!



*The small dbuni in front of Gurusthan*

Megha worshipped this *lingam* with great dedication until the end of his days. When the *padukas* were to be installed, the devotees wanted to take the opportunity to put a *Shivalingam* there too. If there was a tomb here as Baba had said, then according to Hindu custom, it required a *lingam*. They therefore asked Baba's permission and he said they could use the *lingam* that Megha had worshipped

until his death at the beginning of that year. So the *lingam* that we see there now is the same one that Baba lovingly handed over to Megha.

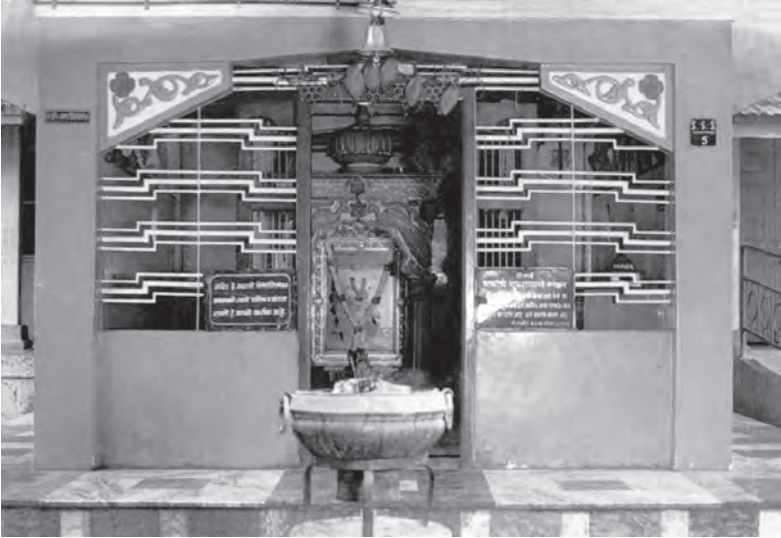
During Baba's lifetime, Gurusthan was completely open and looked quite different from the fully paved and enclosed area it has now become. Sri Sai Baba said that whoever burns incense and cleans here on Thursdays and Fridays would be blessed by Allah (Thursday is sacred to Hindus, and Friday to





Muslims). We assume that out of love and respect for his guru, Baba wishes the place to be venerated and kept clean.

A small *dbuni* on a stand is kept in front of the shrine here. Until recently it was kindled every day by embers brought from the main *dbuni* at the mosque, but this is now done only on Thursdays and Fridays.



*Front view of Gurusthan*

*“Blessed are those who realize that every bit of their fulfilment comes through the sadguru, and only through the sadguru, and remain absorbed in that very awareness.”*

Sri Sainathuni Sarath Babuji

Finally, before we leave Gurusthan, let us return to the mighty neem tree. Since the 1980s, with Sri Babuji’s example and encouragement, more and more devotees have started doing *pradakshina* around the tree (and thereby the tomb). Now, one can often see large numbers of people going around throughout the day and night. Others find that Gurusthan is a



powerful place to sit quietly. Some people regard the tree as a symbol of the Guru's grace under which humanity may take shelter and protection. Indeed, Sai Baba once commented that his devotees are simply resting in the shade of the neem tree while he bears the brunt of their deeds.

### ***Takia***

Just across from Gurusthan, to the east of Dixit Wada opposite the neem tree, near to where an open theatre has recently been built, there used to be a *takia* or small shed. A *takia* is a resting place for visiting fakirs and Baba sometimes spent the night here when he first came to Shirdi.

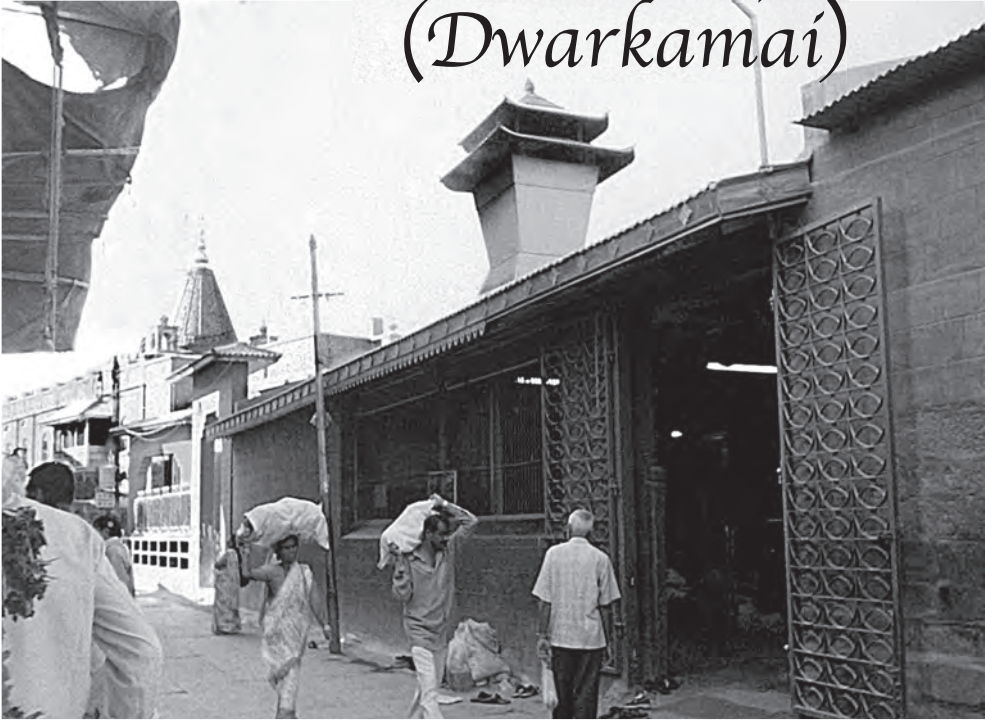
Sai Baba had a great love of music and dance. In his early days he would often go by the *takia* and sing devotional songs, usually in Arabic or Persian, or the (Hindi) songs of Kabir. His voice is described as "very sweet and appealing". Sometimes he would put on bells and anklets and dance around in ecstasy while singing, probably in the company of visiting fakirs who were putting up there for a night or two. Even though the *takia* is not there any more, one can easily imagine the scenes of ecstatic devotion that were creatively enacted here during the night hours.<sup>7</sup>



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<sup>7</sup> See, for example, the ecstatic all-night *qa/wali* sessions that take place in Lendi Gardens and other spots in Shirdi on major festival days.

# Baba's Mosque (Dwarkamai)



*“Highly merciful is this masjid ayi.<sup>1</sup> Once a person  
climbs into her lap, all their troubles are over.”*

Sri Sai Baba

**A**rriving at the mosque for the first time, you may be rather surprised. Was this simple, unadorned structure really the home of “God on earth”? Was this really the centre from which so many miraculous events sprang? Could such a modest building have been the scene of the highest

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<sup>1</sup> *Masjid* means “mosque”, *ayi* means “mother” (when conjoined with another word, it may become “*mayi*” or “*mai*”).



spiritual instruction that flowed forth in almost as many different forms as the number of visitors seeking it?

With its corrugated iron roof and rough stone walls, the mosque

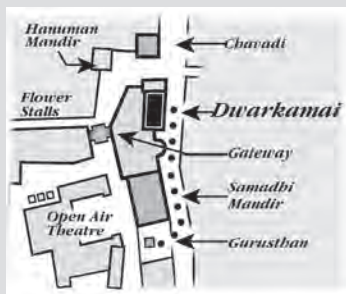
could never be described as grand.<sup>2</sup> Yet, in spite of this – or rather, because of this – it seems to have suited Baba very well. Describing himself as a simple fakir, Baba was a model of dispassion and non-attachment. His personal possessions amounted to little more than a few pieces of cloth, some chillim pipes, a stick, a begging bowl, and a change of *kafni* – and not always even that. Whenever his devotees wanted to refurbish the mosque, Baba resisted, saying that it was not necessary, although basic repair work was gradually carried out.

To the devotees of Sai Baba, Dwarkamai is one of the treasures of Shirdi. The spirit of tolerance, acceptance and welcome for all is very much alive. Baba has said that merely going inside the mosque will confer blessings, and the experiences of



## The Walking Tour

### Dwarkamai



Stepping down from the Gurusthan shrine we turn left and up the three steps into a junction of small lanes or alleys. We turn immediately left and walk down this narrow lane, now crowded with small shops, and make for the mosque a few metres along on our left. Now popularly known as “Dwarkamai”, this mosque is where Baba spent about fifty years of his life and is consequently one →

<sup>2</sup> To improve the construction without losing the style of roof that was there in Baba's time, the Sansthan built a new roof above the existing one in 1999.



devotees confirm this. Sai Baba respected all religions and creeds, and all had free access to the mosque. It is typically unique of Sai Baba that he regarded a place of worship – the mosque – as a mother. He once told a visitor, “Dwarkamai is this very mosque. She makes those who ascend her steps fearless. This *masjid ayi* is very kind. Those who come here reach their goal!” As Sri Babuji has observed, “The Islamic concept of the masjid as the solemn court of the sovereign Creator has been transformed by Sri Sai Baba in his own unique and inimitable way, into the loving lap of a doting mother, the *masjid ayi*.”<sup>3</sup>

On entering the mosque, one is struck by its powerful atmosphere and the intensity and absorption with which visitors are going about their worship. Another point we notice is the great diversity of devotional expression. Some people will be kneeling before Baba's picture or making offerings, others will be praying before the *dhuni* (perpetually burning sacred fire), some may be

 of the most important sites for pilgrims to Shirdi.

Between Gurusthan and Dwarkamai lies the Samadhi Mandir and we pass along the side of it. Although there are two or three small doorways, one cannot usually gain access here. However, if we pause at the first gate (marked “Exit”), we may take Baba's darshan from this spot as the cherished statue of Sri Sai Baba can be seen through the metal shutters, at a distance of about fifteen feet. The mosque is next to the mandir, and as we walk along, if we look up we can see its chimney (newly built in 1998).


In a moment, we reach the mosque and enter the building. On our left is the raised, most important part of the mosque, where we first see Baba (in the form of his portrait) welcoming us from his seat. Let us climb the steps and go straight to →

<sup>3</sup> Arati Sai Baba, Morning Arati XI.



doing *japa* or reading from sacred texts, and others will be sitting in contemplation.

If we spend some time here we may become aware of a mysterious phenomenon.

 the sacred fire (dhuni), which Baba kept all his life. A pair of small silver padukas on the floor here marks the spot where Baba used to spend an hour or two in front of the dhuni every day. Notice also the nimbar (niche) on the western wall (in a mosque the nimbar indicates the direction of Mecca), and in the corner, the grinding stone used by Baba, which plays a role in a leela narrated in the opening chapter of Shri Sai Satcharitra (the celebrated account of Baba's life). Opposite the dhuni, where he used to sit and receive people, is a captivating portrait of Baba. People continue to pay their respects here. In Baba's early days only this upper portion of the mosque existed.

The other main point of interest in Dwarakamai is the large stone on which Baba once sat. This is to be found underneath the famous →

The “*ayi*” aspect of the *masjid* reveals itself in a number of ways and we feel we are sitting in Baba's drawing room. See that child over there happily crawling around with a toffee in its mouth, or her sister colouring a comic book? And what about that old man complaining to Baba about his aches and pains, or that woman sitting with her son on her lap telling him a story? Opposite is a large family group. The grandmother has a tiffin tin, and having offered some to Baba, she walks around giving a handful of *payasam* (sweet rice) to everyone in the mosque. We almost feel we are receiving *prasad* from Baba himself, and perhaps we are then reminded of some of the stories in Baba's life in which devotees brought offerings, or when he affectionately distributed fruit or sweets with his own hands. The atmosphere is so homely in this abode of *Sai-mavuli*!



But what is perhaps more remarkable, is that this homeliness co-exists with a powerful experience of the sacred and transcendent. The spirit is profoundly moved by “something” – something indefinable, something great, something mysterious, something magnetically attractive.

As we explore Sai Baba's Shirdi, this aspect of Baba – at once the concerned mother and the Almighty – is shown again and again. Many devotees relate to Baba as a mother, and many as a God supreme. That these two are so perfectly synthesized in Baba – see his care for

both the smallest domestic detail as well as the ultimate spiritual attainment – is perhaps the most beautiful and unique aspect of Shirdi Sai.

When Sai Baba moved into this mosque it was an abandoned and dilapidated mud structure, much smaller than the one we see today. In fact, it extended only as far as the steps and wrought iron dividers enclosing the upper section, with the rest of the area an outside courtyard. There were no iron bars around the mosque or the *dhuni* as there are today, and according to Hemadpant, there were “knee-deep holes and pits in the ground”! Part of the roof had collapsed and the rest was in imminent danger of following, so it was a rather hazardous place to live! Once when Baba was sitting in the mosque, eating with a few devotees, there was a loud crack overhead. Baba immediately raised his hand and said, “*Sabar, sabar,*” (“Wait, wait”). The noise stopped and the group carried on with their meal, but when they got up and went out, a large piece of the roof came crashing down onto the exact spot where they had been sitting!



photo of Baba sitting on that same stone. Both this picture and the one opposite the *dhuni* are the focus of ardent worship.

We may visit Dwarkamai at any time of the day or night, as the front hall below the *dhuni* is never closed.

cont. on p. 64



Baba's devotees sometimes pestered him to allow them to renovate the mosque but his initial response was always to refuse. For him there was no need for any alterations. Once, in the mid-1890s, a devotee had some building materials delivered to the mosque with the intention that they should be used for repair work, but Baba had them redirected to a couple of local temples that were in need of restoration.<sup>4</sup>



*Baba's mosque in the 1920s*

Later, Nana Chandorkar and Nana Nimonkar were determined that some reconstruction should go ahead, while Baba appeared to be equally adamant that it should not, although he eventually gave permission for it through the intervention of Mhalsapati. At first, whatever work was done, Baba would undo. It seems not an uncommon occurrence with

Baba that whenever a new proposal was put forward, particularly with regard to renovation, he would first oppose it, often vehemently, even violently, before eventually acquiescing

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<sup>4</sup> The offering was made by one Gopalrao Gund as a gesture of gratitude for the birth of a son, which finally happened after years of childlessness (despite having three wives) once he had prayed to Baba.





and allowing the work to go ahead. Eventually the construction team resorted to working at night, and then only on those alternate nights when Baba slept in the Chavadi.

By about 1912 the renovation work was complete and all that remained to be done was the metal roofing for the courtyard. For this, one of Baba's most intimate devotees, Tatyā Kote Patil, and some others, arranged for materials to be brought from Bombay. They then set about the work, including digging a trench for the erection of some iron poles, without asking Baba's permission.

When Baba returned from the Chavadi to the mosque and saw what was happening he appeared to be furious, demanding, "What is going on? Who has done this?" He promptly ripped out the poles with his own two hands (though it had taken several people to carry them), and threw stones at the labourers to drive them away. Then he grabbed Tatyā by the scruff of his neck until he was unable to speak and almost choking, and violently berated him.

Most of the labourers fled in terror and Tatyā was left with Baba. Despite his precarious predicament and Baba's vehement objection to the project, Tatyā insisted that the work should be done. Baba threw him to the ground, snatched off the turban that Tatyā always wore, flung it into the trench and set fire to it. Still Tatyā insisted on the need to make repairs and vowed that he would never wear a turban again until the work was complete. Baba finally relented and by evening had cooled down sufficiently to call Tatyā and tell him to again put on a turban. Tatyā, however, refused. Eventually, in his loving concern, Baba gave money to someone to bring new cloth and himself tied a new turban on his steadfast devotee.<sup>5</sup>

Some time after this event, Kakasaheb Dixit replaced the original mud floor with tiles and the work was complete.

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<sup>5</sup>At first, this incident seems to be incomprehensible, but there was always a reason behind Baba's seemingly erratic outbursts. When Baba threw Tatyā's turban into the ditch and burnt it, he also tossed in a one rupee coin, perhaps as some kind of offering, or for purificatory purposes. Though it is tempting to speculate on →



Obeisance to Baba's photo in  
Dwarkamai

When Sri Sai Baba moved into the mosque permanently, he had already been in Shirdi for a number of years, staying mostly under the neem tree, with an occasional night at the mosque or in the near vicinity. It could be said that Baba's settling in the mosque marked a turning point in his life, or rather, in that of the village itself, as the shift brought him into closer contact with the local people.

Although Baba had been healing people since his early days in Shirdi and was sometimes called "*Hakim*" (Doctor), it was a specific and dramatic event which brought him to the attention

of the local populace, and it took place in the mosque. Throughout his life Baba displayed a fondness for lights and lamps and would regularly light *panatis* (small earthenware pots with cotton wicks and oil) in the mosque and certain local temples, in accordance with the Hindu and Muslim view that places of worship should be illuminated at night. For this he depended on the generosity of a few local shopkeepers from whom he used to beg oil. One day, however, his suppliers

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the reasons behind Baba's actions, we can never really fathom his motives; he himself has declared, "My ways are inscrutable." Baba's close devotees were accustomed to his outbursts of apparent anger, viewing them as a manifestation of grace that was sometimes needed to remove obstacles in the way of a project's success or a person's progress, rather than an as expression of genuine disapproval.



brusquely refused to give him any oil, claiming that they were out of stock. Baba took this calmly and returned to the mosque empty-handed. The shopkeepers followed him in the gathering gloom, curious to see what he would do. What they witnessed brought them to their knees in awe and wonder. Baba took some water from the pot kept in the mosque, and put it in the jar he used for collecting oil. Shaking it up he drank the oily water, then took another jar of water and filled the four lamps with it. Next he lit the lamps, and – to the shopkeepers' astonishment – they not only burned, but remained alight all night. Afraid of being cursed by a man of such powers, the shopkeepers begged Baba's forgiveness. This was freely given, but Baba pointed out the importance of speaking the truth – if they did not want to give, they should simply say so directly and not lie about it.

The wondrous nature of this event, which is said to have taken place in 1892, and the many such *leelas* which followed, precipitated an influx of visitors to the Shirdi mosque that has never stopped growing. To this day, lamps are burnt continually in Dwarkamai, providing us with an unbroken link to Baba and the lamps that he himself started and lovingly kept alight.

During Baba's time Dwarkamai was always referred to simply as "the *masjid*" or mosque. The name "Dwarkamai" came into popular vogue only after Baba passed away but was first coined when a devotee once expressed a wish to make a pilgrimage to Dwarka, a town in Gujarat sacred to Krishna. Baba replied that there was no need to go as that very mosque was Dwarka. "Dwarka" also means "many-gated", and "*mai*" means mother, hence "the many-gated mother" (and Baba did often call it the "*masjid ayi*"). The author of the English adaptation of *Sbri Sai Satcharitra*, N. V. Gunaji, identifies another definition of Dwarka as given in the *Skanda Purana* – a place open to all four castes of people (Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Sudras) for the realization of the four corresponding aims of human existence (i.e. *moksba* or liberation, *dharma* or righteousness, *artha* or



wealth, and *kama* or sensual pleasure). In fact, Baba's mosque was open not only to all castes, but also to untouchables and those without caste. All these interpretations of the name are appropriate for Sai Baba's mosque, but the association that is dearest to the heart of a sentimental Sai devotee is that pointed out by Sri Babuji – *dwar-ka-mai*: the mother (*mai*) waiting at the door (*dwark*) to nourish her child. Just as a loving mother will allow her child to continue playing happily until he or she gets weary or hungry, and will then offer whatever her child needs, so our motherly Sai Baba is waiting to receive us.

Appropriately, Dwarkamai remains open all night (the lower level, that is) so we may go there at any time. During festivals and weekends the mosque may be deluged by devotees, but at other times, especially late at night, it will be less crowded. Three days a year, during the festivals of Ramnavami, Guru Purnima and Vijayadasami, the upper level is also kept open for twenty-four hours continuously.



### ***The Dhuni***

For many visitors, the *dhuni* is the most significant part of Dwarkamai, as it is so intimately associated with Baba. The *dhuni* is the sacred, perpetually burning fire that Baba built and which has been maintained ever since, though today the fire is much bigger and is enclosed behind a wire cage.

The maintenance of a *dhuni* is important in several traditions, including Zoroastrianism, Sufism and Hinduism (especially the Nath sect). Fire was also important to Baba, as wherever he stayed – whether under the neem tree, in the forest, or in the mosque – he always kept a *dhuni*. Baba, however, was not bound by any convention or set rules, nor did he worship the fire. He simply maintained it, using it for his own particular and mysterious purposes. There were none of the classic restrictions around Baba's *dhuni*. Baba did not prevent others from touching



it – indeed, villagers would sometimes come to take embers with which to kindle their own household fires, and whenever Radhakrishnaya used to spring-clean and whitewash the mosque at festival times, she would move the *dbuni* into the street outside. Baba did not confine himself to burning only wood on the *dbuni*, but would throw his old clothes on it once they were worn out, and he would adjust the fire with his foot. (In Indian culture it is considered disrespectful to touch or point to anything with the foot.) One day, the fire in the mosque got wildly out of control, with flames leaping up to the roof. None of those present with Baba dared say anything to him but they were nervous. Baba responded to their uneasiness, not by prayer or supplication, but by majesterially rapping his *satka* (stick) against a pillar and *ordering* the flames to come down and be calm. At each stroke the flames diminished and the fire was soon restored to normal.

When Baba returned from his morning begging rounds with a cloth bag of food and a tin pot of liquids, he would first offer some of it at the *dbuni* before taking any himself. We may not be able to discern exactly why or how Baba used the *dbuni*, but it is evident that despite the apparent informality around it, the fire was an important part of his routine. According to the *Shri Sai Satcharitra*, the fire symbolized and facilitated purification and was the focus of oblations, where Baba would intercede on behalf of his devotees. Once when Baba was asked why he had a fire, he replied that it was for burning our sins, or karma. It is reported that Baba would spend hours sitting in contemplation by the *dbuni*, facing south, especially early in the morning after getting up and again at sunset. Mrs Tarkhad, who had Baba's *darshan* regularly, says that at these times "He would wave his arms and fingers about, making gestures which conveyed no meaning to the onlookers and saying 'Haq' which means God."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *Devotees' Experiences*, p. 71. This was corroborated by other devotees, for example, R. B. Purandhare's testimony in the same book.



The spot where Baba used to sit is marked by a small pair of silver *padukas*. Look carefully – on the floor just in front and to the right of the *dbuni* – for they are easy to miss. We feel awed when we see the *padukas* and reflect on what issued from here – this was the spot where Baba stood and sat, his finger on the pulse of the universe, controlling, effecting, giving, protecting, never resting but constantly seeing to the needs of his devotees, for as he said, “If I don’t take care of my children night and day, what will become of them?”

Today the *dbuni* is maintained in a carefully designed structure lined with special fire-bricks, in the same place that Baba used to have it. Baba made an intriguing comment about this spot, saying that it was the burial place of one Muzafar Shah, a well-to-do landowner, with whom he once lived and for whom he had cooked. This is recorded in *Charters and Sayings*, but as so frequently when Baba speaks about his personal history, we do not know to which life he was referring.

In 1998 the Sansthan undertook the rebuilding of the *dbuni* pit and re-designed the chimney to its current distinctive shape.

## **Udi**

From the earliest days, Baba would give *udi* – holy ash from the *dbuni* – to his visitors. The healing power of Baba’s *udi* is well documented and there are numerous cases of people being healed of pain or sickness by taking Baba’s *udi* both before and since his *mahasamadhi*.

Baba would sometimes apply *udi* to his devotees when they arrived, or when they were taking leave of him, and he often gave out handfuls which he scooped up from the *dbuni*. The *Shri Sai Satcharitra* tells us that “when Baba was in a good mood” he sometimes used to sing about *udi* “in a tuneful voice and with great joy”: “Sri Ram has come, Oh he has come during his wanderings and he has brought bags full of *udi*.” *Udi* is still collected from the fire for distribution. Since this is a continuation of Baba’s own practice, and the *udi* comes from



*Baba at the dbuni*



the very fire that Baba himself lit and tended, it is considered extremely sacred. Today a small tray of *udi* is kept for visitors near the steps.<sup>7</sup>

For devotees of Sai Baba there is an emotional attachment to *udi* as a tangible form of Baba's blessings, a vehicle for Baba's grace and a link to Baba himself. People usually put it on the forehead and/or in the mouth. Sri Babuji also gives Baba's *udi* as a symbol of Baba's blessing. When a Westerner unfamiliar with the custom once asked him why he did this, Sri Babuji replied that because the *udi* is from the fire that was lit and touched by Baba, the ashes are a connection to Baba and to his touch – and thus no ordinary ash. Putting the *udi* on the forehead, says Sri Babuji, “always gives me the experience of the touch of my Beloved and the *udi* is a symbol of his grace.”

*Udi* is available in small packets from a small booth outside the Samadhi Mandir.



### ***The puja pillar***

Just in front of the *dhuni*, on the right as you face it with your back to the portrait, you will see a painted wooden supporting pillar; the silver *padukas* are at the bottom of it. This pillar played a small but significant part in the history of Sai worship. H. V. Sathe has described how there were no Guru Purnima celebrations until the day that Baba sent for Dada Kelkar and said, “Don't you remember that today is Guru Purnima?” Pointing to the pillar in the mosque, Baba told him, “Go and bring puja material and worship that post!” From then on, according to Sathe, the

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<sup>7</sup> Traditionally, ash contains a symbolic meaning: it reminds us of the impermanence and transitoriness of the phenomenal world. Remembrance of this is said to help foster *viveka* (discrimination) between the real and the illusory. Ash – *udi* – is purified matter; and this is said to make it a perfect conductor of grace.





practice of celebrating Guru Purnima by worshipping Baba was continued.<sup>8</sup>

The correlation of the pillar, which is essential to the construction's stability, and the guru, is a pertinent one for devotees. Today when we look at this post it appears so ordinary and unremarkable, yet it stands in Baba's mosque, and is a reminder of the early days of a most extraordinary and remarkable movement. From our own experience, we can imagine the keen emotions of those early devotees, eager to offer worship to their beloved *gurudeva*, yet at the same time, uncertain of how Baba would receive it and whether he would allow it.<sup>9</sup> Remembering this, looking at the pillar today may evoke a feeling of affinity with and appreciation for those early pioneers along the path of Sai.



### ***The kolamba and the waterpot***

In the southwest corner of the mosque by the *dhuni* is a waterpot on a stand, and below it, an earthenware dish known as a *kolamba*. Baba used to beg for his food at least twice a day. He generally visited only five houses – those of Vaman Gondkar, Vaman Sakharam Shelke, Bayajabai and Ganapat Kote Patil (Tatya's parents), Bayaji Appa Kote

<sup>8</sup> *Devotees' Experiences*. However; a slightly different version was given in a letter written by Tatyasaheb Noolkar to Nana Chandorkar published in *Sai Leela* magazine (May-August 1991), in which he says that one day when doing *namaskar* to Baba, Baba pointed to the pillar beside the *dhuni* and said, "Worship that pillar tomorrow." Noolkar did not understand why Baba had spoken like that until the next morning when he suddenly remembered that it was Guru Purnima. He told the other devotees and they then understood the meaning of Baba's words and went to the mosque to beg Baba to allow them to perform the worship of their guru, but he again told them to worship the pillar. Baba sent word to Dada Kelkar and Radhakrishnaya that puja was going on; this was the beginning of regular Guru Purnima worship. Given Baba's reluctance to allow worship of his person, this version seems more likely than he himself "sending for" a devotee to start worship.

<sup>9</sup> Noolkar's letter (above) hints at Baba's reluctance to allow Guru Puja.



Patil and Nandaram Marwari – and stood outside them calling for alms. Baba would collect the solid food in a cloth bag and any liquid offerings in a small tin pot. When he returned to the mosque he would offer some at the *dhuni*, then empty it all into a *kolamba* and leave it available for any person or creature to take from, before eating a small quantity himself. In continuance of this tradition, a *kolamba* is still kept here beside the water pot. People leave *naivedya* (food offerings) here as a gesture of offering *bhiksha* to Baba, and take it as his *prasad*. Baba used to keep one or two water pots by the *dhuni* (for drinking and performing ablutions) and this tradition is also maintained. Devotees like to take the water as a symbol of Baba's *teerth* (holy water).



### ***The nimbar***

On the western wall of the mosque – in the direction of Mecca – is a *nimbar* or niche, with a set of lamps in front of it. The *nimbar* is a standard feature of all mosques, but the lamps were put there by Baba. In Dwarkamai this spot, which is near where Baba used to sit, is decorated with a garland of flowers.

The *Shri Sai Satcharitra* relates that it was here that Baba used to have his midday meal, sitting behind a curtain with his back to the *nimbar*, and a row of devotees on either side of him. This is also the place where Baba would sleep with his head pointing towards the *nimbar*, with Mhalsapati on one side of him and Tatya Kote Patil on the other.

Baba occasionally did *namaz* (ritual prayers) here and Muslims would sometimes come for this purpose. A group of elders



once came from the local Muslim headquarters of Sangamner, a town about fifty kms away, to investigate Baba following complaints of his heterodoxy from local Muslims. When they arrived they found Baba smearing fresh cowdung paste on the floor (a common practice in rural India). After answering their questions Baba suggested they do *namaz* together as it was already noon. Seeing the wet floor and their own clean clothes, they hesitated. "If you do *namaz* with a clean heart, no dirt will stick to you," counselled Baba. "Let's start...*Allah Malik*." The men had no choice but to kneel down. Afterwards they were astonished to see their clothes still in pristine condition. They concluded that Baba was a great saint and therefore no formal procedures were necessary for him.<sup>10</sup>



### ***The grinding stone and bag of wheat***

A grinding stone – a common household item in rural India – is kept in the north corner of the western wall. Baba apparently had two or three such stones (another is on display in the Samadhi Mandir) which, on occasion, he used for grinding wheat. The most famous of these became the inspiration for

Hemadpant's celebrated *Sbri Sai Satcharitra*. It is described as follows:

One morning, some time after the year 1910, while I was in Shirdi, I went to see Sai Baba at his mosque. I was surprised to find him making preparations for grinding an extraordinary quantity of wheat. After arranging a gunny sack on the floor, he placed a hand-operated flour mill on it and, rolling up the sleeves of his robe, he started grinding the wheat. I wondered at this, as I knew that Baba owned

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<sup>10</sup> *Sajpatham* magazine, March 1988. (Cowdung paste, a traditional flooring material used by Hindus, is known for its antiseptic, cooling and insect-repelling qualities.)



nothing, stored nothing and lived on alms. Others who had come to see him wondered about this too, but nobody had the temerity to ask any questions.

As the news spread through the village, more and more men and women collected at the mosque to find out what was going on. Four of the women in the watching crowd forced their way through and, pushing Baba aside, grabbed the handle of the flour mill. Baba was enraged by such officiousness, but as the women raised their voices in devotional songs, their love and regard for him became so evident that Baba forgot his anger and smiled.

As the women worked, they too wondered what Baba intended doing with such an enormous quantity of flour... They concluded that Baba, being the kind of man he was, would probably distribute the flour between the four of them...When their work was done, they divided the flour into four portions, and each of them started to take away what she considered her share.

“Ladies, have you gone mad!” Baba shouted. “Whose property are you looting? Your father’s? Have I borrowed any wheat from you? What gives you the right to take this flour away?”

“Now listen to me,” he continued in a calmer tone, as the women stood dumbfounded before him. “Take this flour and sprinkle it along the village boundaries.”

The four women, who were feeling thoroughly embarrassed by this time, whispered among themselves for a few moments, and then set out in different directions to carry out Baba’s instructions.

Since I was witness to this incident, I was naturally curious as to what it signified, and I questioned several people in Shirdi about it. I was told that there was a cholera epidemic in the village, and this was Baba’s antidote to it! It was not the grains of wheat which had been put through the mill but cholera itself which had been crushed by Sai Baba, and cast out from the village of Shirdi.

*(Sai Baba of Shirdi, by P. S. Bharucha, Shirdi: Shri Sai Sansthan, 1980.)*



To this day, a grinding stone is kept in the mosque with a sack of wheat beside it, as it was in Baba's time. This tradition goes back many years and is associated with an early devotee of Baba's, Balaji Patil, who was dedicated to Baba's service, cleaning the mosque every day and the streets through which Baba passed (this service was later taken over by Radhakrishnaya). Balaji was a farmer from Nevasa. Once there was a dispute between himself and the landowner, as Balaji claimed the property as his own. Balaji suggested that they go to Baba for arbitration and abide by his decision and the owner agreed to do so. Upon their entering the mosque Baba immediately called out to Balaji to return the land.<sup>11</sup> Balaji used to offer all of his crop to Baba and only when Baba had accepted a part of it would he take the remainder for his livelihood. He maintained this practice throughout his life and it was continued by his son after he died.

These days a bag of wheat is kept in a glass case by the grinding stone throughout the year, and is replaced annually on the festival of Ramnavami (see p. 124).

### ***The chillims***

In the corner by the grinding stone you will see a cupboard. It was in this niche that Baba used to keep his chillims. He was fond of smoking tobacco through these clay pipes and used to pass the pipe around to his close devotees. At such times he might tell stories and the atmosphere was one of good humour and friendliness.

As with many of the apparently ordinary things around Baba, there was more to the chillim smoking than at first appeared. It seems that Baba sometimes used the chillim as a means of bestowing grace. G. S. Khaparde notes in his *Shirdi Diary* that one day Baba "was very gracious and repeatedly gave me smoke out of his pipe. It solved many of my doubts

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<sup>11</sup> Balaji, however, did not do this and the owner went to court and eventually won the land back.



and I felt delighted.” There are also reports of Baba using the pipe for healing purposes. Hari Bhau, for example, suffered from asthma. He had never smoked before Baba offered him the pipe one day. Because it was given by Baba, he took it and smoked. From then on, his asthma was cured and never bothered him again.

None of the pipes can be seen in Dwarkamai now, but a few are on display in the Samadhi Mandir. Baba received many pipes in his lifetime and would often give them away.



*The portrait of Baba marks the place where he used to sit*

### ***Baba's portrait***

Baba would spend much of his time in the mosque sitting in front of the *dhuni*, often with his arm leaning on a little wooden balustrade. A large portrait of Baba, sitting in the same posture, is now to be found here. The picture is kept on a throne-like platform and is the focus of worship, just as Baba himself was when he sat here. Baba sits relaxed and calm, looking out at us with a warm, welcoming,

almost amused expression; at the same time the gaze is both penetrating and searching. On seeing the finished work, Baba is reported to have said, “This picture will live after me.”



Of the few pictures there are of Baba, we feel we could be looking at a different person in each of them. In *satsang* Sri Babuji once described the phenomenon of the ever-changing features of a saint's face which he likened to a river: when we watch a flowing river, in one way it is the same river, and in another way it is always different, the water always moving.



*The padukas in front of  
Baba's portrait, Dwarkamai*

The saint is one whose actions are free from the influences of past or future. In this way, he is constantly being reborn, each moment a fresh moment, each moment a fresh life! That is why we never get tired of looking at a saint's face – there is always something new in it.

Something of that freshness is evident when we look at the portrait here. No matter how many times we take its *darshan*, we feel that Baba is greeting us anew. For that, we are indebted to the artist, S. R. Jaikar, from Bombay. The original picture was painted under commission from a close devotee (M. W. Pradhan). At first, Baba did not give permission for the work, claiming that he was just a simple beggar and fakir and what was the point of painting such a person. It would be better for Shama (who relayed the request to Baba) to get his own portrait done, suggested Baba! Luckily for future generations, though, Baba later relented and Jaikar actually painted four pictures, one of which was touched by Baba.

The picture was installed in Dwarkamai after Baba's *maha-samadhi*. The painting that we see now is a recent copy of Jaikar's original, which was moved to a Sansthan office to



preserve it from the drying effects of the *dbuni*. It can currently be viewed in the Museum Hall adjacent to Dixit Wada.

In front of the portrait is a pair of silver *padukas* which was installed later. Here it may be worth adding a note about the significance of *padukas*. They are used throughout India, but particularly in the Datta<sup>12</sup> cult in Maharashtra. *Padukas* may be a pair of carved “footprints” or a pair of shoes used by the saint. It is the former which we mostly see in Shirdi. *Padukas* signify the presence of the saint – wherever the feet are, the rest of the body will be! – and thus they are revered.<sup>13</sup>

In Dwarkamai alone, there are five sets of *padukas*, symbolizing Baba's presence and aiding us in remembrance and worship. Taking the lowest part of the saint's body, we touch it with the highest part of our own (the head) as a gesture of obeisance and respect, in an act of *namaskar*. When we bow down we are adoring our Beloved, affirming our hallowed connection, and in this way, asking for continued blessings. Sri Babuji elucidates the meaning of *namaskar* as follows: “The term is said to be a compound of three root words: *na* (=no) + *mama* (=I) + *aaskaara* (=scope) =no scope for the ‘I’. Thus it is a state of mind in which the self is effaced by an expressive recognition of the divine magnitude. To bear such a self-effacing feeling in mind is true *namaskar* ...*namaskar* symbolizes the state of the ego's readiness to lose itself... [and] is not a mere deferential gesture of greeting, [but] a meaningful technique handed down by the masters of mystic wisdom as a means of effacing the ego.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Datta or Dattatreya is the symbolic manifestation of the Hindu holy triad (Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva) in the form of the perfect Guru. Some devotees worship Sai Baba as an incarnation of Dattatreya.

<sup>13</sup> There are at least three instances of Baba blessing *padukas* for his devotees and telling them to use them for puja. In the case of Mrs Pradhan, Baba allowed her to place the newly made silver *padukas* on his feet, as a blessing, and then joked, “See, mother has cut off my feet and carried them away,” an indication of his presence in the *padukas*.

<sup>14</sup> *Arati Sai Baba*.





Baba has told his devotees, "I am a slave of those who always remember me in their thoughts and actions and do not eat anything before offering it to me." If you are in Dwarkamai around midday, you may see people offering food to the portrait. After being offered, the food is then taken back to the person's house and shared as *prasad* or distributed among those in the mosque. The Sansthan also offers food to Baba here (as well as at Gurusthan and the Samadhi Mandir). After noon *arati*, a small portion is added to the pots in Dwarkamai and distributed there as *prasad*; the rest is taken back to Prasadalaya and mixed with the other *prasad* offered to devotees.

In the context of offering food to Baba's portrait, we may recall the story in the *Shri Sai Satcharitra* of the Tarkhad family. Mrs Tarkhad and her son were planning to visit Shirdi, but the son was reluctant to go, as he was afraid his father would not properly carry out the daily worship to the large picture of Baba he devoutly kept in their house. His father assured him that he would, and mother and son left for Shirdi. For three days all went well, but on the fourth day, although Mr Tarkhad performed the puja, he forgot to offer the customary few pieces of lump sugar. As soon as he remembered his omission, he prostrated before the shrine, asked for forgiveness and wrote a letter to Shirdi.

Meanwhile, around the same time in Shirdi, Baba turned to Mrs Tarkhad and said, "Mother, I went to your house in Bandra to get something to eat, but the door was locked. I managed to get in somehow, but found that Bhau [Mr Tarkhad] had left nothing for me to eat so I have returned unsatisfied." Mrs Tarkhad did not understand what Baba was talking about, but the son immediately realized and asked Baba if he could go home. Baba refused, but let him do his puja in the mosque. The son wrote to his father imploring him not to neglect the puja and the two letters crossed in the post and were delivered the next day. This shows that in a mysterious and inexplicable way, when we offer something to a picture of Baba, it is not merely symbolic, but we are offering it to Baba himself.



### ***Dakshina box/hundi***

Until around 1909, Baba almost never asked for *dakshina* (donations) and rarely accepted monetary offerings, except occasionally a few small coins which he used for buying fuel. Then, for some reason, Baba did start asking, although he had no personal need or desire for money, and by the end of each day he had always given away whatever he had received that day, remaining true to his principles of non-attachment and poverty. A few devotees (such as Bade Baba and Tatyā Kote Patil) were even given a fixed amount every day.

Baba's purpose in asking for *dakshina* was always to benefit a particular individual by, for example, driving a (frequently moral) point home, balancing a forgotten debt or conferring a special blessing. Often, the amount asked would contain a hidden or symbolic meaning. "I do not ask from everyone," he said, "but only from those whom the fakir (God) has pointed out. In exchange I have to give ten times the amount I have taken."<sup>15</sup> Consequently, some people were eager to give Baba as much as possible! – but just as Baba would ask only from certain people, he would not accept unsolicited *dakshina* from everyone who wanted to give it.

Baba once told a devotee that his own guru had asked him for *dakshina* of two *paise* but, as Baba pointed out, it was not coins which his guru wanted, but *nishta* (faith) and *saburi* (patience). The significance of *dakshina*, its subtleties and the way Baba used it would be a fascinating subject for further exploration.

The *hundi* (donation box) that we now find beside the portrait reminds us of the special role that *dakshina* played in Baba's *leelas*, and how he used it to bless his devotees. Today, the enormous quantity of donations is used by the Sansthan for maintaining facilities and worship, and for various social projects (see Appendix 1).

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<sup>15</sup> *Charters and Sayings*, no. 233.



### ***The bathing stone***

This is to be seen in the corner to the right of the portrait and was presented to Baba by Rambaji, a devotee from Nasik. Rambaji was mentally ill when he came to Shirdi. He used to drink and bathe in Baba's *teerth* and recovered, so he gave the stone for bathing in commemoration of this cure.

Though Baba used to wash his hands, face and feet in the mosque, he was not in the habit of taking a daily bath. It is thought that he never actually used this stone.



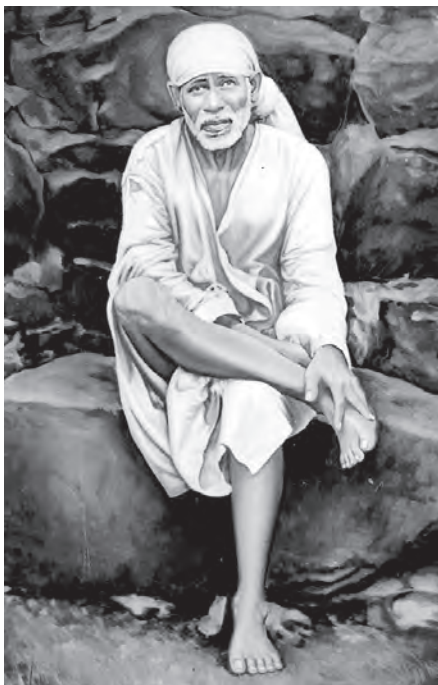
### ***The tulsi brindavan***

Coming down the steps from the upper part of the mosque, you will see a podium on the left at the back, about chest height. This is a tulsi brindavan – a masonry block with a tulsi plant in its centre. Tulsi (*ocimum sanctum*, a kind of basil) is traditionally sacred to Hindus, especially to the Vaishnavites. It was put here, with Baba's permission, by some of Baba's Hindu devotees around the time that the mosque was being renovated (1909-1912).

Sai Baba is often described as a living emblem of Muslim-Hindu unity. The provision of the tulsi in a Muslim place of worship is an example of the many ways in which Baba fused Muslim and Hindu elements and resisted being identified exclusively with one religion, while persistently challenging sectarian divisions and prejudices.

### ***Baba's photograph and the stone***

On the eastern wall, opposite the steps leading up to the *dhuni*, hangs a large framed picture of what is probably the most famous image of Baba. It is a painting of an original black-and-white photograph.



*"Those who seek refuge  
in this mosque will never  
come to an evil end, even  
to the end of this world."*

Sri Sai Baba

Baba is seated on a large stone with his right leg crossed over the left thigh, his left hand resting on the crossed foot. He is wearing a torn *kafni*, a headscarf knotted over his left shoulder, and he sits relaxed yet alert, leaning forward slightly. His expression is at once intense, all-knowing and compassionate, but above all, unfathomable. To Sai devotees, this is probably the most familiar image of Baba. Consequently, many believe that this posture was a common one of Baba's. Some suggest that Baba adopted this pose deliberately, as in Indian iconography it represents sovereignty, and is associated with gods and maharajahs (and

some draw parallels with Dakshinamurti who also sits facing south with one leg crossed over the other). Others say that it has no special significance and that it was not Baba's typical posture. Whatever the facts, the picture is treasured by Sai devotees as one of only six or seven photos that we have of Baba.

Until Baba sat on it, the stone was used by devotees for washing their clothes (remember that in those days, the mosque consisted of only the raised area around the *dbuni*, so the stone



was outside). One day Baba happened to sit down on it and someone took the opportunity to photograph him. Once he had sat on it, the stone was considered sacred and no longer used for washing. It is that stone, set with a pair of marble *padukas*, which is now under Baba's photo. The owner of the original painting of this photo, D. D. Neroy from Bombay, gave the painting to his guru, Kammu Baba, who later gave it to the Sansthan. It is likely that this was the picture that the Sansthan gave as a model to the sculptor who carved Baba's statue for the Samadhi Mandir.

Devotees meditate on and worship this picture. Baba has said that there is no difference between his physical self and his image. Indeed, he even proved this on a number of occasions. When Balabua Sutar came to see Baba for the first time in 1917, Baba said that he had known him for four years. This puzzled Sri Sutar, but then he remembered that he had prostrated before a picture of Baba in Bombay four years previously, and it was that to which Baba was alluding. Even more dramatically, Baba once came to Hemadpant in a vision and told him he would be coming for lunch that full moon festival day. In an extraordinary chain of events, a picture of Baba was unexpectedly delivered to Hemadpant's house just as the midday meal was about to be served!



### ***The animal statues***

On each side of the photo is a statue of an animal – to the right a tiger and to the left a horse. There is a remarkable history behind each of these.

Just one week before Baba's *mabasamadhi*, a band of travelling dervishes brought a tiger to him which they were exhibiting and thereby earning money. The animal had fallen sick, and is described as "very



ferocious". After trying various remedies in vain, the dervishes brought it to see the renowned saint of Shirdi hoping it would be cured by *darshan* of a mahatma.

The group paid obeisance to Baba and told him about the tiger's condition. "I shall relieve him of his suffering," said Baba. "Bring him here!" The dervishes wheeled the cage into the courtyard of the mosque. The tiger, which was tied up tightly with chains, was taken out for Baba to see.

People watched the unfolding drama first in great apprehension and then in utter astonishment. The tiger approached the steps and stared at Baba, who returned its gaze. It then thrashed its tail on the ground three times, gave out a terrific roar and fell down dead!

The dervishes were dismayed at losing their means of livelihood, but later they were reconciled to it and recognized the tiger's exceptionally good fortune in dying in the presence of a saint. (In India, this is commonly thought to confer *moksba*, i.e. liberation.) Baba consoled them saying that the tiger was "meritorious" and that it had been destined to die there on that day and had achieved permanent bliss by doing so. "The tiger's debt incurred to you in a former birth is now cleared," said Baba. He also helped the dervishes financially by giving them 150 rupees.

Baba told the dervishes to bury the tiger in front of the nearby Mahadev Temple (one of the three small temples that now lies between the Samadhi Mandir and the Queue Complex) and you can see its *samadhi* by the Nandi. The statue of the tiger was erected much later (on 12 November 1969), by Sri Tryambaka Rao of Ojar village, in commemoration of this blessed incident.

The story of the horse is equally remarkable, though somewhat milder! The horse was given to Baba in fulfilment of a vow by a horse dealer named Kasam, in about 1909. Kasam's mare had not produced a foal for a long time and so he resolved to give the first-born to Baba if she foaled. This



came to pass and Shyam Karni (meaning “black ears”, Baba’s name for him) became a great favourite with Baba who lavished much love on him. Shyam Karni (also known as Shyam Sunder, “Black Beauty”) was an integral part of the Chavadi procession. Extravagantly decorated, he would lead the procession each time. He was present at puja and is also said to have been trained to do *namaskar* to Baba. Nana Chandorkar hired a man to look after him. One day, when Baba was in the mosque, he suddenly exclaimed in pain, “Oh they’re killing that horse! Go quickly and fetch him!” It turned out that the trainer had been beating him severely, but perhaps what is more extraordinary is that when Baba revealed his back, the livid marks of a whipping could be seen on his own skin.

Shyam Sunder outlived Baba; his *samadhi* is in Lendi Gardens.

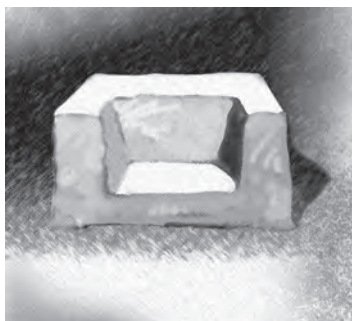


### ***The tortoise tile***

On the floor of the mosque, about two-thirds back from the steps, you will notice a white marble tile with a tortoise carved in relief. The tile is said to mark two things: the place where Shyam Sunder used to bow down to Baba, and the original location of the stone on which Baba sat, which was moved when the mosque was extended after Baba’s *mahasamadhi*. According to Hindu mythology, it is a tortoise which bears the weight of the world on its back. As it is already underfoot, it cannot be defiled by being trodden on, so is an appropriate symbol to use here.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, the tortoise is traditionally associated with qualities of protection; a mother tortoise is thought to be able to protect her child even from far away. Baba invoked this concept when speaking of the love between himself and his guru. “He always protected me by his glance just as the tortoise feeds her young ones, whether they are near her or away from her on the other side of the river bank, by her loving looks... Just remember that the guru’s tortoise-like loving glance gives us happiness.” *Shri Sai Satcharitra*, Ch. 18.



### ***The cooking hearth and the wooden post***

To the left of the courtyard area of the mosque is the small hearth where Baba sometimes used to cook. Like most things here, it is now enclosed in a wire cage but in Baba's time and until recently it was, of course, open.

Here Baba would occasionally prepare large quantities of sweet milk-rice, pulao and other food for distribution among visitors. He would supervise the whole process himself, including shopping, grinding spices, and chopping the ingredients. The food was cooked in huge copper pots – enough for 50-200 people – which are now on display in the Samadhi Mandir.

An outstanding aspect of Baba's cooking style was that rather than use a ladle or a spoon, he would stir the scalding food with his bare hand, without causing himself any injury. The *Shri Sai Satcharitra* describes tenderly and in great detail how and what Baba would cook, "then with his own hands, serve very lovingly to all, with great respect. And those desirous of eating would happily partake of the food till quite full, even as Baba pressed them to have more, saying affectionately, 'Take, take some more!' Oh, how great must have been the merit of those who partook of this most satisfying meal! Blessed, blessed were those to whom Baba served himself." The author adds that once the number of visitors became very large and the quantity of food offerings also increased, Baba cooked less often. Baba never gave up the custom of begging for his food throughout his long life.

Beside the stove is a three-foot tall wooden post, which Baba would lean against while cooking. Though it is unremarkable looking, it is thought to be invested with healing properties since Baba once advised a close devotee (Sai Sharananand, then





Vaman Patel) suffering from a severe pain in his knee to touch the post with his knee and then do *pradakshina* around it. The devotee did this and the pain disappeared. To this day, people with bodily aches and pains also like to lean against the post as a means of receiving Baba's blessing for their healing.



### ***Padukas where Baba used to stand***

Just behind the cooking area is the place where Baba would stand, usually before going to Lendi, leaning against the mud wall. He would call out to villagers in a friendly way, "How are you?" "How's the crop coming along?" "How are your children doing?" Following Baba's *mahasamadhi*, a pair of *padukas* was installed in this spot and a small shrine placed over them. In the wall above is a smaller set of *padukas* where he is said to have leaned his arm.

### ***The storage rooms***

On each side of the lower section of the mosque is a small shed. One contains the palanquin used for processions and the other, until recently, used to house the *rath*, or chariot, used for festivals.

The chariot was presented by M. B. Rege and Avasthi and used only once during Baba's lifetime, on Guru Purnima 1918. Permission for this was given reluctantly by Baba and he himself never went in it.

With the extension of the Samadhi Mandir in 1999 the chariot was moved and the shed is now used for storing firewood and *udi*. The other shed (on the right as you face the steps), holds within its fabric a tale of great passion and determination that took place in 1912.



*Experiencing Sai Baba's Shirdi*

A silver palanquin (not the one that is now used) was acquired by some enthusiastic devotees, led by Radhakrishnaya and R. B. Purandhare, who were resolute that Baba should have some fine royal paraphernalia, despite Baba not wanting it. The palanquin was given by Sadhu Bhaiya Naik from Harda and his two brothers. When it was delivered, Baba shouted his objections and would not allow it to be unwrapped. It remained so for about three months, until Purandhare finally succeeded



*In this rare old photograph we can see how Baba's darbar used to look in the early twentieth century. Devotees sometimes used to offer sacred books to Baba to gain his blessing before embarking on a reading. Here we see Baba (seated) looking at a collection of abhangs (a type of lyrical poem) by Sant Tukaram - Tukaram Gatha. The picture of Baba (without the backdrop of the mosque) was published in the first edition of Shri Sai Sacharitra in 1930.*



in persuading Baba to allow it to be opened. Still Baba refused to touch it and did not even want it inside the mosque, whereas the devotees were insisting that Baba climb inside it and use it for the Chavadi procession. After much wrangling, Baba finally gave his *padukas* (in this case, his sandals) for the purpose and the procession went ahead, but Baba would not allow the palanquin back inside and he never did set foot in it. That night, some silver ornaments were stolen off it. When news of the theft was brought to Baba, he commented that it was a pity the whole thing had not been taken!

The devotees felt the only way to avoid the risk of theft was to build a lockable shed for it at the side of the mosque. The building job entailed boring holes into the side of the mosque – conventionally an act of extreme desecration. However, in his determination to honour his beloved *gurudeva* with the provision of a palanquin, Purandhare started the drilling, taking his opportunity when Baba was out at Lendi. Almost all the other villagers fled the place, fearing Baba's wrath.

Predictably, once Baba returned and saw what was going on, he flew into a rage, but Purandhare, who loved Baba very dearly, was extremely stubborn. Baba continued raining down abuse on him and Purandhare retorted that Baba could do whatever he liked with him – even kill him – but that he would not leave without finishing the job. At last, after lamenting that Purandhare would not listen to him and was intent on breaking the mosque, Baba gave his permission for the work to go ahead, but told him to do it carefully. All the while Purandhare doggedly continued with his labour, despite Baba's outbursts, and would not pause for food. (This meant that his wife and his mother also had to wait for their meal, since in India it is customary for women to serve the men of the house before taking food themselves.) Knowing that Purandhare had not eaten, Baba became upset and concerned. He commented to Dixit that because Purandhare was hungry, Baba was also feeling pangs of hunger. Dixit explained that Purandhare was



anxious to complete the work quickly as the leave from his job was almost over.

Purandhare was listening to all this while he was working. When he heard Baba send somebody for him, he immediately came running, fell at Baba's feet and wept. There was a touching scene of reconciliation – Baba at once scolding and consoling, and Purandhare overwhelmed by Baba's extraordinary love and care for him, even while he was intent on doing something Baba did not like. At last Baba succeeded in persuading him to take a break and go home for food. However, at the doorway, Purandhare had second thoughts and came back saying, "No Baba, if I do that you'll simply pull it down the moment I'm gone." Only when Baba had promised not to interfere with the work, did Purandhare agree to take a break and the job was soon completed. Once the palanquin had been moved inside Purandhare finally took leave from Baba and returned home.

The palanquin was kept, but it is noteworthy that Baba never did condone such pomp and always refused to get into it himself; devotees had to be content with carrying his *padukas* in it. Today a palanquin is still used in the Thursday Chavadi procession.

### ***The bell***

Hanging to the left as you enter Dwarkamai is a bell. This is rung three times a day, at 4.00 a.m. 11.30 a.m. and 8.30 p.m. If it rings at any other time it is taken as an alarm signal, and villagers will rush to Dwarkamai to find out what the trouble is.

Some people say that Baba put the bell here himself. Certainly we know that it was there during his lifetime as there is reference to it in *Shri Sai Satcharitra*. When Baba sent Hemadpant to talk with Shama, just as Shama had finished relating a beautiful *leela* to him, "the bell in the mosque began to ring, proclaiming that the noon worship and *arati* ceremony had begun. Therefore Hemadpant and Shama hurried to the mosque."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> *Shri Sai Satcharitra*, Ch. 18.



### ***Shyam Sunder Hall / Old Parayana Hall***

Adjoining the eastern wall of Dwarkamai is what was, until 1999, a *parayana* hall, or reading room (the entrance is outside the mosque around the left-hand corner as you come out). When Sai Baba was living in Dwarkamai, there was a collection of sheds where the current building now stands, part of which was used as a school. Madhav Rao Deshpande, alias “Shama” (Baba’s nickname for him) was a teacher there. He was one of Baba’s earliest devotees and became one of the most intimate. Shama reported that there was a small window in the dividing wall through which he sometimes used to peep at Baba and



*The old Parayana Hall*

“I realized that he had remarkable powers and began to have faith in him.”

The ardent devotee, Radhakrishnayi, who was instrumental in developing Baba’s Sansthan, probably stayed in one of these sheds when she first came to Shirdi. Baba used to send visitors to her and referred to her room as “the school”. Abdul Baba also lived here for a while. In the few years before Baba’s *mahasamadhi*, part of the building was used as a stable for Shyam Sunder,



*Inside the new Parayana Hall*

Baba's celebrated and beloved horse. It was built with the money donated (500 rupees) by a grateful Sakharam Aurangabad-kar from Sholapur, whose wife had given birth to their first child after twenty-seven years of marriage, once she had resorted to Sai Baba.

The building is now used as a storeroom and a new Parayana Hall on the west side (beside

Lendi Gardens) has been built as part of the new complex. It is open from 5 a.m. to 8 p.m.

Before leaving the mosque, let us sit for a few moments in this sacred abode of Baba. While doing so, we may recall Baba's loving and reassuring words: "As soon as one climbs the steps of the mosque, suffering due to karma is over and joy begins... She will save anyone who is in danger...Whoever sleeps in her shade will attain bliss...enter this *masjid ayi* and your goal will be achieved..."

Sri Babuji draws our attention to a peculiar but quietly spectacular feature of Dwarkamai: although the mosque may be full of people, activity and noise, when we sit here we feel that we are in a pool of silence and alone with Baba. Somehow, the noise is not a disturbance to us, and despite the comings and goings, we feel unusually still and peaceful.



# The Chavadi



*“We went to the Chavadi for Kakad Arati...Sayin  
Baba showed his face and smiled most benignly. It is  
worthwhile spending years here to see it even once.  
I was overjoyed...”*

G. S. Khaparde (Shirdi Diary)

**C**havadi means village meeting place, office, or court and was the place where taxes were collected, village records kept, disputes settled by the village heads, and visiting officials put up. After Baba's *mahasamadhi* the Sansthan acquired the Chavadi, and until the late 1930s, used it for

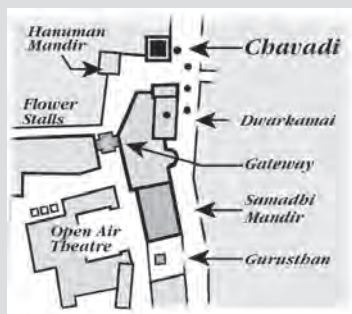


storing books and accommodating pilgrims. The village offices have long been relocated and the Chavadi is kept as a shrine to Baba and is open to all.



## The Walking Tour

### The Chavadi



Turning left out of Dwarkamai, crossing the top of the small lane to the Hanuman Mandir, we come to the Chavadi. This was the small – once ramshackle – village meeting place and camp office of visiting revenue officials, where Baba used to sleep on alternate nights. Nowadays, his portrait and some things associated with him, such as the wheelchair and the wooden bed, →

Sai Baba is intimately connected with this place, as he used to sleep here on alternate nights during the last decade of his life. The routine was started one wild and stormy night around 1909. It was raining heavily and water was coming through the leaky walls of the mosque. The devotees tried their best to persuade Baba to move out, if only until the water had subsided, but Baba did not want to go. Eventually, they virtually forced him to leave, by picking him up and half-carrying him to the Chavadi. From that day on, Baba would spend alternate nights here.

The Chavadi is very significant to Sai devotees not only because Baba stayed here but also because it played a major role in the inception of formal worship of Baba. Once Baba started sleeping at the Chavadi, the custom arose of offering regular *arati* to him on his arrival from the mosque. This





was Sej (night) Arati. Later, Kakad (morning) Arati was offered when he woke up there. The performance of Midday and Evening *aratis* at the mosque probably developed after this.

Around the time that Dwarkamai was renovated, the Chavadi was also upgraded. The mud walls were neatly plastered, huge mirrors were hung, glazed tiles replaced the mud floor and glass chandeliers were suspended from the ceiling. The funding for the renovations was provided by Anna Chinchankar, who was deeply devoted to Baba.



are kept here. Neither of these was used by Baba, but it was on this bed that Baba's body was laid out and dressed after he had passed away. Women, as in Baba's time, are not allowed into the right half of the building which was Baba's bedroom.

cont. on p.72

He had been involved in a land dispute and after a protracted struggle, during which he repeatedly asked Baba about the outcome, he was elated when the court ruled in his favour. Feeling that the triumph was due purely to Baba's grace, he very much wanted to give Baba the full sum awarded. Baba, however, refused it and Dixit suggested that the money be spent on the Chavadi and named after Chinchankar and his wife. Consequently, their names are inscribed (in Marathi) on a plaque above the doorway. The sitting platform along the outside of the front wall is a later addition.

Inside the Chavadi is a large portrait of Baba which was painted by Ambaram from Nausari in Gujarat, after Baba had given him *darshan* in a dream in 1953. At the time, Ambaram was only eighteen years old. Touched by Baba and Ambaram's painting of him, the villagers of Nausari collected donations in order to buy the painting and bring it to Shirdi.

On the left of the painting is a plain, wooden bed on which Baba was given his last bath after he passed away in Dwarkamai. These days, the bed is taken out each Thursday



and the palanquin is placed on it. In the same corner next to the bed is a wheelchair which was presented to Baba when he was suffering from asthma, but which he never used.

The right portion of the building contains the framed photo of the cross-legged Baba kept in grand attire (hence it is known as the *raj upachar* photo – see opposite page). This is the picture that is taken out on procession each Thursday and on festivals. It is now kept on a silver throne which stands in the place where Baba used to sleep. Baba did not allow women into this section and this tradition is maintained today; only men and boys are allowed in this area.

The Chavadi is open 5 a.m.- 9 p.m.

### ***The Chavadi procession (utsav)***

Over time, the moving from Dwarkamai to the Chavadi took on the form of a grand affair. This was thanks largely to the efforts of Radhakrishnaya, who wanted Baba to be honoured as a Maharajah, and supplied all sorts of ceremonial regalia. With the bedecked horse Shyam Sunder leading the way, Baba followed with Tatyā on one side and Mhalsapati on the other, walking on carpets laid on the path. A crowd of people accompanied them, singing *bhajan* and dancing, playing musical instruments, shouting Baba's name, letting off fireworks, holding a silver umbrella over Baba, waving flags and fans, and chanting *Hari-nama*. The distance of a few metres took up to three hours to cover. Years earlier, Baba had predicted such scenes when talking to a few devotees, "In Shirdi there will be huge storeyed buildings, grand processions will be held, and big men will come. Chariots, horses, elephants will come, guns will be fired..."<sup>1</sup>

Once again, one cannot help marvelling at Baba. We know that he did not like such pomp and paraphernalia and we have seen the importance to him of holy poverty (*faqiri*)

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<sup>1</sup> *Charters and Sayings* no. 360.



*Worshipping Baba inside the Chavadi*

and his reluctance to allow devotees to worship him, yet here he was allowing himself to be led to the Chavadi in an extravagant display of adoration. In describing the scene a few moments before the procession, Hemadpant hints at Baba's response. People were singing *bhajan*, some were decorating the palanquin, rows of oil lamps were burning, Shyam Sunder stood waiting fully decorated, "then Tatyapa Patil came to Baba with a party of men and asked him to get ready. Baba sat quiet in his place till Tatyapa came and helped him to get up by putting his arm under Baba's armpit" (Ch. 37). Clearly, Baba was not eagerly waiting to begin – in fact, we may sense a certain resignation – yet he went ahead with it, not just once, but hundreds of times! Again and again this



scene was re-enacted, and it is one replete with poignancy and poetic tension. A great saint, adored as a living deity, but to whom any personal worship was distasteful, yet allowing it out of love for his devotees and a sympathy for their human longings and affection.

The *Sbri Sai Satcharitra* gives a moving account of the procession. It tells us that when Baba arrived at the Chavadi and stood in front of it, his face shone with a “peculiar lustre”. He “beamed with steady and added radiance and beauty, and all the people viewed this lustre to their heart’s content...What a beautiful procession and what an expression of devotion! With joy pervading the whole atmosphere of the place... That scene and those days are gone now. Nobody can see them now or in the future.”

However, we are fortunate that those days are not completely gone. We *can* experience something of that splendour and fervid devotion even today, as each Thursday evening a similar procession takes place with Baba’s photo in honour of that tradition. It is a passionate, unrestrained – yet exalted – celebration of Sai Baba. If you have a chance, be sure to see the procession – it is an exhilarating experience!

In the evening, Baba’s *satka* and *padukas* (in this case, a pair of Baba’s leather sandals) are displayed in front of his sacred tomb from 7.30 p.m. until they are carried out at the beginning of the procession at nine o’clock. The Samadhi Mandir is even more crowded, as people are eager to touch and pay their respects to these sacred objects, which are accessible only at this time. The sense of occasion is enhanced by the hearty singing of melodious *bhajan* by some villagers, and a group of young men from a local youth organization dancing rhythmically to a rapid drumbeat.

At about 9.15 p.m. the procession moves out of the Samadhi Mandir to a flurry of horns, cries and waving fans. At the centre is the garlanded portrait of Baba (the one from the Chavadi), carried reverently by the great-grandson of one of Baba’s dearest



devotees, Taty Kote Patil, and another of his relatives. They are preceded by one of the *mandir* staff carrying the *padukas* and *satka*. Other staff follow, dressed in festive Maharashtrian-style red tunics and turbans. The procession wends its way through the street lined with eagerly waiting crowds, and the music and excitement crescendo as people strain for a glimpse of the photo and *padukas*. Many throw flowers, and guns fire marigolds, petals and confetti into the air.



Photo: Dev Gogoi

*The Thursday Procession to the Chavadi*

The procession enters Dwarkamai about ten minutes later, where again there is an assembled crowd waiting for its arrival and jostling for a view. Here the photo is placed on the decorated silver palanquin to the accompaniment of more exuberant *bhajan*. This takes about fifteen minutes. *Mandir* staff and locals then carry the palanquin to the Chavadi, where people are waiting inside and out.

As the palanquin approaches the Chavadi, we come to the climax of the evening. The palanquin is parked outside, and the picture, draped in gold-embroidered red velvet, is carried inside



## Experiencing Sai Baba's Shirdi

the Chavadi and greeted as if it were Baba himself entering. People may prostrate (if they have the space!), shout his name, say a silent prayer, or gaze longingly on his face. Baba's picture is then settled into place on a silver throne and *arati* is performed. Finally, the whole group returns to the Samadhi Mandir. Here, a local person receives the *satka* and *padukas*, and the Kote brothers hand back the picture and collect a coconut as *prasad*. The coconut is kept beside Baba's statue until the final night *arati* is over (around 10 p.m.). The picture is returned to the Chavadi after morning *arati* the next day.

During the procession, *lalkari* is performed. There is no direct translation for "*lalkari*", but it means the ceremonial shouting of slogans or words of praise (traditionally used for royalty) such as "Long live Sai Baba!" There are specific points where this is done during the *utsav*, just as there were when the saint of Shirdi covered the short distance by foot nearly a hundred years ago.<sup>2</sup>



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<sup>2</sup> The points are: at the Samadhi Mandir; in Dwarkamai, opposite the Hanuman Temple and (on special festival days) when leaving Chavadi to parade through the village, after *arati* has been performed.

# *Lendi Gardens*



**L**endi is significant as the place which Baba used to visit every day. It contains some tombs, a shrine, and most importantly, the perpetually burning lamp lit by Baba and placed between the two trees he planted. A few months



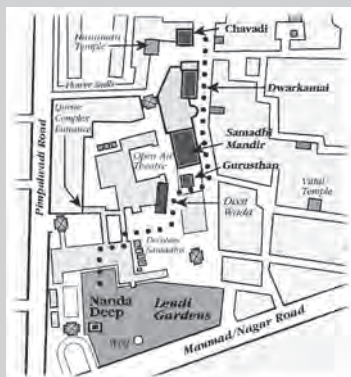
before Baba's *mabasamadhi* the land was bought by a Bombay devotee, M. W. Pradhan, and later presented to the Sansthan. At the end of 1999, Lendi Gardens was radically re-landscaped,

and the previously paved and tree-lined area turned into lawns with a waterfall and flower beds.



## The Walking Tour

### Lendi Gardens



Now a cultivated park with a waterfall, Lendi was once an area of wasteland where Baba used to answer the calls of nature. He would come here two or three times a day.

To get there, we turn right out of the Chavadi, back the way we came past Dwarkamai, through Gurusthan and onto the paved area opposite Dixit Wada and turn →

In Baba's time, Lendi was an area of wasteland between two small streams, the Lendi and the Sira (now dried up). Baba used this area for toilet purposes. He would leave the mosque for Lendi around nine o'clock in the morning accompanied by some devotees. However, none was allowed inside with him except Abdul Baba.

Apart from answering the calls of nature here, Baba seemed to enjoy going to Lendi and sometimes went several times a day. This was the place where he spent time in solitude.

It was a particular characteristic of Baba's that once he had started something, it became a strict and lifelong routine. For example, though initially devotees forced him out of the mosque into the Chavadi because of heavy rain, he continued his routine





of sleeping there every other night as long as he was alive. Similarly, after his arm was burnt in the *dbuni*, it was dressed and tended by Bhagoji Shinde; the wound healed and Baba lived for a further eight years, but the practice of Bhagoji changing the bandage every day continued until the end.

Showing a similar regard for routine, Baba always took the same route whenever he went to Lendi from Dwarkamai. A fakir will sometimes take up strict adherence to a routine as a practice, as it is supposed to reduce the opportunity for personal preference, and hence development of the ego. Baba had no need for any practice, but he seemed to maintain the routine anyway. His route to Lendi was not the most direct or obvious, yet he stuck to it unswervingly. Perhaps we will never know what his reasons were, but just as Baba used to go along with a few devotees, let us also walk with him and take a short stroll to Lendi.

We begin by turning right out of Dwarkamai, then left down a narrow lane opposite the entrance to



left. Passing by the end of the row of five samadhis (tombs), we walk through the small cluster of Sansthan buildings which offer various services to pilgrims, and turn left into Lendi. (N.B. This is the most direct way, but if you want to follow the route Baba always took, see main text, left.) Straight ahead of us is our main object of interest here, Nanda Deep. This is the “lamp of bliss” that Baba lit and kept constantly burning, and where he would spend time in quiet solitude every day. The lamp has been maintained ever since and devotees also like to come here for contemplation and reflection. The lamp stands between two trees – a neem and a bodhi – that Baba is said to have planted.

A few metres away you will see a more recent addition to Lendi – a small shrine dedicated to Dattatreya.

Turning back the way we came, we come out of →



Gurusthan. Halfway along this path, the route kinks right and then immediately left. Baba would often pause at this corner, which was where his devotee Balaji Pilaji

Guurv lived. A small shrine enclosing a pair of *padukas* now marks the spot where he would stand. Baba would sometimes also stop further down the lane and stand in a similar posture to the god, Vittal (see photo opposite). There is now a Vittal Temple in that same place.



Lendi by the entrance to the new Parayana Hall. Alternatively, at this point we can buy a drink from the canteen next door (tea, milk and coffee are served) and pause to enjoy it in the peaceful gardens. Leaving Lendi, we continue along the covered walkway to the entrance of the Queue Complex for the Samadhi Mandir, the climax of our tour.

cont. on p.80

At the bottom of the lane we turn right, and within a few metres, come to a small temple on the left opposite the post office. This is one of the oldest temples in Shirdi. It is dedicated to

Sri Kanifnath, one of the nine leaders of the Nath cult. A distinguishing feature of the Naths is the maintenance of a *dbuni*. Baba used to pass the temple every day, giving rise to conjecture that he had some connection with the place and therefore incorporated it into his routine. From the Kanifnath Temple we turn right along the main road and make our way to Lendi, again on the right. Now the area is peppered with small stalls selling trinkets and snacks, but in Baba's time it would have been virtually empty. Arriving at Lendi



*The Kanifnath Temple*



*Sri Sai Baba on the way to Lendi, c.1911-12 (left to right: Nana Nimonkar, Sai Baba, Bhagoji Shinde, Gopalrao Booty, Nana Chodar)*



we may pause for a moment and remember that this was where Baba asked his devotees to wait, since he preferred to enter Lendi alone.



*Nanda Deep between the  
neem and bodhi trees*

### ***Nanda Deep***

This is the main feature of Lendi: the perpetually burning lamp between two trees that Baba is said to have planted, a neem and a bodhi. As the trees were touched by Baba and planted close to where he sat and the lamp that he lit, the area serves as a focus for worship, including *pradakshina*.

Between the neem tree and the bodhi tree is Nanda Deep (“lamp of bliss”, also known as Akhanda Deep – “perpetually

burning lamp”), the lamp that was originally lit by Baba. Later, Baba instructed Abdul Baba to see that it was kept burning.

The lamp as we see it now was built by the Sansthan and the area has been paved. In Baba’s time the lamp was sunk into a small pit and protected from the wind by some zinc sheets and later some pieces of cloth, making a kind of tent with the lamp in the centre.



Nanda Deep was a place where Baba liked to sit in contemplation. Abdul Baba says that Baba would sit on the ground close to the lamp, but not in a place from where he could actually see the lamp. It seems, therefore, that Baba was not using this lamp for its light or flame (since it was covered).



*One of the four new gateways into the Temple Complex;  
this one is beside Lendi*

Just as the lamp itself was concealed, exactly what Baba was doing here is also veiled from us.

One of Abdul's duties was to keep two buckets of water by the lamp. After sitting, Baba would apparently take these, and in a ritualistic and rather mysterious way, throw the water in all four directions around the lamp. In his *Life of Sai Baba* Narasimhaswami observes, "He seemed to be blessing devotees in each direction and warding off evils that may be threatening them." This, however, is conjecture, and again we cannot be sure why Baba did this.



*The statue of Shyam Sunder  
placed on his samadhi*

A few feet from Nanda Deep is a small Dattatreya shrine erected in 1976. Close by is the small *samadhi* of Shyam Sunder the horse.

### ***The well***

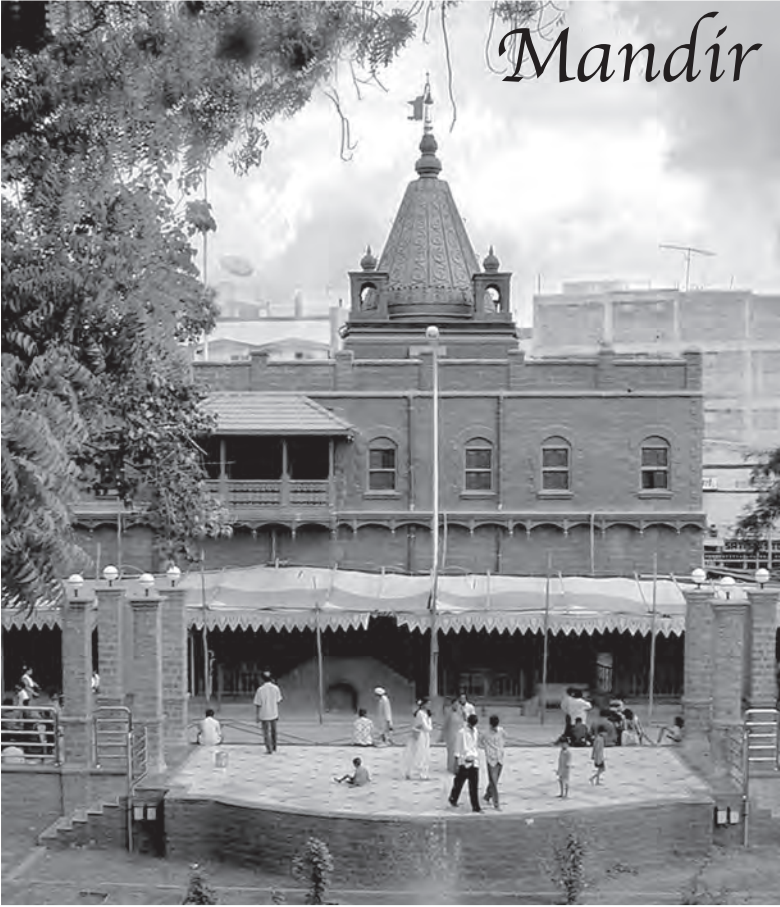
A little beyond Nanda Deep and slightly to the left is a well. This well is of interest as it was dug by Baba and some of his devotees, and it was from here that Baba got his drinking water. Baba even gave this well a nickname, “Bukhi”.<sup>1</sup>



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<sup>1</sup> There is another well in the Temple Complex, behind Shanti Niwas, which is associated with one of Baba's *leelas* and is sometimes confused with this one. In 1897 the villagers were organizing a big festival (the first *urs*, which was held on the festival of Ramnavami) and were anxious about supplying water to so many extra visitors. At that time the water in this well was brackish, and there was only one other well in the village. As usual, the villagers took their problem to Baba. He told them not to worry, and threw some flowers into the well. The water turned sweet and became the main water supply for the village. It remained so until recently, when demand exceeded supply.

# The Samadhí Mandir



*“Do not think I am dead and gone. You will hear me  
from my samadhi and I shall guide you.”*

Sri Sai Baba

**T**hese moving and inspiring words, spoken by Sai Baba, have played their part in ensuring that the Samadhí Mandir (also known as the Sai Baba Temple, although technically it is a shrine rather than temple) is the most

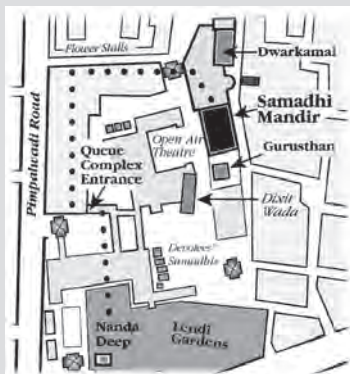


important site in Shirdi, and the main focus of Sai worship and devotion. For it is here that we find the *samadhi*<sup>1</sup> (tomb) of Sai Baba, with the compelling statue above it.



## The Walking Tour

### The Samadhi Mandir



This is the most important site in Shirdi, as it is the shrine that houses the sacred tomb ("samadhi") of Sri Sai Baba. The construction was originally undertaken by a devotee as a private house and temple. However, it was never used as such, as in his last moments in the physical body, just as the building →

Baba has famously promised, "I shall be active and vigorous even from the tomb," and it is perhaps in the *mandir* that we can most fully experience the phenomenon of Sai Baba and the remarkable way he has touched the hearts and lives of millions of people from all over the world. At any given point, the shrine will be full of devotees eagerly queuing up to have Baba's *darshan*. People will be holding flowers, garlands,

<sup>1</sup> Sri Babuji has explained the meaning of *samadhi* as follows: "There are different meanings of the word 'samadhi'. *Samadhi* means a tomb. It also means a state, that is, a state in which our quest for fulfilment is answered and in which all our needs are met. The third meaning of *samadhi* is the state of mind in which you feel totally absorbed, without any contradictory intellectual or emotional pulls, and in which you get the harmony of your emotions. So the tomb is called a *samadhi*. Baba is in *samadhi*, in that state of consciousness. What we see concretely is his tomb, his *samadhi*. When we go there what we get is *samadhi* – our needs are answered. That is why he said, 'My *samadhi* will answer.' His state of fulfilment will answer the various needs of the people – the *samadhi* which answers to our needs. So all three senses of the word are relevant here." (From an unpublished *satsang* transcript, 1998.)





sweets, or fruit to offer Baba at his *samadhi*. Some may have a personal item – such as a shawl, book, key to a new possession, etc, which they have brought here to obtain Baba’s blessing by offering it at his feet and having it touch his tomb. Some people may be chanting, “*Sri Satchidananda Sadguru Sainath Maharaj ki jai!*” (Hail the great *sadguru*, Lord Sai, who is being-consciousness-bliss!) and others may be singing *bhajan* or whispering prayers. At busy times, especially during festivals, the queue for *darshan* used to stretch for hundreds of metres through the village streets; with the recently constructed Queue Complex, this is no longer the case. People may wait up to eight hours just for the opportunity to pay brief homage to their Lord. The atmosphere of fervent and one-pointed devotion reaches its zenith here. “Attention one and all!” commands the noon *arati* psalm, “Come, come quickly and make obeisance to Sai Babal!” This is exactly what the devotees are hastening to do, and to be part of this torrent of emotion is a powerful experience.



was nearing completion, Baba indicated that this was where his body should be laid to rest.

Baba has promised that he would be “active even from the tomb”, and the experiences of thousands of people testify to this. The revered statue of Baba is enthroned above the tomb and devotees hasten here to seek Baba’s blessings, offer their respects by prostrating, and take his *darshan*.

When we arrive at the Queue Complex we may be able to enter the *mandir* straightaway, or we may find ourselves at the end of a long queue; it depends on the season, day of the week and time of day. Afternoon in the mid-week is usually the least busy time.

Once inside the *mandir*, we will be among a throng of people queuing up on either side. If you choose the queue on the left, you will arrive at Baba’s feet and →



Concerning the significance of Sai Baba's tomb and the response that devotees experience there, Sri Babuji was once asked whether there was any difference for the devotees between now and when Baba was in his physical body. He gave the following reply:



the padukas (Baba was buried lying down with his head to the north and his feet pointing south). A white marble platform inlaid with semi-precious stones surrounds the tomb. It is covered with cloth, and scattered with flowers and garlands. At least two priests, one at each end, sit on the platform to receive devotees' offerings to Baba and give part of them back as prasad. A team of security staff keeps the crowds moving to ensure that as many people as possible can have darshan.

As you are queuing up in the mandir, if you look to your left you will see a small display behind a glass window. On show are Baba's few possessions and some things associated with him, such as his chillims (tobacco pipes), stick, cloth, sandals etc.

Arati (worship with music and light) is performed before the sacred tomb four times a day, with great →

“Baba was never confined to his physical body even before 1918, because he himself said, ‘My *murshid* (guru) has already freed me from this body. Whoever thinks that this body is Sai Baba, hasn't seen Sai Baba at all.’ His devotees need some means of interacting with Baba, and because his body had already been released, it was actually a tomb — a small, moving, limited tomb that was capable of interacting with a number of people. Then, because he is so loving and he wanted to cater to the growing needs of the people, he had to change. So he changed his tomb — from that tomb to the present tomb, which is an extension of the one he had before, and is a form of Baba's body. That is why he said, ‘My tomb will speak, my tomb will move, my tomb will answer,’ just as his physical body had been answering.”<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> From an unpublished *satsang* transcript, 1998.



In this form, thousands of people a day are able to take Baba's *darshan* and do *namaskar* to him.

The shrine which houses Baba's tomb was originally constructed as a *wada* (large private house) during Baba's last years in his physical body. It is built on some land which Baba had tended as a garden. Sai Baba seemed to like growing plants and in his early days he cleared and levelled this land which had been used as a dumping ground. Using seeds that he had brought from Rahata, he planted it with jasmine and marigolds. For about three years Baba would water the plants every day and distribute the flowers to the

local temples.<sup>3</sup> Now that his tomb is here and Baba is receiving so many devotees, it seems that he is nurturing plants of a different nature – and still sowing seeds.

The shrine was built by a wealthy devotee from Nagpur, Gopalrao Booty (his picture may be seen on p. 75; he is standing on Baba's left). The *Shri Sai Satcharitra* describes him as a



gusto and passionate devotion.

The mandir is open from 5 a.m. until the end of night arati (about 10.30 p.m.). On special festival days (three times a year, see p. 123-126) it remains open all night.

Our tour of Sai Baba's Shirdi reaches its climax and final destination here with Baba's *darshan*.

END OF WALKING  
TOUR

<sup>3</sup> It is worth noting an interesting point here, which gives an inkling of Sai Baba's original way of working. Instead of using water-pots fired in a kiln that would have been waterproof and efficient for watering the garden, Baba used freshly-made, i.e. wet, pots. He left them at the foot of the neem tree and they would collapse after one use. These had to be replaced every day and were supplied by the local potter. Why such a procedure? Sai devotees see this as one of Baba's *leelas*. One interpretation is that Baba was cultivating a beautiful garden of flowers (i.e. good and noble souls), signifying the flourishing of *bhakti* and *bhaktas* that were to come. For spreading love and devotion, even imperfect, unfinished vessels (i.e. flawed human beings) can be used. The symbolism of cultivation is also evident in Baba's instructions to Upasani Baba: "You must plant trees that will live for many centuries, from which people will derive much benefit."



“multi-millionaire”. He was introduced to Baba by S. B. Dhumal about ten years before Baba’s *mahasamadhi*.<sup>4</sup>

The *wada* was originally intended as a resthouse and *mandir*. The inspiration for the building came to Booty in a dream, when he was sleeping beside his friend and fellow



*The Samadhi Mandir in the 1920s*

devotee, Shama. Baba appeared and told him to build a house and temple. Excited by his vision, Booty immediately woke up and pondered its significance. He noticed that Shama had tears in his eyes and asked him what the matter was. It transpired that Shama had just had the same dream and was deeply touched by it. He told Booty, “Baba came near me and said distinctly, ‘Let there be a *wada* with a temple so that I can satisfy the desires of all.’” Together they then drew up some

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<sup>4</sup> In India people do not regard the death of a saint as the end of his or her existence, nor do they talk of saints dying, but as “taking *samadhi*” (or *mahasamadhi*). Baba directly pointed this out to one of his devotees the day after he passed away: Mrs Pradhan dreamt that she saw Baba dying and yelled out, ‘Baba’s dying!’ Baba immediately corrected her, ‘People don’t talk of saints dying, but as taking *samadhi*!’ The death anniversaries of saints are therefore usually celebrated, not mourned, because they signify the growth of the saints’ influence and mission.



rough sketches, showed them to Kakasaheb Dixit for approval, then took them straightaway to Baba to ask his permission to go ahead with the plan. Baba responded warmly and gave his blessings to the project.<sup>5</sup>

The work was begun around 1915. It was built in stone and was therefore known as *dagadi* (stone) *wada*. Shama supervised the construction of the basement, ground floor and well. Later, Bapusaheb Jog took over supervising the work. When Baba passed the site on his way to Lendi, he would sometimes offer



*The main square with the Samadbi Mandir  
and Gurusthan*

suggestions. As the building progressed, Booty asked Baba if he could include a temple on the ground floor with a statue of Murlidhar (a form of Krishna). Baba readily gave permission

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<sup>5</sup> Baba had apparently identified the site as early as 1914, when he pointed out the spot to Mrs Jog, saying, "It is my site; a big mansion will be built here and we shall live in it. Big people will look after me."



and said, "When the temple is built, we shall inhabit it and ever afterwards live in joy." Shama then asked Baba if that moment was an auspicious time to start the work and Baba replied that it was. Shama immediately fetched and broke a coconut and the work was begun. The foundation was quickly laid, a pedestal prepared and an order placed for the idol. However, the significance of Baba's



*The Samadhi Mandir*

comment was not appreciated until a few years later.

It was around this time that Baba fell ill and his devotees feared the worst. Booty also felt dejected, wondering whether Baba would live to see the completed *wada*, never mind grace it with his presence. The whole construction seemed pointless to him if Baba was not going to remain there in his body. However, Baba was to move

into the *wada* in a way that had not been foreseen by others. His health rapidly deteriorated and on 15 October 1918 he lay with his body fading fast. His last words were, "I'm not feeling well in the *masjid*. Carry me to the *dagadi wada*."

Baba was indeed carried to the *wada*, and was buried in the place where the image of Murlidhar was to have been



placed; an edifice was later raised over the tomb. However, this did not happen immediately, as a dispute erupted over where Baba was to be buried. One faction led by Kushalchand, Amir Shakhhar and Bade Baba insisted on burial in a Muslim grave outside Lendi Gardens, which Shama also supported; Ramchandra Patil headed the group that insisted that Baba's last words be respected and he be buried in Booty Wada. The group wanting burial in the Muslim burial ground not only deemed it appropriate for a fakir, but more urgently, they wanted to ensure that they would have access to the tomb. They were apprehensive that if Baba was buried in a private house, the tomb would become the personal property of the owner and there would be no guarantee of their admittance. Others, however, especially the younger generation, were adamant that Baba be buried in Booty Wada. Both groups shared the desire to honour Baba appropriately and the matter was eventually settled by plebiscite.

The day that Baba took *mahasamadhi*, Tuesday, 15 October 1918, was a highly auspicious and holy one in both the Hindu and Muslim calendars. It was the ninth day of Ramzan (a major festival and fasting month for Muslims) and it also happened to be the major Hindu festival of Vijayadasami (see p. 126). Furthermore *ekadasi* (a significant time in the lunar cycle of the Hindu calendar) had just started. Two months previously Baba had sent a message to Banne Mia fakir, saying that "on the ninth day, of the ninth month, Allah is taking away the lamp he lit". He also sent some offerings to the fakir Shamsuddin Mia and a request to do *moulu* and *qawalis* (both are types of devotional singing) and *nyas* (feeding of the poor). Thus right up until his final moments in the body, Baba was embracing both communities.

The news of Baba's passing spread quickly, and thousands came to Dwarkamai for a final *darshan*, queuing for five or six hours. The body was kept on a hand-cart all night, while the preparations – digging a pit and building the platform – went



on. Before the burial, Baba's *kafni* was removed and he was given a final bath. It is reported that even at this stage his body remained soft, as if he were merely sleeping. Earlier, while the body was in the wheelchair, his nose started to bleed (usually impossible in a lifeless body).

Twenty-six hours after he had left his body, Baba was finally interred. Certain personal articles were buried with him: the broken brick, now mended with gold and silver wire;<sup>6</sup> one of his *satkas*; a chillim; needle and cotton (Baba would mend his clothes until they were a mass of repairs, a cause of affectionate amusement among close devotees); some spices to preserve the body; and an old cloth bag that Baba never allowed anyone to touch, but which devotees investigated after his *mahasamadhi* and found that it contained a green *kafni* and a cap.

The burial was completed by Wednesday evening and the tomb sealed. A photograph of Sai Baba was placed on a throne on the platform above the tomb. It remained there until the statue was installed in 1954. That picture is now kept in the recess of the Samadhi Mandir where some other articles used or touched by Baba are on display (see p. 93).

The *mandir* that we see now is about twice the size of the original building, having been later extended back from the stone arches. As the temple authorities try to find new ways of coping with the ever-increasing flow of visitors, various alterations are made. In 1998 a hall, adjoining Dwarkamai, was added to the back of the *mandir*, so that it has again almost doubled in size. Devotees who wish to spend time in the Samadhi Mandir may use this part of the building.

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<sup>6</sup> Throughout his life in Shirdi, Baba appeared to be very attached to a brick that he kept close to him and used as a pillow at night. Some devotees felt that it had been given to Baba by his guru but there is no concrete proof that Baba ever stated this. A few days before his *mahasamadhi* Madhav Phasle accidentally dropped the brick while he was cleaning, and it broke in two. Baba held the broken pieces in his hand and with eyes full of tears said, "It is over; it is finished. My relationship with this brick in this life is finished. I must go now." (*Sevat jhala ata sarvach atople. Janmachi khari sobateen sevati goleech. Ata apanhi goli pahaje. Aphan veet sonyacha tarene neet julvoon bandhan ghevu.*)





### *The statue and tomb of Sri Sai Baba*

For pilgrims to Shirdi, *darshan* at Baba's tomb is the climax of their visit and the statue above the tomb represents the living, breathing God. As such, it is the focus of all their longings, hopes and desires, and a concrete form to which they can express their love. The statue is admired as an extraordinary and exquisite

image, exuding grace and benevolence, and a mysterious vitality. Baba sits relaxed, natural and majestic, gazing benignly on the millions of diverse visitors who flock to him for succour. Many have commented on the life-like quality of the eyes, as these are typically the most difficult feature to portray in a stone sculpture. In this statue, though, they really do seem to be looking at us and responding!



*The cherished statue of Sri Sai Baba*

Baba repeatedly assured devotees

that he would never cease to answer their call even from his tomb, and that his mission is "to give blessings". The pull of the tomb, above which the statue sits, is powerful and intense and draws seekers to Shirdi in numbers that increase every year. Here, devotees address their heartfelt prayers, beg for help, give



*Baba's tomb with padukas in front. "My bones will assure you from my samadhi. It will communicate with you. It will respond to whoever surrenders to it."*

thanks and offerings for prayers answered and wishes fulfilled, sing their devotion, and pay humble obeisance to their beloved deity. For them, the statue does not merely represent God, it *is* God; and the opportunity to prostrate before it and make oblations may be the fulfilment of a lifetime's ambition.

The statue, which has become such a famous and well-loved image of Baba, was not installed until 1954, and there is an intriguing story behind it. Some white marble arrived from Italy at the Bombay docks, but nobody seemed to know anything about it – who it was for, or why it had come. In the absence of a claimant, the dockyard auctioned it and the purchaser offered it to the Shirdi Sansthan (temple authorities). Impressed by the quality of the marble, they wanted to use it for an image of Baba and gave the commission to a sculptor from Bombay, Balaji Vasant Talim. However, the latter had only one black-and-white photo of Baba to use as his model and was struggling to get the likeness. One night Baba came to him in a dream, remarked on his difficulties and then showed him his face from various angles, encouraging Talim to study it thoroughly and remember it well. This gave Talim the fillip he needed and after that the work flowed easily and the result exceeded all expectations.

The statue was installed on 7 October 1954, on Vijayadasami day, the 36th anniversary of Baba's *mahasamadhi*. The



ceremony was performed by Swami Sai Sharananand who, as a youth (then named Vaman Patel), had had direct contact with Baba during the eight years before Baba's *mahasamadhi*. The Nandi bull (statue of Shiva's vehicle) now seen at the entrance of the temple was added later. The silver throne upon which the statue is seated and from where Baba governs his spiritual empire weighs 60.82 kg. A grand new throne weighing 205 kg was installed on Ramanavami 2002 and is used on special festival days.



*Baba's darshan*

As the main object of adoration in Shirdi, the statue is accorded all due honours. As one of the chief Sansthan officials said, "We believe that Baba is still alive." Out of their love for Baba, devotees wish to provide every comfort and respect they can. Accordingly, Baba is given a hot water bath in the morning, offered breakfast, lunch and dinner, has his clothes changed four times a day before each *arati* and is adorned with a silver or gold crown for the *arati* worship. At night a mosquito net is hung and the tomb is spread with a special plain white cotton cloth, of the type that Baba's *kafni* was made. A glass of water is kept by his side. Each morning at five o'clock Baba is woken up, the mosquito net is removed, and incense is offered while *bhupali* (a morning *raga*) is sung.

After the first *arati* of the day, *abbisbekam* (ritual bathing of the statue with water, milk, curd, ghee etc) is performed. Devotees may sponsor the *abbisbekam* by contacting the Donation Office. Visitors may also donate cloth for Baba, which will be wrapped around the statue. Later, all the cloth that Baba has "worn" is put on sale in the Sansthan shop, just



a few metres from the *mandir*. Many people like to buy cloth that has been sanctified in this way and use it for their altar or some other sacred purpose.

Believing that their work is service to a living Sai Baba, a living god, the priests carry out their duties with tender love and care. One of them related that once when bathing the statue, he inadvertently dropped the water container onto it.



*Devotees queue for darsban inside the Samadhi Mandir*

For the next two days he had a severe pain in his knee, went to the doctor, had injections, took painkillers and did everything he could to try to alleviate it. Eventually he prayed to Baba and asked why he had to suffer in this way. That night Baba came to him in a dream and said, “You think *you’re* in pain, but how do you think *I* felt when you dropped the jar?” Thereafter the priest was careful not to injure Baba in any way, and to respect the statue as if it were the living Baba in a physical body.



The feeling and experience that Baba is still alive and present pervades all the Sansthan facilities and activities of his devotees. As you move around Shirdi, you will see that this sentiment informs life, worship and pilgrimage here and contributes to the mystique and magic of what we call Shirdi.

### ***The display of Baba's articles***

Inside the shrine, behind a glass window on the left side as you face the *samadhi*, some things associated with Baba are on display. These include three pairs of sandals (though Baba was almost always barefoot), his folded clothes in a glass-fronted cupboard, several chillims, ornaments for Shyam Sunder the horse, cooking pots and a silver palanquin.

There is one other item here which, though insignificant looking, perhaps holds the greatest fascination for Sai devotees, and that is Baba's *satka*. This short, sturdy stick played a role in many of Baba's *leelas*. It is not that Baba gave it so much importance (as he did, say, to the brick), but whenever someone or something was to be chastised or driven out, we usually find that the *satka* is there, being shaken, waved threateningly or beaten on the ground. For example, when a sudden cyclone hit Shirdi, trapping the devotees in the mosque and causing them to fear for their lives, crops and livelihoods, Baba, upon being appealed to, simply shook his *satka* and ordered it to stop. In a similar way, he once commanded the wildly leaping flames of the *dbuni* to be calm. The *satka* was also once used to intimidate a group of Muslims waiting to threaten Mhalsapati outside the mosque.

On another occasion, Baba used the *satka* for healing purposes. He had warned Mhalsapati that some misfortune would strike his family, but that Mhalsapati should not worry as he would take care of it. Soon after, several members of Mhalsapati's family fell seriously ill. Some devotees who were doctors offered Mhalsapati medicine, but Baba discouraged him from using it, saying simply that the sick should stay in



bed. With that, he walked around the mosque waving the *satka* exclaiming, “Come on, show us your power! Let’s see it, such as it is, and I will show you the power of my *satka* if you [dare to] come and face me.” This was the way Baba treated the disease and cured it without any other medicine.

### ***Arati***

*Arati* is a form of congregational worship with music and lights, celebrated with particular elan in Maharashtra and especially in Shirdi. Those interested in the history of *arati* and its evolution in Shirdi are referred to *Arati Sai Baba – the Psalm Book of Shirdi Aratis* by Sri Sainathuni Sarath Babuji (see p. 135).



For many who come to Shirdi, attendance at *arati* is one of the highlights of their visit. It is perhaps during *arati* that we can most easily experience the essence of Shirdi and the power of Baba’s presence. Some people experience a heightened state and speak of a dissolution of the sense of separation, the erosion of the boundary between self and God. Others say that this is the time when Baba comes “alive” for them and answers their questions and prayers.

The effect of the group and its stirring emotion – of faith, longing and devotion – acts powerfully on the heart. The atmosphere becomes highly charged and there is a palpable sense of the numinous. In Baba’s time too, it seems that *arati* was an occasion when his grace was particularly felt and experienced by the devotees.<sup>7</sup> Some of these instances are recorded in *Shirdi Diary* by G. S. Khaparde who, in his own phlegmatic style, speaks of a particular elation at such

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<sup>7</sup> It must be noted, however, that until the last decade of his life Baba resisted allowing his devotees to worship him. The custom of offering morning and evening *aratis* at Chavadi was established only once he started spending alternate nights there (around 1909) and in Dwarkamai only noon *arati* was performed.



Photo: Dev Gogoi

*Prostrating before Baba*

times. The impact of the ceremony is intensified by dazzling sensual input: for the eyes there is a dynamic kaleidoscope of colourful images (the fondly adorned statue and *samadhi*, the waving *arati* flame, the red and gold uniform of the mace-bearing *chopdars*); for the ears there are the melodious and passionately rendered songs accompanied by harmonium and other instruments – not to mention the thrilling cries of praise at the end; and for fragrance there is the aroma of incense, rose-water and numerous flower offerings.



Of the thirty or so devotional songs sung in the *aratis*, about half were specially composed for Baba and the remainder are traditional *arati* songs by the medieval poet-saints of Maharashtra. Most of them are in Marathi with a couple each in Hindi and Sanskrit. A small booklet of English transliterations is available; *Arati Sai Baba* (already mentioned) includes transliterations, full English translations and commentaries.

*Arati* is held four times a day at Baba's *samadhi*: at 5 a.m., noon, sunset (around 6.30 p.m.) and at 10 p.m. A siren resounds throughout Shirdi a few minutes before the noon and sunset *aratis*, and at four o'clock in the morning. The ceremony is broadcast by an amplified system throughout the village. To attend *arati* it is best to go early and join those waiting in the Queue Complex, where there will be a separate line from the regular *darshan* queue. If you are too late for this you may be able to enter through the Mukh Darshan entrance, i.e. directly into the *mandir* at the northeast corner (depending on the number of the people) and attend from the back of the Samadhi Hall. If you are unable to get inside the Samadhi Mandir because of the crowd, you can participate in *arati* by going next door to Dwarkamai. It was in Dwarkamai that *arati* was originally performed to Baba and devotees still flock here to join in the worship. Alternatively, you can watch the *arati* on one of the outside television screens located around the *mandir*, including one at Gurusthan.

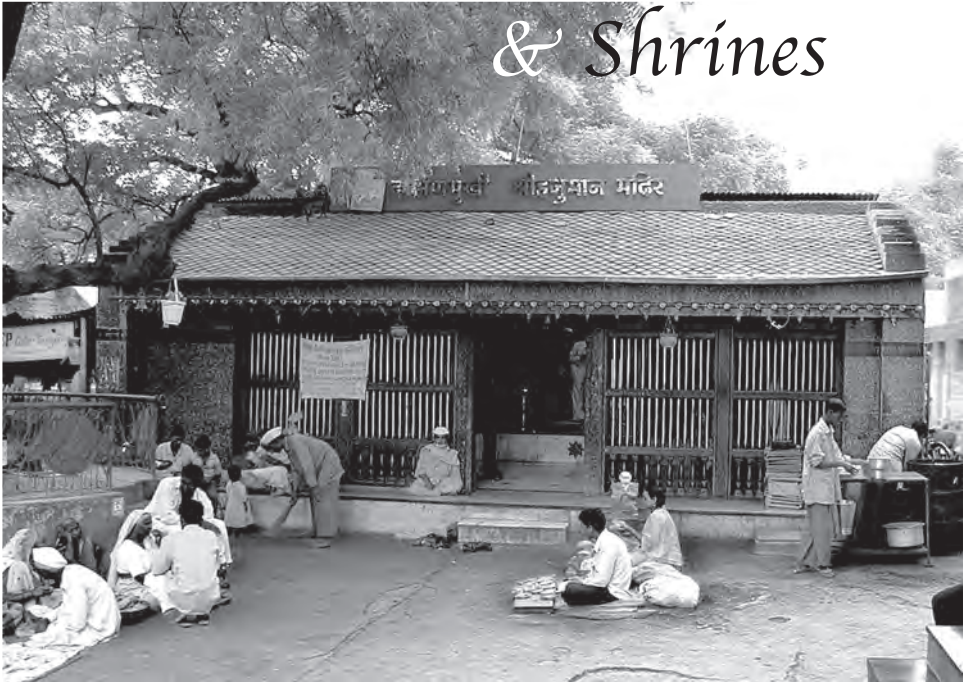
“While singing devotional songs in unison, a devotee can cut across the cussed insulations of the ego and merge easily into the group rhythm. It induces a sense of expanded consciousness in which one tends to lose the individual ‘voice’. The sense of being ‘apart from the world’ is subtly replaced by an awareness of being a part of a ‘whole’.”

(Sri Babuji)





# Other Temples & Shrines



*The Hanuman (Maruti) Mandir*

**T**here are several temples in Shirdi connected with Sri Sai Baba. A notable characteristic of Baba was his respect for all religions and forms of devotion. He did not approve of people changing their religion and would insist on his devotees maintaining their traditional worship even after coming to him. He saw to it that the run-down local temples were repaired and sometimes used to frequent them. Khandoba Temple has been discussed earlier; other temples are described below.



### ***Hanuman (Maruti) Mandir***

Down the lane that runs between Dwarkamai and the Chavadi is the Hanuman Mandir, one of the oldest temples in Shirdi. Marked by a pair of trees enclosed by a circular railing, it is also known as the Maruti Mandir. Unusually, the temple faces south and there are two Hanuman images here, side by side. You may also notice a few weights and dumbbells in the corner. Because Hanuman is considered strong and vigorous and is the patron deity of wrestlers, young men find this an auspicious place in which to exercise.

Baba seems to have had some connection with this temple; sometimes he would stand in front of it and remain there for a while, occasionally slowly moving his arm up and down. Once during the procession to the Chavadi, when he came to the lane facing the *mandir*, he was suddenly seized as if by a spirit (*avesam*) and some devotees had to hold him until he reached the Chavadi, where the *avesam* left him. Shama asked him about the incident: “Baba, this Maruti is our Swami. Why do you worship and adore our Swami?” Baba replied, “*Arre*, Shama, in my childhood my parents dedicated me to Maruti, and so I make signs at him to remind him I am his brother.”

The *mandir* was a place where *sadhus* used to stay, including the ascetic Devidas, whom Baba would occasionally visit during his earlier years in Shirdi. When Baba went to Rahata (a village about five kilometres from Shirdi) with the fakir Javhar Ali in the early 1890s, his devotees were deeply unhappy at his absence from them. After about eight weeks they succeeded in persuading Javhar Ali to let Baba return to Shirdi, though he insisted on coming too. A few days later, a debate was held in this *mandir* between Javhar Ali and Devidas. The fakir was roundly defeated, causing him to flee the area, after which Baba remained among his devotees in Shirdi until the end of his days.

At night, especially on Thursdays, the temple is sometimes filled with music when locals gather to sing *bhajan*.



### ***The Three Temples***

Just behind the new outdoor theatre is a row of three small temples. They are dedicated to Ganesh, Shani (Saturn) and Mahadev (Shiva). Baba had them repaired and his local devotee, Tatyia Kote Patil, was fond of offering lamps here. The shrines were rebuilt and enlarged in 1999 as part of the re-modelling of the Temple Complex.

The small *samadhi* of the tiger, commemorated by a statue in Dwarkamai and said to have received *mukti* from Baba (see p. 53), is a few feet from the Mahadev shrine.



*The Three Temples – Ganesh, Shani, Mahadev*

### ***Mahalaxmi Temple***

This temple is just beside Pilgrims Inn Hotel (MTDC) on Pimpalwadi Road, about five minutes walk from Dwarkamai. Baba occasionally visited it on his begging rounds and the temple is mentioned in the *Shri Sai Satcharitra* as Baba once sent a devotee there on an unusual mission. Bala Ganapat Shimpi



had tried all sorts of medicine to cure his malaria, but nothing worked and he had a raging fever. Baba gave him a curious prescription: “Give a black dog some rice mixed with curd in front of the Laxmi temple.” Shimpi wondered how he would be able to carry out this instruction, but he found the necessary ingredients at home and took them to the temple. There he saw a black dog wagging its tail. The dog ate the proffered food and Shimpi quickly recovered.

The temple has recently been thoroughly restructured.

### ***Narasimha Temple***

This is near the Chavadi next to where Sakharam Shelke's house used to be (one of those from which Baba took *bhiksha*), and was built by his descendants in the mid-1960s. Its compound houses the *samadhis* of Sakharam's son and daughter-in-law, and that of Ramgiri Bua (“Babugir” of the Jamner *leela* – *Shri Sai Satcharitra* Ch. 33).

### ***The Kanifnath and Vittal Temples***

Baba sometimes stopped at these temples which he passed every day on his way to Lendi Gardens (see p.74).



*Kanifnath*



*Vittal*



### ***The Five Samadhis***

Just outside the southern fence of Lendi, across the square from Dixit Wada, is a row of five *samadhis* (tombs). Each is labelled with name and dates. The five people buried here include important Sai devotees. They are described below.



#### ***1. Abdul Baba (d.1954)***

Abdul Baba came to Shirdi in 1889 or 1890 when he was around twenty. His parents, who were very poor, had given him into the care of a fakir. It is said that Baba appeared to the fakir in a dream, gave him two mangoes and asked him to send the boy to Shirdi. When the fakir woke up, what should he find beside him, but the two mangoes he had seen in his dream! He duly sent Abdul to Sai Baba, who greeted him with the curious words, “My crow has come.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In India “crow” has the connotation of “scavenger”; one of the services Abdul was to provide was that of sweeper. Years later, Baba was again to refer to Abdul as a crow, when telling Dr Pillai that a crow would come and peck him and cure his guinea worm. As Dr Pillai lay in agony on the floor of the mosque beside Baba, Abdul accidentally trod on his swollen leg, forcing out the worms.



Abdul Baba

Abdul Baba was a dedicated worker: he cleaned the mosque, swept the streets outside it, kept the lamps burning in Lendi, washed Baba's clothes and collected water. Baba cared for Abdul like a father and took on the responsibility for his welfare. Abdul used to sit reading the Koran in the mosque, and Baba sometimes asked him to recite passages aloud. He kept a notebook in which he wrote down Baba's teachings and comments.

After Baba's *mahasamadhi*, for some time Abdul Baba occupied a room on the first floor of Booty Wada (the Samadhi Mandir). He continued to serve by maintaining the tomb and keeping it decorated with flowers. To this day, Abdul Baba's family members are continuing the tradition of offering flowers to the *samadhi* every morning.

## 2. Nanavalli (d.1918)<sup>2</sup>

Nanavalli was a unique and intriguing Sai Baba devotee, who called himself the "General of Sai Baba's army". His background and history are shrouded in as much mystery as Sai Baba's, and he was notorious for his erratic and eccentric behaviour. Some people were afraid of this man – not only would he carry snakes in his pockets and scorpions in his mouth, but he would violently abuse and attack certain people for no apparent reason. Others felt him to be a *mahatma*, with an outstanding love for Sai Baba. His appearance was wild and dishevelled – sometimes he went naked and sometimes he dressed in old sacking. If we investigate the life of Nanavalli, we uncover a tale of touching and inspiring devotion,

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<sup>2</sup>The information on the devotees is from unpublished translations of articles written by Sri Babuji in Telugu, published in the magazine, *Saipatham*.



and a model of *vairagya* (dispassion).

Accounts of Nanavalli's background vary. One says that he was a Brahmin by birth and another that he was born into a Muslim family. Sometimes he wore the clothes of a Muslim fakir, and at others those of a Hindu *sadhu*. Thus again like Baba, his religious roots were ambiguous. However, both versions agree that as a small boy Nanavalli served in a Muslim *dargah* and came to attend Baba upon divine inspiration. Nobody



*Nanavalli's samadhi*

knows when he came to Shirdi, but some say he was already there when Baba arrived with the wedding party. Upon seeing Baba, Nanavalli greeted him affectionately, "Oh, Uncle, you have come!" Thereafter, he always addressed Baba as "*Mama*" or Uncle.

Nanavalli was content to see Baba only occasionally and from a distance, but his emotion for Baba was such that he felt all glory and greatness should be Baba's and that none should accrue to himself. He used to say, "My duty is only to protect my uncle."

Nanavalli could not bear immorality or hypocrisy. He seemed to know devotees' inner thoughts and target them accordingly. He would sometimes wait outside Baba's mosque and beat up certain individuals. Though people would rush to Baba and complain, Baba would never reprimand Nanavalli, but simply warn them to be careful of him.

H. V. Sathe was a prominent devotee with a prestigious job in the colonial government. For some reason, he was particularly



harassed by Nanavalli. During the Chavadi processions, Sathe had the privilege of carrying a sort of regal sceptre and walking in front of Baba. On one such occasion Nanavalli attacked Sathe on the back of the neck with a piece of broken glass. Another time, when Sathe was about to go to the mosque to worship Baba, his father-in-law rushed in and begged him not to, as Nanavalli was waiting there with an axe threatening to kill him. Sathe was so afraid that he fled Shirdi without seeing Baba or getting his permission to leave. That was in 1916 and he never came back to Shirdi again while Baba was alive.<sup>3</sup>

As Sai Baba's fame grew, he was worshipped with increasing pomp and splendour. One day Nanavalli strolled into the mosque, which was crowded with visitors, and to the horror and mortification of those present, demanded of Baba, "Please get up. I want to sit there!" Baba immediately rose from his seat, saying, "Please sit." Nanavalli took his place. The devotees were appalled at his audacity and wanted to drag him away, but when they saw Baba's expression – calm and happy – they desisted. After a few moments Nanavalli exclaimed, "*Shabash!*" ("Good, well done!"), prostrated before Baba and danced ecstatically before leaving. Some say that Nanavalli wished to test the object of his adoration to see if any egoism had crept in, but others believe that he harboured no such doubts and simply wanted to demonstrate Baba's purity and detachment. Baba did not comment on the incident and none dared to ask him about it.

Nanavalli's attachment to Baba was so great that he used to say, "If Baba goes, I'll not be around for long." Sure enough, when Baba passed away Nanavalli rushed to Dwarkamai crying, "Uncle, without you how can I live? I am coming with you!" With that, he went to the Hanuman Mandir. There he wept grievously and took no food. Thirteen days later Nanavalli too passed away.

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<sup>3</sup> However, Sathe wrote (in *Devotees' Experiences*) that he realized leaving Shirdi for Pune was ultimately for his good and that Baba protected him there just as in Shirdi.



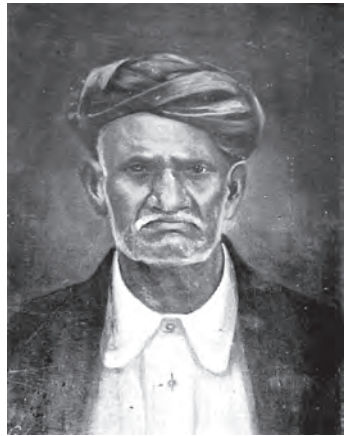


### 3. *Bhau Maharaj Kumbhar (d.1928)*

Bhau Maharaj was a much-loved devotee of Sai Baba, who came to Shirdi in the last two or three years of Baba's life. He was held in high esteem and many regarded him as an *avadhut*. He used to maintain silence, but his loving nature, cheerfulness and kindness to all creatures made him popular with everyone. Bhau Maharaj took it upon himself to sweep the streets of Shirdi; whenever he had money, he spent it on others. He usually wore only a *koupina* (loincloth) and if anyone gave him clothes, he would hang them on trees in order to "clothe" the trees or provide shade for animals. Similarly, if anyone offered him food, he would give it away. Until recently, when the area was paved, local people would sometimes take the earth from around his *samadhi* and mix it with castor oil as a general panacea for children.

### 4. *Tatya Kote Patil (d.1945)*

Tatya Kote Patil occupies a special place in the history of Shirdi and Sai Baba, and many of his descendants are active in the local community. Sometimes referred to as Baba's "pet" devotee, Tatya had a unique relationship with the saint and was under his wing from the age of about seven. While most devotees were attracted to Baba because of his powers and what he could give them, Tatya related to Baba in a personal and human way.



*Tatya Kote Patil*

Tatya's parents had been among the very first to recognize Baba's greatness, although Baba had the appearance of a fakir and, to many, seemed to be a madman. The moment Baba saw Bayajabai, Tatya's mother, he



said, “She has been my sister for the last seven births.” For her part, Bayajabai was immediately drawn to Baba, even before his powers or saintliness had been revealed. Having once met him, she would never eat without having first fed Sai. At that time Baba was roaming in the fields and every day Bayajabai would go and search for him, carrying food. Baba never forgot this service, and took loving care of her son. Later, when Baba was begging regularly for his food, the Patil’s house was one of the five to which he usually went.

Bayajabai was Baba’s “sister”, and Baba loved her son like his nephew. As a child, Tatyā addressed Baba as “*Mama*” or “Uncle” and they would play and romp together, with Tatyā climbing on Baba’s back and sitting in his lap. As Tatyā grew up, the affection also deepened. Sometimes they wrestled together and played practical jokes. While Tatyā was dozing, Baba might hide his towel, and then, in all innocence, pretend to help Tatyā look for it. At other times, he would push the sleeping Tatyā outside the mosque and gleefully wait for his reaction upon waking. Bleary-eyed, Tatyā would wonder how he had got there. Sometimes he would twist Tatyā’s body into odd contortions. In return, Tatyā, who was tall and stocky, would sometimes pick Baba up and run with him over his shoulder, with Baba yelling laughingly to put him down and go more slowly. Once he put his own turban and cloth on Baba and showed him his reflection in a mirror. Baba immediately began mimicking Tatyā and teasing him.

Being so close to Baba, Tatyā had various privileges that few, if any, shared. For example, only he and Mhalsapati were allowed to stay with Baba in the mosque at night. The three of them would lie like spokes on a wheel, with their feet touching. Baba would lie in the middle with his head pointing west. For fourteen years, Tatyā slept like this until his father died and household responsibilities compelled him to be at home. When the chillim was taken out, Tatyā would light it and take the first puff. Before the Chavadi procession, it was always Tatyā



who would come to the mosque and persuade Baba to move. Tatyā was the only one whom Baba allowed to adorn him with expensive cloth for the occasion.

Sometimes Baba and Mhalsapati would massage Tatyā's tired farmer's body, which upset Tatyā as he felt it was inappropriate for Baba to do this service. Once, Tatyā was so annoyed with Baba for doing this, that he kept away from Dwarkamai for several days. When Baba called out to him as he passed by the mosque, Tatyā replied sulkily that he was not going to have anything to do with Baba! Later, Tatyā was mollified by Kakasaheb Dixit and persuaded to come back to the mosque. Only Tatyā treated Baba in this way.

Baba took care of Tatyā's material welfare, giving him thirty-five rupees a day (a government employee's average salary was about this amount *per month!*) and instructing him to use it properly as capital and not to squander it. As a result, Tatyā became a wealthy landowner and acquired a prominent social standing.

In 1916 Sai Baba privately predicted that Tatyā would die two years later. At the time foretold, when Baba himself was ailing, Tatyā fell seriously ill. One day, Baba summoned Tatyā to the mosque. Tatyā was so weak that he had to be carried. After feeding him a little milk-rice, Baba told him, "Tatyā, at first I got two cradles ready for both of us, but now I've changed my mind. I don't want to take you now. I'm going alone. Go home!"

With that, he applied *udi* to the forehead of his beloved devotee, and watched for a long time as Tatyā disappeared down the road. That was the last time Tatyā saw his Gurudev alive: two days later Sai Baba passed away, while Tatyā went on to recover and lived a further twenty-seven years. This has led some people to believe that Sai Baba sacrificed his own life for Tatyā's. Others, however, point out that such an exchange would not have been necessary for one of Baba's calibre – after all, he had saved lives before and even raised people from the dead. In Tatyā Kote Patil's life with Baba, what



stands out most is the immense and solid love and friendship between them. Its legacy provides us with both an inspiration and an aspiration.

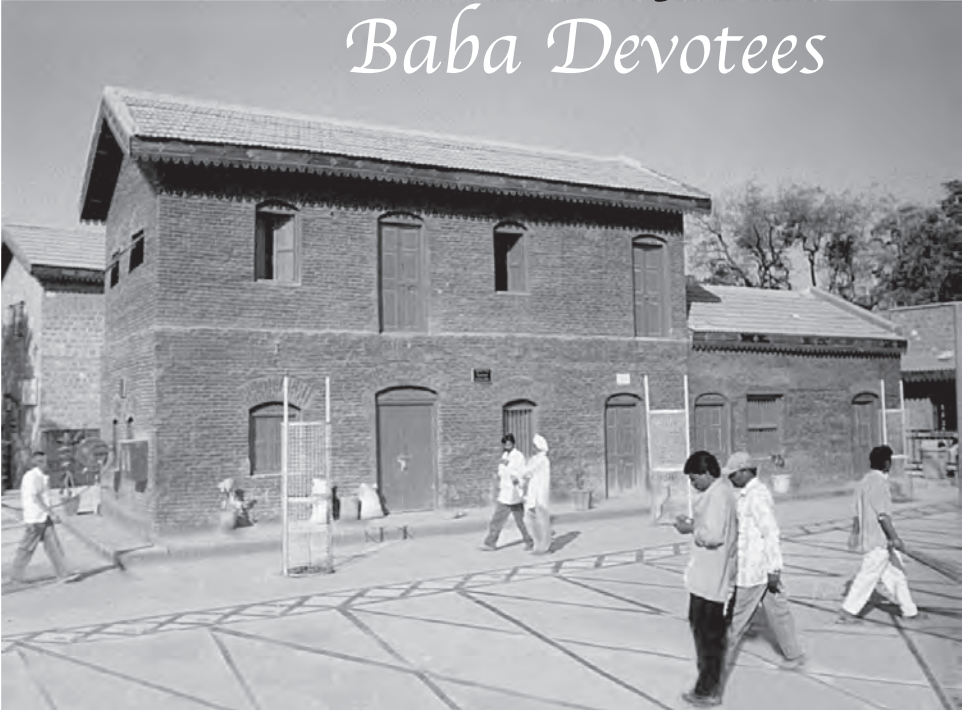
*5. V. P. Iyer (d.1945)*

V. P. Iyer was the manager of a sugar-cane factory in Kopergaon. He did not see Sai Baba while Baba was in the body, but he was a staunch devotee who gave much service to the Sansthan and was popular with the villagers of Shirdi. He fell ill when visiting Shirdi and died holding Baba's picture and saying his name. It was his desire to be buried here.



*Sri Sai Baba in the mosque*

# Houses of Sai Baba Devotees



*Dixit Wada*

Although the face of Shirdi has changed dramatically since Sai Baba was physically present here, some of the buildings from that era still remain. As they include the houses of some of his closest followers with whose names devotees will be familiar, we include them here. Among them were two purpose-built *wadas* constructed by devotees from outside Shirdi. A third, Booty Wada, became the Samadhi Mandir.

# Location of Devotees' Houses



5. Abdul Baba

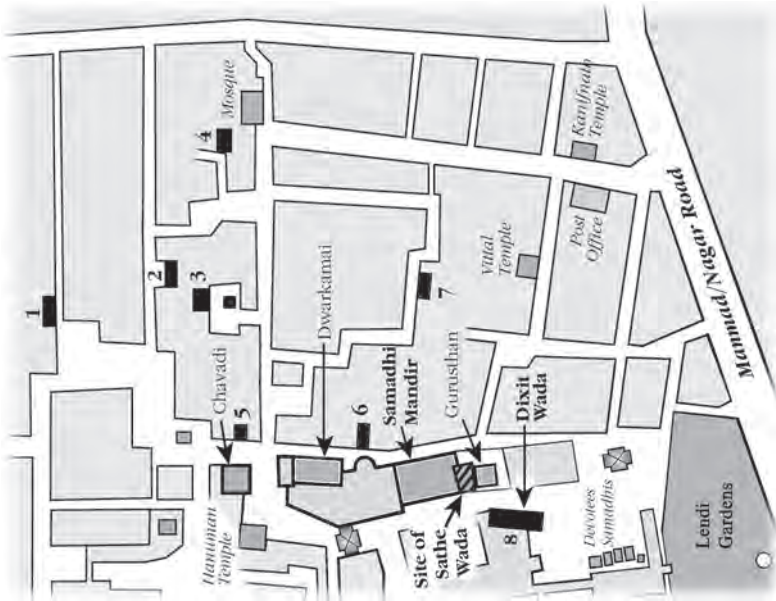
6. Nandaram Maruvari



7. Shama



8. Dixit Wada



1. Bayajabai Kote Patil

2. Bhagoji Shinde



3. Laxmibai Shinde



4. Mbalsapati



### ***Sathe Wada*** (now demolished)

This wada occupies a significant place in the history of Baba's Shirdi as it was built on Baba's instruction, and was the first of its kind. Moreover, it was during preparations for its foundations that Baba revealed that this was the place of his guru. Furthermore, several of the devotees whose names have gone down in history stayed here. For example, it was here that Khaparde wrote part of his informative *Shirdi Diary*, that Jog did daily *parayana* as asked by Baba, that Dada Kelkar lived, and where Hemadpant had his first *darshan* of Baba standing outside; *arati* to Baba's picture was conducted regularly at the *wada*. By providing what was, at that time, the only accommodation for visitors to Shirdi, Sathe rendered valuable service to pilgrims.

H. V. Sathe was a man of considerable social standing who worked in the colonial government as a Deputy Collector. Four years after his wife died in 1900, he came to Baba to ask whether he should remarry. Baba advised him that if he did so, he would have a son. Sathe did remarry and the couple had two daughters and a son. Sathe became a keen devotee and played a prominent part in life around Baba. He was also responsible for bringing Megha (who became Baba's *pujari* and faithful devotee) into contact with Sai Baba.

The *wada* was built in 1908 on a site between the Gurusthan neem tree and where Booty Wada (now the Samadhi Mandir) was subsequently constructed. Sathe describes the building's inception as follows:

Near Baba's favourite neem tree were the remnants of the old village wall. Baba told me: "Pull down the wall and build." Baba's suggestion was for building residential quarters there and for including the village wall in the construction. So I bought the land there and using the remnants of the village wall built a *wada* enclosing or surrounding the neem tree.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Devotees' Experiences



In 1924 the *wada* was bought by R. S. Navalkar and in 1939 his heirs gave it to the Sansthan. Two years later the Sansthan added four rooms for the use of pilgrims.

Until 1998 part of the *wada* still stood and was being used by the Sansthan as an administrative office. It was pulled down during the restructuring of the Temple Complex.

### ***Dixit Wada***

Dixit Wada is to be found just opposite Gurusthan. Work on the building began with Baba's permission in late 1910, the year after Dixit had taken his first *darshan* of Baba and been so touched by him. The building took about four months to complete and was inaugurated on Ramnavami the following year. Dixit lived in a modest room on the first floor and generously kept the rest of the building, including a small dining hall, for the use of visiting pilgrims. Many people benefited from the facility – Hemadpant, author of *Sbri Sai Satcharitra*, always stayed here when he was in Shirdi and the *wada* is mentioned several times in the literature. Baba sometimes sent people to the *wada* to attend the *parayana* that Dixit did every day and puja was also conducted regularly. It was while lying on the verandah here that Sri Bhisma conceived the idea of celebrating Ramnavami, a festival that grew in size each year and is one of the grandest events in the Shirdi calendar.



H. S. Dixit

Hari Sitaram Dixit, better known as Kakasaheb Dixit, was a close and exemplary devotee of Sai. He came to Baba in 1909 as an influential lawyer, active in politics, through his good friend Nana Chandorkar. While studying in London, Dixit had





injured his leg in a train accident which left him limping and lacking in confidence. It was ostensibly for his recovery that Nana persuaded him to visit Sai Baba. How this trip came about and the beautiful way in which Baba arranged it, with Shama as his escort, is described in the *Shri Sai Satcharitra*, Ch. 50. Upon having Baba's *darshan*, Dixit forgot why he had come and reported that the handicap of his leg was nothing compared to the limitations of his mind.

Baba apparently once asked Dixit, "Why are you anxious? All care is mine." Dixit accordingly entrusted all responsibility for his material, physical and spiritual welfare to Baba. In each area he received ample and dramatic help, including being saved from a near fatal fever and unexpectedly getting last minute relief from a huge debt. There are many inspiring instances of his deep devotion to Baba and of Baba's response.<sup>2</sup> Baba once promised that he would "take Kaka in a vimana" (i.e. secure him a happy death). This transpired in 1926 when Dixit passed away peacefully while travelling on a train with some close fellow devotees, as he was fondly recalling the greatness of his beloved *gurudeva*.

Dixit bequeathed part of the *wada* to the Sansthan and later it was given the whole building. Until the mid-1990s the building was used as a canteen. A small part of it is now open as a reading room. In a recent extension to the *wada* a few of Baba's things have recently been put on display in a small museum with a sign above the door: "Museum Hall". The Sansthan is planning to expand the display.

### ***Abdul Baba's cottage***

Just opposite the Chavadi next to a couple of tea stalls is a small entrance with a sign above it: "Abdul Baba's cottage".

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<sup>2</sup> For more information on the numerous occasions on which Dixit was rescued by Baba, see *Life of Sai Baba*, vol 2, by B.V. Narasimhaswami.



*Abdul Baba's cottage*

This is the room where one of the devotees serving Sai Baba, Abdul Baba, lived for the last years of his life. The building is open to the public and there is a pair of *chimta* (fire tongs) here, said to have been given to Abdul by Sri Sai Baba.

### ***Laxmibai Shinde's house***

Laxmibai Shinde was one of the half dozen or so devotees who were with Baba when he passed away, and the only woman who was allowed in the mosque when the curtain was down. (In those days, the curtain acted as a door, and screened the upper part of the mosque.) Like several other close devotees,



*Laxmibai Shinde*

she used to prepare food for Baba every day. Baba gave her four rupees daily, and just before he died he gave her a total of nine rupees. Some people see these as symbolizing the nine forms of devotion, others as the nine characteristics of a good disciple, as indicated in the *Bhagavata Purana*.<sup>3</sup> The coins are kept with a statue of Laxmibai in the small house which is open to the public. To find it, walk a few metres

down the narrow lane which starts opposite the Chavadi until you come to a small open area on your left; here you will see the house with *samadhi* in front.

<sup>3</sup> These are: indifference to honour; to fame and to insult; service to the guru; freedom from jealousy; alertness to one's spiritual evolution; steadiness; not indulging in idle talk; and being intent on gaining knowledge. The nine forms of devotion are: hearing (*sravan*), praying (*kirtan*), remembering (*smaran*), resorting to the feet (*padaseva*), worship (*archana*), bowing (*namaskar*), service (*dasya*), friendship (*sakhyatva*), surrender (*atmanivedan*).



*Laxmibai Shinde's house with her samadhi in front*

### ***Bhagoji Shinde's house***

Bhagoji was a sort of attendant to Baba, engaged in regular service to him. He was the first to enter the mosque in the early morning, and every day he used to massage first Baba's right arm and then his body. Then he would light a chillim and the two of them would share it. Bhagoji also had the privilege of carrying the umbrella for Baba when he went to Lendi (see the picture on p.75).

When Bhagoji came into contact with Baba he had leprosy. The disease was cured by taking Baba's *teerth*, though he remained partially disfigured.

Bhagoji's house, known as Shinde Wada, is just behind Laxmibai's house. To find it, turn left out of the Chavadi. Within a few metres you will see Narasinh Lodge on a right-hand corner, with a pair of holy *padukas* set in the wall. Turn right down this lane, and the compound of Shinde Wada lies on your



right, behind a solid old wooden door. Entering, you may see Bhagoji's house in the back right-hand corner. The compound is adjacent to a pharmacy run by a relative of Bhagoji.

### ***Mhalsapati's house***

Mhalsapati, who had the benefit of forty to fifty unbroken years with Sai Baba, may be considered among the foremost of his devotees. He was the first to worship Baba, the first to greet him on his arrival in Shirdi and to address him as "Sai" (Saint). Only Mhalsapati and one other (Tatya Kote Patil) were allowed to stay with Baba in the mosque at night.

Mhalsapati was the hereditary priest of Khandoba Temp-

le, and hereditary goldsmith of Shirdi (though later he gave up this trade). His education was minimal, but he was noted for his piousness. He also used to receive and help visiting fakirs, and *sadhhus* such as Devidas and Janakidas. His income was so scant that he and his family would sometimes have to go without food, but absorbed as he was in his religious practices, this did not seem to disturb him unduly. Mhalsapati



*Mhalsapati's house*



was so identified with his God, Khandoba, that he sometimes entered trances and talked as if possessed by him. In this way, he fulfilled the role of village shaman and villagers would put questions to Khandoba, via the medium of Mhalsapati.

In 1886 Mhalsapati was entrusted with a very important responsibility that was literally a matter of life and death, and which had far-reaching implications. Baba, who had been suffering from breathing difficulties, told him that he was “going to Allah”, and that Mhalsapati should look after his body for three days. “If I do not return,” said Baba, “then get it buried near the neem tree.” On uttering these words, Baba passed out. Mhalsapati sat for three days with Baba’s body on his lap. When village officers held an inquest and declared Baba dead, Mhalsapati remained steadfast and refused to allow them to take the body for burial. After this, Baba revived to live for another thirty-two years!

In such ways, Mhalsapati gave continued and devoted service to Baba throughout. In return, Baba guided and protected him, and kept him on a high moral and spiritual course. In his *Life of Sai Baba* B.V. Narasimhaswami has recorded some of the many occasions on which Baba came to Mhalsapati’s aid during their long association. They include curing his wife’s throat tumour, manifesting to Mhalsapati at Jejuri 150 miles away to reassure him that his party would not be touched by the plague that raged there, and warning him of the peril of coming events (such as a snake on his pathway home, a fight in a house he was to visit, an insulting situation at another, etc).

Mhalsapati survived Baba by four years. During that time he continued to sleep in the mosque, perform daily worship of Baba and Khandoba, observe *mouna* (silence) and sit in meditation. Baba had moulded this simple and conservative yet dedicated priest into a paragon of spiritual excellence. An indication of his attainment is the mode of his death. On an auspicious *ekadasi* day, Mhalsapati gave instructions to his family and told them that he would “close [his] earthly life



and go to heaven” that day. With his loved ones around him chanting *Ramachandra japa*, and himself uttering the word “Ram”, he left consciously and peacefully. It was a fitting end to a lofty life of spiritual endeavour.

Mhalsapati's remains are interred in his modest house, where his great grandson now lives. It is open to visitors and some people like to worship at the *samadhi* and take *darshan* of the things here that Baba gave Mhalsapati. One of Baba's *kafnis*, one of his *satkas*, three coins, some *udi* and a pair of Baba's *padukas* are kept here. The house is located just beyond Laxmibai Shinde's place, a little further up the lane at the next opening. The walls are painted and there is a sign above the door.



Shama

### **Madhav Rao Deshpande's ("Shama") house**

This house is mentioned in the *Sbri Sai Satcharitra*, as Baba sent Hemadpant here to collect *dakshina* from Shama and to have a chat with him. Hemadpant had been feeling disconsolate because a newcomer to Shirdi had just had a wonderful vision after doing a seven-day *parayana* of *Gurucharitra*, whereas Hemadpant had been studying it for forty years and felt he had not had any result.

“No sooner did this thought cross his mind, than Baba knew it then and there.” Hemadpant's subsequent conversation with Shama on the verandah of this house resulted in one of the most beautiful passages in the entire *Sbri Sai Satcharitra* (Ch. 18), in which Baba speaks (to Radhabai Deshmukh) of the great bond between himself and his guru.

Shama was among the most intimate devotees of Baba, and acted like a personal secretary to him. Baba once told Shama that they had been together for seventy-two generations. Shama's



*Shama's house*

parents had moved to Shirdi from Nimon (five kilometres away) when Shama was only two. He became a school teacher in a room next door to the mosque and his interest in Baba was kindled there.

Shama's house is a few metres from Dwarkamai – take

the lane opposite and bear immediately right following the narrow winding lane. There is a sign on the building and it is still occupied by Shama's daughter-in-law. His son, Uddhavrao, passed away in 1998.

### ***The houses of the five blessed ones from whom Baba took bhiksha***

Right up to his last days, Baba used to beg for his food. He usually confined his *bhiksha* rounds to the same five houses which were all within a few metres of Dwarkamai, and went several times a day. On rare occasions when he was unable to go himself, Baba sent someone in his place. Baba would stand outside and call for bread, but he never went into the houses. Baba collected the food all together in a cloth bag and any liquids in a tin mug, then took it back to Dwarkamai. He would offer some at the *dhuni* and empty the rest into a pot (the *kolamba*) by the fire, where any creature could take from it. Only later would Baba eat a small amount himself (see pp. 41-42).

The first two houses Baba used to go to were those of Vaman Gondkar and Vaman Sakharam Shelke, beside the Chavadi. Both were wealthy landowners. These two substantial houses were demolished in 2001, though the small



Narasimha Temple beside them, with its three little *samadhis*,<sup>4</sup> still stands.

Vaman Gondkar's house appears in one of the *leelas* in the *Shri Sai Satcharitra*. Hemadpant narrates that one day at noon, Baba suddenly got up and went and stood near Radhakrishnaya's place and asked some men to bring a ladder and lean it against the wall of Gondkar's house. Baba then climbed up, walked over the roof and the adjacent one (which was Radhakrishnaya's), got them to move the ladder there, and



*Baba on his bhiksha rounds, c. 1916*

then climbed down again. As Hemadpant says, “No one could understand this mystery.” For one thing, “Baba could only walk if two people on either side of him supported him. When he himself was so feeble, from where did this strength

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<sup>4</sup>They are said to be of Sakharam's son, daughter-in-law, and Ramgiri Bua.





come?" Secondly, for this small service, Baba paid the owner of the ladder the then princely sum of two rupees! When asked about this, Baba simply replied that we should never take anybody's labour for free. It so happened though, that the owner of the ladder later prospered and had two sons, having been childless until then. Villagers also wondered if Baba had done some-thing for Radhakrishnaya's benefit, as she had been suffering from malaria at the time.



*Bayajabai, who served Baba bhiksha throughout his life in Shirdi*

The next houses Baba went to on his rounds were also very close to each other – those of Bayajabai (Tatya's mother), and Bayaji Appa Kote Patil (in whose arms Baba passed away). They are just beyond Narasinh Lodge opposite Ithiraj Hotel (its sign is in Hindi only), around the corner from what is currently Saikkon Colour Laboratory. It was in this area that the photo of Baba on his begging rounds was taken. Bayajabai's family later moved to a bigger house a few metres away behind Mahalaxmi Temple. This has been converted into a hotel and is now known as Bayajabai Guesthouse.

Finally, Baba used to go to the house of the local money-lender, Nandaram Marwari. This is in the lane between Dwarkamai and Gurusthan behind what is now the Madras Hotel. Like the other families to whom Baba went for *bhiksha*, this one was devoted to Baba and, also like the others, received many blessings from him. Baba sometimes went to all or any of these houses more than a dozen times a day (later the number of daily visits became fewer). In the case of Nandaram's wife, Baba would sometimes shout and heap abuse on her if she



*Experiencing Sai Baba's Shirdi*

was slow in preparing the offering. Nandaram's descendants are still living in part of this house, which has been extended; the rest of it has been turned into a lodge.



*Bayajabai's house. It is said that  
Baba used to stand on the stone  
seen in front of the door.*

On Vijayadasami, as part of the celebrations, Baba's *bhiksha* routine is ritualistically re-enacted by devotees. The participants are selected by lottery and taken ceremoniously in procession to the five houses, via Dwarkamai, starting at the Samadhi Mandir.





**T**he three main festivals in Shirdi, of two to four days each, are Ramnavami (March/April), Guru Purnima (July), and Vijayadasami (September/October). In Shirdi, these festivals are celebrated with great passion, verve and heartfulness. Thousands flock to bathe in the grace which seems to flow especially freely at such times. There is a programme of



puja, music (*bhajan*), public *parayana* (reading of scriptures and devotional texts) and exuberant processions with the palanquin and the *rath* (chariot). The Samadhi Mandir remains open all night during one of these days, with the upper section of Dwarkamai being open the previous night, and there are all-night *bhajan* and *qawali* sessions at various locations around the village, including Lendi Gardens. Printed programmes with full details are available from the Sansthan. On the special atmosphere that prevails at such times, Sri Babuji has commented, "When there is a collective activity or endeavour, then it is easy for the love and the experience to sink into the heart. On ordinary days it is as if you have to sail with your oars and row, but on these days it is just like setting the sails and then letting yourself be happily carried along by the wind!"

### ***Ramnavami***

In 1897, Gopalrao Gund proposed holding an *urs* in Shirdi as an expression of his gratitude to Baba for having been granted the birth of a son after many childless years. Baba gave his permission for the celebration and fixed the day for Ramnavami. This was an ingenious touch of Baba's. *Urs* is a Muslim festival honouring a Muslim saint (usually one who has passed away); by holding the *urs* on the day of a Hindu festival, the two communities were brought closer together in a natural yet remarkable way. The festival gradually grew in importance and in 1912 some devotees asked Baba if they could celebrate Ramnavami, since it fell on the same day (Ramnavami is the anniversary of Lord Rama's birth). Baba agreed and the festival was held in grand style. From that day, says the *Shri Sai Satcharitra*, "the *urs* was transformed into the Ramnavami festival".

In Shirdi, two locally historic rituals are carried out during this festival: the sack of wheat that is kept in Dwarkamai is changed and the old one taken to Prasadalya to be used there, and secondly, the Dwarkamai flags are replaced. When the *urs* was first celebrated, Gopalrao Gund prevailed upon his friend



*Parading through Shirdi with Baba's picture  
on the festival of Vijayadasami*

to supply a flag for the procession. This was Damu Anna Rasne of Ahmednagar who had similarly been blessed by Sai Baba with sons, having come to Baba for this purpose on the recommendation of Shama's father-in-law. In addition, Gund asked Nanasaheb Nimonkar to supply a second flag with embroidery. This was also done and both flags (described as "huge" by M. W. Pradhan, who saw them) were taken in procession through the village and fixed at the two corners of the mosque. Descendants of these two devotees continue this tradition and flags are brought and offered at Baba's *samadhi* before being taken on a grand procession. The procession begins – as it did in Baba's time – at the house of the three carpenters who did the bulk of the repair work on the mosque (Tukaram, Gabaji and Kondaji, the first of whom personally served Baba for several years). In the evening, the descendants of Abdul Baba perform a traditional "sandal procession", finishing at Dwarkamai and applying the sandalwood paste to the *nimbar* there.



### ***Guru Purnima***

Guru Purnima (“*purnima*” means full moon) is the day on which disciples and devotees honour and felicitate their guru and seek his or her special blessings. Although it is not a major festival for everyone in India, it is of great importance in Shirdi, being the only festival which Baba asked devotees to celebrate. It falls on the full moon day of the month of Ashad in the Hindu calendar (June-July).

The festival originated in the Buddha's time when the monks used to take *diksha* (instructions on their spiritual practice) at the beginning of the annual four-month rains-retreat. The practice was then borrowed by the Jain tradition and later by the Hindus.

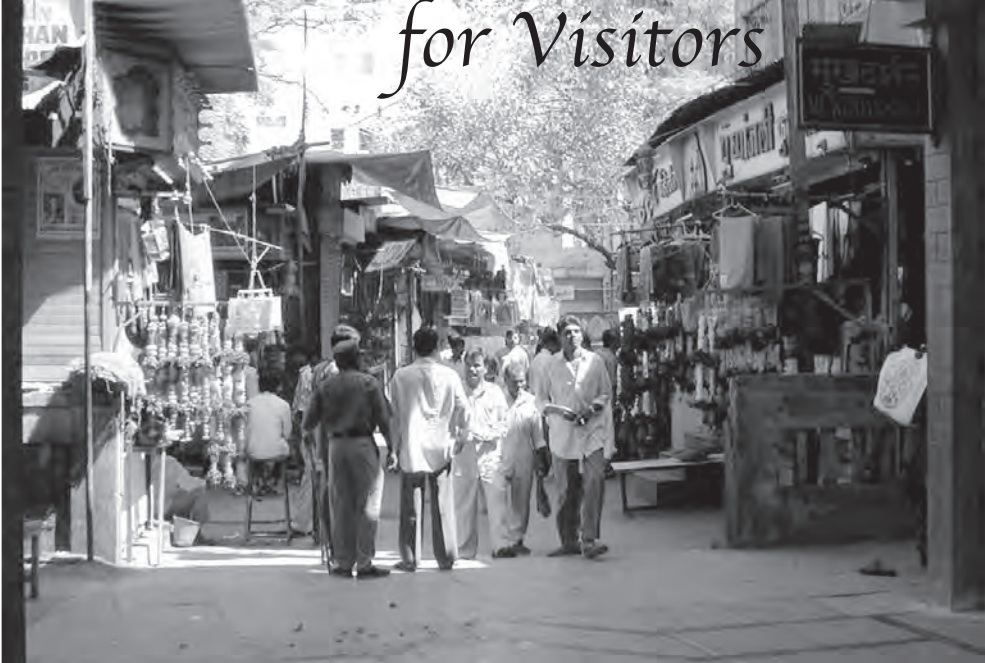
According to H. V. Sathe, Guru Purnima celebrations in Shirdi were started one year when Baba called Dada Kelkar (probably in 1910) and said, “Don't you remember that this is Guru Purnima? Come on, go and worship that post there.” That post is in the mosque (see p. 40). Later Dada Kelkar told others, and so everybody thought that Baba gave importance to Guru Purnima; thus the tradition started.

### ***Vijayadasami***

Vijayadasami is a major festival celebrated throughout India under different names and with regional variations, as the victory of good over evil. It is also known as Dusserah and is the culmination of the nine days of goddess worship. For Sai devotees, it is venerated as the holy day that their beloved *gurudeva* attained *mahasamadhi* (also known as *punyatitthi*) and is a big festival in Shirdi. This was also the day on which the statue of Baba “came to life” and was inaugurated in the Samadhi Mandir. For devotees of Sri Sainathuni Sarath Babuji it is a day imbued with additional significance and joy as it is the same day he took birth in 1954.



# Practical Tips for Visitors



*“That anyone should come here and not experience relief is a thing that can never happen, in the past, present or future. Be sure that your object will be accomplished.”*

Sri Sai Baba

## ***When to visit***

When to visit? The best advice is to visit whenever you have the chance and as often as possible!

You may like to experience Shirdi during one of its festivals (see previous chapter). At these times Shirdi is extremely crowded, with people coming “like ants”, just as Baba predicted. However, one may enjoy the exceptional atmosphere of such



occasions, when the thrill and magic of Shirdi seem to be heightened.

Climatically, at an elevation of more than 500 metres, Shirdi is blessed with relatively benign conditions for its latitude. The peak of the hot season is April-May, when maximum temperatures may reach the 40s (centigrade). However, nights are pleasantly cool. By mid-June, the monsoon will usually have started, and will run through till September/October. The rains have a cooling effect, but the unpaved streets of Shirdi may be full of mud and puddles. Winters are dry and sunny in the daytime, cold at night: you will need woollens and a shawl.

### ***How to get there***

Shirdi is well served by a network of public transport. The nearest airports are Aurangabad (130 kms), Pune (200 kms) and Mumbai (300 kms), from where taxis and frequent buses are available.

Kopergaon station, sixteen kilometres away, is the railhead for Shirdi. The daily Bangalore-Delhi Karnataka Express (known as the "KK") stops here. It is eighteen hours from Delhi, twenty-one from Bangalore. From Kopergaon station you will need to take an autorickshaw to Shirdi (around 100 rupees per vehicle), or a shared tempo (about 15 rupees). Taxis are available from the taxi stand in the village a couple of kilometres from the station.

There is a greater choice of trains to Manmad (including the Jhelum Express, Punjab Mail and the Goa Express), which is a railway junction about eighty minutes by road from Shirdi. This is also the station for those coming from Mumbai. From Hyderabad the Manmad Express leaves in the evening and arrives the next morning. The train also stops at Nagarsol which is the station before Manmad and is closer to Shirdi. Buses operate between Shirdi and these two stations. Another route to Shirdi is to take one of the several mainline trains to Pune or Daund and proceed by road (about four hours). At certain peak times special trains run between south and north India (usually Chennai and Ahmedabad or Jodhpur) via Kopergaon.





There is a small computerized railway booking office in Shirdi within the Temple Complex.

Long-distance buses run from many different cities, including Pune, Mumbai, Hyderabad and Vijayawada. The bus station is opposite the Shri Sainath Hospital on the main road. The private bus service from Dadar, Mumbai, terminates opposite Hotel Pilgrims Inn, Pimpalwadi Road. There is also a local bus service from Kopergaon and Manmad. There are numerous travel agencies in Shirdi which can help with bookings and onward arrangements.

### ***Where to stay***

There are more than 250 hotels and lodges in Shirdi, offering a range of accommodation, from a bed in a dormitory for a few rupees, to air-conditioned luxury hotels. In addition to these privately-run places, the **Sansthan** has several large accommodation blocks with a capacity for thousands. These are: i) **Bhakta Niwas** (also known as “**five hundred rooms**”), about two kms from the *mandir* on the main Nagar-Manmad road towards Rahata. It has about 476 rooms with attached bathroom, for 100 rupees, and a VIP block to accommodate up to seven people. A free and frequent 24-hour bus service ferries visitors between Bhakta Niwas and Prasadalya. ii) **Sai Prasad One** and **Sai Prasad Two**. These two blocks are centrally located on the corner of Pimpalwadi Road and the main road. They provide about 168 rooms at 20-40 rupees each. iii) **Sai Udyan**, a collection of dormitory halls with locker facilities and beds for about 2,400 people is in Pimpalwadi Road. iv) **Sai Baba Dharamsala** (also known as “**two hundred rooms**”), opposite the bus station, has rooms with four beds which are rented per person (21 rupees per bed). All Sansthan accommodation is allotted on a first-come first-served basis, and is given for just twenty-four hours, extendable only in special circumstances.





### ***Where to eat***


Shirdi is in central India and the restaurants serve both north and south Indian cuisine; Gujarati and Andhra *thalis* (fixed meals) are readily available.

Many devotees like to eat at Prasadalaya, which serves meals between 10 a.m. and 10 p.m and is run by the Sansthan (buy a ticket from the booth outside). Otherwise there is a large variety of places to choose from. All the major hotels have attached restaurants and there are dozens of restaurants and snack bars around the bus station, the *mandir* area and Pimpalwadi Road. The Sansthan canteen in front of Lendi Gardens serves tea, coffee, hot milk and biscuits at subsidized rates, 24 hours a day. These are also available in the *darshan* Queue Complex and in Bhakta Niwas.

### ***Miscellaneous***

 If you are going to be in Shirdi for just a few hours, you may leave **luggage** in the lockers in the Sansthan accommodation blocks (see previous section). A new computerized Accommodation and Information Centre is under construction and is expected to open by the end of 2003. It is on the main Nagar-Manmad road opposite the bus station.

 If you are going to be in the *mandir* for any length of time, you are advised to leave your **shoes** at one of the shoe-stands, unless you don't mind donating them to a stranger. There is one at the entrance of the Queue Complex and another opposite the Mukh Darshan door of the Samadhi Mandir. You will be given a ticket for your shoes (for 50 paise) which is needed to retrieve them. Similarly, take care of your valuables (make sure bags are closed and zipped up) when amongst crowds.

 There is a **bookshop** in the Temple Complex run by the Sansthan where you can get Sansthan publications, including the *Shri Sai Satcharitra*. It is in the complex by Lendi



Gardens. Two other shops with a comprehensive selection of books about Baba are to be found on the corner of the lane leading straight out of Gurusthan.

☞ Cloth that has been used on Baba's *samadhi* is offered for sale as **prasad** in the Sansthan shop in the Temple Complex. The price is fixed at the original cost, but on Thursday and Sunday mornings at 8 o'clock it is auctioned (between Dixit Wada and the canteen). There are booths and shops selling *pedha* (a traditional Indian confectionary), coconuts, garlands, etc all around the *mandir* area.

☞ The **post office** is opposite the Kanifnath Temple in the small lane that runs perpendicular to the main Nagar-Manmad road down to the Shirdi mosque, about five minutes' walk from Gurusthan.

☞ There is a daily fruit and vegetable **market** on the eastern outskirts of the village beyond Pushpanjali Hotel. On Sundays it is much bigger and held a little further away.

☞ The Sansthan has recently built a small **meditation hall**. It is just in front of Gurusthan, opposite Dixit Wada, and will be opened once the air-cooling system has been installed.

☞ Free **medical facilities**, both allopathic and homeopathic, are provided at the Shri Sainath Hospital on the main Nagar-Manmad road. The hospital is maintained by the Sansthan.

☞ Shirdi never really goes to bed – and that is part of the thrill of the place! At night, especially, there is a sense of promise, perhaps because these hours feel like an extra blessing, “stolen moments”. There is a sense of expectation lingering in the air, and at the same time, a permeating peace. This may be enhanced by hearing the sound of *bhajan* – often one will be walking quietly through the streets, or sitting in silence in Dwarkamai, when a musical rendition of some devotees' call to God wafts through the night air, evoking all of our longings,



and linking us to Baba and our fellow men and women. One may feel quite safe wandering around Shirdi alone at night, and you may like to take the opportunity to visit Nanda Deep (Lendi Gardens), Gurusthan or Dwarkamai in these relatively quiet hours.

☞ In Pimpalwadi Road there are some *chai* (Indian tea) and snack stalls that are open late at night and from very early in the morning.

☞ **Sakuri** is a small and peaceful village three-four kilometres from Shirdi, just outside Rahata. It was here that a leading Sai devotee, Sri Upasani Maharaj, settled and established an ashram, which is still active today. Visitors are welcome.



## ***Suggested Reading***

For those interested in reading more about Sri Sai Baba, the following books are suggested. The first four are the most authentic.

*Shri Sai Satcharitra: the Wonderful Life and Teachings of Shri Sai Baba*, by G. R. Dabholkar (alias “Hemadpant”), translated by N. V. Gunaji, Shirdi: Shri Sai Sansthan, 1999. (Orig. pub. 1944.) (Many reprints.) The original Marathi edition of this book was written by one of Baba’s close devotees and is revered as a sacred text and the most authoritative sacral account of Baba’s life and *leelas*. It was composed in verse-form, to be recited out loud, and was started with Baba’s permission while he was still alive. It was completed only in 1929, eleven years after the mahasamadhi of Sri Sai Baba. The English version, which is a prose adaptation and abridgement of the original, was published some fifteen years later.

*Shri Sai Satcharitra: the Life and Teachings of Shirdi Sai Baba*, by G. R. Dabholkar, translated by Indira Kher, Mumbai: Sterling Publishers, 1999. This recent English translation is a complete, unabridged and more literal translation of the original Marathi text and contains notes to help the reader identify people, places and events mentioned.

*Life of Sai Baba, Vols I-IV*, by B. V. Narasimhaswami, Mylapore, Chennai: All India Sai Samaj, 1995. (Orig. pub. 1934.) (Many reprints.) This is the most complete and accurate account of Baba’s life, teachings, and devotees, written by a tireless and devoted propagandist of Baba’s life and path.

*Devotees’ Experiences of Sri Sai Baba*, by B. V. Narasimhaswami, Hyderabad: Akhanda Sai Nama Saptaha Samiti, 1989 (Orig. pub. 1934.) (Many reprints.) This is a collection of personal experiences of devotees who encountered Sai Baba while he was still alive – and therein lies its unique value. The stories were gathered personally by the author, whose profession as



a lawyer is reflected in the careful and balanced manner in which they are presented. The first-person accounts – of a wide variety of individuals touched and graced by Sri Sai Baba, their *sadguru* – bear the stamp of authenticity of direct contact and interaction with Baba, and thus convey the spirit of what it was like to live and move with him.

*Sri Sai Baba's Charters and Sayings*, by B. V. Narasimhaswami, Mylapore, Chennai: All India Sai Samaj, 1999. (Orig. pub. 1939.) (Many reprints.) A unique and invaluable compilation of Sai Baba's sayings and precepts, often quoted by other writers on Baba.

*Shri Sai Baba of Shirdi, a Glimpse of Indian Spirituality*, by M. W. Pradhan, Shirdi: Shri Sai Baba Sansthan, 2000. (Orig. pub. 1933.) (Many reprints.) Probably the first biography in English of Sai Baba, this brief sketch is alive with the authenticity of one who lived and moved with Baba as his close devotee.

*The Life and Teachings of Sai Baba of Shirdi*, by Antonio Rigopoulos, New Delhi: Sri Sadguru Publications, 1993. Originally written as a doctoral thesis, this is the first full-length scholarly treatment of the life and work of Sri Sai Baba. It assembles the available information concerning Baba's life and antecedents, considers the questions of his birth, parentage, and guru, and discusses in detail the rich and varied historical and spiritual currents which formed the matrix within which Baba appeared and characterized the times in which he lived. Among the themes treated are Indian Sufism, the Pandharpur Varkari tradition, and the medieval Maharashtrian *bhakti* of Jnaneshwar, Eknath, and Tukaram; accounts of the *bhakti* and *jnana* paths as they relate to Baba and what is known of his teachings on these subjects are also covered.

*Sai Baba of Shirdi – a Unique Saint*, by M. V. Kamath and V. B. Kher, Mumbai: Jaico Publishing House, 2000. (Orig. pub. 1991.) (Many reprints.) This work gives a good account of Baba's life, set in the broader framework of the times in which he lived.



*Sai Baba the Master*, by Acharya E. Bharadwaja, Ongole, Andhra Pradesh: Sri Guru Paduka Publications, 1996. (Orig. pub. 1978.) (Many reprints.) The emphasis in this biography is on the miracles that happened around Baba, and on devotees' experiences. It contains some previously unpublished material (testimonies), and succeeds in furnishing the reader with some sense of the exceptional nature of Sri Sai Baba.

*The Incredible Sai Baba*, by Arthur Osborne, New Delhi: Orient Longmans, 2002. (Orig. pub. 1957.) (Many reprints.) A short, celebrated, very readable biography by a leading Western devotee of Sri Ramana Maharshi, the sage of Arunachala (1879-1950), South India. The author makes some interesting observations and comparisons between the two saints.

*Arati Sai Baba, the Psalm Book of Shirdi Aratis*, by Sainathuni Sarath Babuji, Shirdi: Saipatham Publications, 1996. Though a slim volume, *Arati Sai Baba* is full of information and innovative interpretation. The extensive introduction expounds the meaning and history of *arati* and the gradual evolution of *arati* worship of Sri Sai Baba. Incidentally, a wealth of fascinating detail about Baba's life and teaching is revealed. The rest of the book gives an English transliteration and translation of each of the Shirdi *arati* songs, along with a commentary. Since *arati* is a central part of devotional life in Shirdi, this book is a valuable resource. It also enables non-Marathi speaking devotees to participate in the singing of the *arati* songs and know their meaning.

### ***In Telugu only***

*Sai Bhakti Sadhana Rahasyam*, by Sainathuni Sarath Babuji, Shirdi: Saipatham Publications, 2001. (Orig. pub 1997.) This is a selection of twenty-three outstanding articles from the many that were originally published in *Saipatham* magazine. The articles, meticulously researched, reveal different aspects



of Sai Baba, his teachings and the secrets of Sai *sadhana*. It is therefore an important guide for any Sai devotee.

*Sai Gurucharitra*, translated by S. V. L. Narayan Rao, with extensive introduction by Sainathuni Sarath Babuji, Shirdi: Saipatham Publications, 2001. (Orig. pub 1997.) This is a translation from the Marathi of selected passages about Sai Baba from the works of Das Ganu, who was a contemporary devotee of Sai Baba and his first biographer. The carefully researched introduction discusses the content and significance of the various passages presented.

### ***Magazines***

*Shri Sai Leela*, Shirdi: Shri Sai Baba Sansthan, 1923-; bi-monthly. The official magazine published by the Sansthan in Shirdi containing articles about Baba and devotees' experiences. Published bi-monthly in two editions, Marathi and English/Hindi; available by subscription from the Sansthan.

### ***Websites***

Some of the website addresses that may be of interest to visitors to Shirdi:

[www.shrisaibabasansthan.org](http://www.shrisaibabasansthan.org)

[www.saipatham.com](http://www.saipatham.com)

[www.saibaba.org](http://www.saibaba.org)





## Appendix 1

# Shri Sai Baba Sansthan

**D**uring Baba's time, there was no fund, trust or institution of any kind.<sup>1</sup> As we have already noted, whatever donations Baba received during the day had been completely given away by the end of it. In this way, Baba began each day afresh, as a penniless fakir. There was no hierarchy to organize and no position to maintain.

After Baba's *mahasamadhi*, a committee of prominent devotees was constituted to continue worship of Sai Baba and to maintain the places associated with him; for this, a fund was started. Kakasaheb Dixit played a key role and contributed greatly by preparing the scheme for control of the Samadhi Mandir and getting it sanctioned by the Ahmednagar District Court in 1921. The movement developed into the Shri Sai Baba Sansthan which was formally established in 1922 and has now become a Public Charitable Trust (Regd. No E69, Ahmednagar). It is this organization that is now responsible for maintaining the Sai Baba sites and running facilities for pilgrims. An indication of the extent of their work is the number of employees, which runs to some twelve hundred.

There are several Sansthan offices, including a bookshop selling Sansthan publications; a Public Relations Office (currently by the main gateway close to Lendi Gardens); and a Visitor Reception Centre and Cloakroom (where you can deposit luggage) at the Prasadalya complex. A new Visitor Reception Centre has been built opposite the bus station. This will also house a computerized accommodation booking office (and there will be another at Prasadalya). It is expected to open

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<sup>1</sup> An attempt to manage funds, led by Radhakrishnaya and H.V. Sathe, and known as Dakshina Bhiksha Sansthan, did not meet with any lasting success.



by the end of 2003; meanwhile, the Accommodation Office is in Prasadalya. In addition to the small drinks canteen in the Temple Complex, the Sansthan also runs a large dining hall (called Prasadalya) in Pimpalwadi Road, where rice meals may be had at a very nominal charge, from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. To the east of Prasadalya, is Sulabh Shauchalya, a cloakroom and washing facility. In an effort to accommodate the flow of visitors, extensive and long-term work has been carried out and the current configuration of buildings may still change.

Apart from the above, the Sansthan runs several social projects, including a hospital, an annual eye-camp, a blood bank, educational scholarships for its employees, an emergency fund, local NGO assistance fund, and feeding of the poor (200-400 per day). These are funded by the liberal donations made by pilgrims. The Sansthan also runs a primary school, a secondary school for girls and an industrial training institute.

A monthly magazine, *Shri Sai Leela*, was started by Kakasaheb Dixit, Hemadpant and others in April 1923, to promote the path of Sai. Today it is published bi-monthly by the Sansthan in two editions, Marathi and English/Hindi. It is available by subscription only.

## Appendix 2

# Daily Programme

### *Key events of the day in Shri Sai Baba Mandir*

4.30 a.m.	Dwarkamai, Gurusthan and Chavadi open
5.00 a.m.	Samadhi Mandir opens, <i>bbupali</i> ; <i>abhishekam</i> at Gurusthan
5.15 a.m.	<i>Kakad</i> (morning) <i>arati</i> ; <i>naivedya</i> of butter and sugar to Baba in Samadhi Mandir; oil offered to the lamps in Dwarkamai
5.40 a.m.	<i>Bhajan</i> in Samadhi Mandir
6.00 a.m.	<i>Mangal snaan</i> (washing) of statue and <i>samadhi</i> in Samadhi Mandir
7.00 a.m.	<i>Darshan</i> begins in Samadhi Mandir
9.00 a.m.	<i>Naivedya</i> in Samadhi Mandir and Dwarkamai
10.30 a.m.	Satyanarayana puja
11.30 a.m.	<i>Dhuni</i> puja with rice and ghee in Dwarkamai
12.00 noon	Midday <i>arati</i>
12.30 p.m.	<i>Naivedya</i> in Samadhi Mandir, Dwarkamai and Gurusthan
4.00 p.m.	<i>Pothi</i> (devotional reading/study) in Samadhi Mandir
Sunset	<i>Dhoop</i> (evening) <i>arati</i>



- 6.30 p.m. *Naivedya* in Samadhi Mandir, Dwarkamai and Gurusthan
- 8.00 p.m. Devotional songs in Samadhi Mandir and other cultural programmes (if any)
- 9.00 p.m. Chavadi and Gurusthan close
- 9.30 p.m. In Dwarkamai water is given to Baba, a mosquito net is hung and the hanging lamp is lit
- 9.45 p.m. Dwarkamai (the upper part) closes
- 10.00 p.m. *Sej* (night) *arati*. After this, a shawl is wrapped around the statue in the Samadhi Mandir, a *mala* is put around Baba's neck, a mosquito net is hung, and a glass of water kept there
- 10.45 p.m. Samadhi Mandir closes after night *arati*

The Chavadi procession (*utsav*) is held every Thursday at 9.00 p.m. (See page 66.)

## Appendix 3

# Sri Babuji and Saipatham

In 1989 Sadguru Sri Sainathuni Sarath Babuji (affectionately known as “Guruji”) came to Shirdi from his native Andhra Pradesh, to settle in the place where the sacred tomb of his beloved *sadguru* is located. He was perhaps the very first “settler” from Andhra Pradesh though others have since followed. A small colony, known as Saipatham (which means “path of Sai”), has been growing up around him on the edge of Shirdi village.

At the heart of Saipatham, about a hundred metres from Sri



*Sri Babuji in Saipatham  
satsang hall*

Babuji’s residence, is the compound where *satsang* activities are conducted. When we enter it our eye is immediately drawn to the spacious bamboo *satsang* hall with its beautiful life-sized photo of Sai Baba on the marble dais. We are struck not only by the originality of the building’s design, but also by its openness and the absence of any doors or solid walls. This enables anybody, at any time of day or night, to enter and take Baba’s *darshan*. Every evening at 7 p.m. devotees gather here for *satsang*. *Satsang*



consists of *bhajan*, Telugu *parayana* and occasionally a discourse, a reading from the Marathi version of the *Shri Sai Satcharitra*, Baba's *nama*,<sup>1</sup> and finally *naivedya* and *arati* to Baba, followed by the distribution of *prasad*.

Sri Babuji lives in a rented flat with his wife and teenage daughter, though he spends extended periods of time in South India. During festivals, while he is in Shirdi there may be the opportunity to take his *darshan* and bask in his presence. People seeking help find solace and inspiration here and, in Sri Babuji, a living emblem of the path of Sai.

Sri Babuji is not at all in favour of being associated with any ashram or institution and has no property of his own. He reminds us that Sai Baba never had any kind of ashram, trust or hierarchy around him and he urges devotees to remember their original purpose in coming to Baba and not to get distracted from it. He tells those visiting Shirdi to simply spend as much time as possible in the Samadhi Mandir, Dwarkamai and Gurusthan, and assures them that Baba will take care and that his grace is infinite.

Sri Babuji lives as a householder and adheres strictly to the principle of not accepting anything gratis (*aparigraha*). Even the small fruit and sweet offerings respectfully brought by devotees are immediately distributed as *prasad*. In the Saipatham *satsang* hall we are surprised to see a sign that no donations of any kind will be accepted! Anybody asking to make a donation is politely refused. The Saipatham colony is being built by individual devotees who wish to be near Sri Babuji.

Visitors are welcome to come and participate in the evening *satsang*.

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<sup>1</sup> Sri Babuji's complete dependence on Baba's grace is seen in all aspects of his life. Baba's name is commonly linked to other names of God (such as Sai Ram, Sai Krishna etc). It was Sri Babuji who initiated and popularized Sai *nama*, as "Sai Baba, Sai Baba!" Galvanized by his example, this *bhajan* – which Sri Babuji describes as "calling Baba" – is now a regular part of worship for thousands of devotees who attest to its potency.

# Glossary

- abbang*** : lit. unbroken; a metrical composition in Marathi used by the Varkari saint-poets
- abbisbekham*** : ritual bathing of a deity in worship
- Advaita Vedanta*** : the non-dualistic school of Indian philosophy advocated by Shankara (788-820ad)
- Allah Malik hai*** : Allah is the Lord and Master; a phrase uttered frequently by Sai Baba
- amrit*** : nectar
- arati*** : a mode of congregational worship, in which the devotees stand facing the image of a deity or saint, or a living saint, singing devotional songs in unison while a priest or devotee revolves clockwise a lighted oil lamp (usually consisting of five oil-traylets) around the object of adoration. After the devotional singing the flame of the *arati*-lamp is offered to the devotees. They pass their hands in turn over the sacred flame and quickly draw them to their faces and heads as a gesture of pulling towards them the auspicious energy emanating from the sacred flame, which is regarded as a receptacle of divine grace
- Arre!*** : exclamation of surprise
- artha*** : wealth
- avadbut*** : a liberated sage who has shaken off all identification with the body
- avesam*** : possession; strong emotion
- bhajan*** : worship in the form of singing devotional songs, litanies or the divine name
- bhakta*** : devotee; one who cherishes an intense love for the object of his or her spiritual endeavour
- bhakti*** : devotion to a chosen deity, guru, or spiritual principle
- bhiksba*** : the food reverently offered to a religious mendicant
- bbupali*** : the name of a *raga* (melodic pattern) in the classical Indian music tradition (formerly used



	by court musicians to rouse the monarch from sleep respectfully in the morning)
<b>Brahma</b>	: the Creator, one of the Hindu trinity
<b>chopdar</b>	: a section of the Shirdi Sansthan temple workers, who regulate the crowds, shout the <i>lalkari</i> during <i>arati</i> , and who may be identified by their traditional Maharashtrian dress of red tunic and turban
<b>dagadi</b>	: stone
<b>dakshina</b>	: donation (originally the sacrificial or professional fee paid to officiating priests or the guru upon completion of studies)
<b>darbar</b>	: a royal court; Sai Baba's mosque came to be known as a <i>darbar</i>
<b>dargah</b>	: tomb of a Muslim saint
<b>darsban</b>	: sight, appearance; usually refers to the seeing of, or audience with, a deity or saint
<b>Dattatreya/Datta</b>	: the manifestation of God as the perfect Guru and the unity of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva; some believe Sai Baba to be an incarnation of Dattatreya
<b>dbarma</b>	: the way things ought to be; the natural order of the world and the ideal social law
<b>dboop</b>	: evening
<b>dbuni</b>	: sacred fire
<b>diksha</b>	: initiation; spiritual practice or vow performed with unswerving devotion and perseverance
<b>ekadasi</b>	: the eleventh day of the lunar month according to the Hindu calendar, traditionally considered auspicious
<b>fakir</b>	: lit. a poor man; a wandering Muslim mendicant or holy man
<b>gopuram</b>	: temple tower
<b>gurubandhu</b>	: a person who is "tied" ( <i>bandhu</i> ) to the same guru as oneself; a fellow devotee
<b>Gurucharitra</b>	: highly revered Marathi text which gives an account of the lives of two medieval saints (Shri Shripad Shrivallabha and Shri Narasimha Sarasvati Swami), considered to be incarnations of Dattatreya





<b><i>gurudeva</i></b>	: guru-god
<b>Guru Purnima</b>	: annual festival in India in celebration of the guru; held on the full moon ( <i>purnima</i> ) in July
<b>Hari</b>	: one of the names of Vishnu
<b><i>Hari-nama</i></b>	: chanting the name of Hari
<b><i>bundi</i></b>	: box for depositing donations
<b>Indra</b>	: the king of gods
<b><i>ishtadevata</i></b>	: one's personal chosen deity
<b>Ishwara</b>	: "Lord"; the personal aspect of the Supreme Godhead as the lord of all phenomenal creation; an epithet of Shiva
<b><i>japa</i></b>	: repetition of a mantra, a deity's name or a short prayer
<b><i>kafni</i></b>	: robe worn by Muslim men
<b><i>kakad</i></b>	: morning
<b><i>kama</i></b>	: sensual pleasure or desire
<b><i>kirtan</i></b>	: singing the glories of God
<b><i>kolamba</i></b>	: earthen pot or plate
<b><i>lalkari</i></b>	: the shouting of auspicious slogans
<b><i>leela</i></b>	: divine play; spontaneous sport of the Lord in creating, maintaining and destroying the universe; any divine act
<b><i>lingam</i></b>	: the phallic symbol of Shiva
<b><i>mabasamadbi</i></b>	: lit. great <i>samadbi</i> ; respectful way of referring to the death of a saint
<b><i>mabatma</i></b>	: lit. great soul
<b><i>mala</i></b>	: garland; rosary
<b><i>malik</i></b>	: lord, master, owner, boss
<b><i>mandir</i></b>	: temple
<b><i>mangal snaan</i></b>	: lit. auspicious bath; the ritual bathing of an idol as a part of worship
<b><i>masjid</i></b>	: mosque
<b><i>mavuli</i></b>	: mother
<b><i>maya</i></b>	: lit. magic; illusion; the mysterious creative power of the godhead
<b><i>moksba</i></b>	: final liberation from karmic bondage; freedom from suffering; absolute bliss
<b><i>mouna</i></b>	: silence
<b><i>mukti</i></b>	: lit. release; emancipation from misery born of ignorance; freedom from conditioning



## Experiencing Sai Baba's Shirdi

<b><i>mursbid</i></b>	: guru (in the Islamic tradition)
<b><i>naivedya</i></b>	: ritual offering of food to a deity
<b><i>nama</i></b>	: chanting the name of God
<b><i>namasaptaba</i></b>	: chanting the name of God for seven days
<b><i>namaskar</i></b>	: a greeting with the palms pressed together; prostration before one's object of devotion
<b><i>namaz</i></b>	: the Muslim ritual prayer, which must be recited five times a day
<b><i>nimbar</i></b>	: niche in the Mecca-facing wall of a mosque
<b><i>nishta</i></b>	: lit. <i>na</i> = not, <i>ishta</i> = choice, hence "not my choice"; commonly translated as "faith", "perseverance"; one of the two <i>paise</i> asked of Baba by his guru (the other was <i>saburi</i> )
<b><i>paduka(s)</i></b>	: footprints or footwear of a deity or saint as a symbol of their spiritual presence
<b>Pandharpur</b>	: (also known as Pandhari) an important pilgrim site in Maharashtra; the presiding deity is Vittal (also called Vithoba)
<b>Parabrahman</b>	: the Supreme
<b><i>parayana</i></b>	: devotional reading of a scripture or holy text (the word used in Maharashtra is " <i>potbi</i> ")
<b><i>payasam</i></b>	: sweet rice dish
<b>Pathan</b>	: member of a people inhabiting NW Pakistan and SE Afghanistan
<b><i>pedba</i></b>	: a popular Indian confectionary; in India sweets (and also flowers or fruit) are a traditional item to offer to God or a saint
<b><i>potbi</i></b>	: see <i>parayana</i>
<b><i>pradakshina</i></b>	: clockwise circumambulation of a sacred spot, shrine or deity, always keeping it on the right as a mark of respectful attention and submission
<b><i>pranam</i></b>	: act of prostration
<b><i>prasad</i></b>	: the remains of food which has been offered to a deity or saint which is redistributed among the devotees as a conveyer of purification and grace of the deity
puja	: ritual worship
<b><i>pujari</i></b>	: the priest who carries out puja
<b><i>punyatithi</i></b>	: death anniversary



<b><i>purnima</i></b>	: full moon day
<b><i>qawali</i></b>	: a devotional song in the Muslim tradition that follows a particular form (of question and answer)
<b>Rahata</b>	: a village some five kilometres from Shirdi, which Sai Baba sometimes used to visit
<b><i>rath</i></b>	: a chariot-like vehicle used for carrying a temple deity
<b><i>saburi</i></b>	: courageous patience and fortitude; one of the two <i>paise</i> asked of Baba by his guru (the other was <i>nishta</i> )
<b><i>sadguru</i></b>	: spiritual guide or teacher of the highest order; lit. the true master or teacher
<b><i>sadbaka</i></b>	: one engaged in <i>sadhana</i>
<b><i>sadhana</i></b>	: spiritual practice or endeavour
<b><i>sadbu</i></b>	: a general term for a holy man or ascetic, especially a mendicant monk
<b><i>samadhi</i></b>	: lit. bringing into evenness; i) a state of union with Brahman; ii) respectful way of referring to the death of a saint or holy person; iii) in an extended sense, the tomb of a great person
<b><i>samskaras</i></b>	: mental habits and tendencies
<b><i>sannyas</i></b>	: renunciation
<b><i>sannyasin</i></b>	: a renunciate
<b><i>sansthan</i></b>	: foundation, usually charitable
<b><i>sant</i></b>	: saint, holy person; a class of medieval Vaishnav saints which flourished in northern India
<b><i>satka</i></b>	: stick
<b><i>satsang</i></b>	: keeping company with the truth ( <i>sat</i> ), or the wise
<b><i>satsang kendra</i></b>	: a group of people who come together for <i>satsang</i>
<b><i>sej</i></b>	: night
<b><i>seva</i></b>	: selfless service rendered to a Master
<b><i>Shivalingam</i></b>	: see <i>lingam</i>
<b><i>siddhi</i></b>	: supernatural power
<b><i>sishya</i></b>	: disciple
<b><i>sloka</i></b>	: a stanza or verse in Sanskrit
<b><i>smarana</i></b>	: remembrance



*Experiencing Sai Baba's Shirdi*

<b>Sri/Shri</b>	: respectful title for men (in Maharashtra, Shri)
<b>tabsildar</b>	: district revenue officer
<b>takia</b>	: resting house for Muslim visitors
<b>tapas</b>	: lit. heat, especially that generated by ascetic practices
<b>teerth</b>	: the holy water offered at the worship of Hindu deities and saints which is devoutly sipped by devotees; sacred water(s)
<b>tulsi</b>	: holy basil ( <i>ocimum sanctum</i> ) sacred to Vaishnavites
<b>udi</b>	: ash from the sacred fire lit by Sai Baba
<b>urs</b>	: Muslim death anniversary celebrations held in honour of a departed saint
<b>utsav</b>	: procession; festival
<b>vairagya</b>	: dispassion
<b>Vaisbnavite</b>	: one who worships Vishnu
<b>Varkari</b>	: lit. one who travels; pilgrims to Pandharpur; <i>bhakti</i> movement in Maharashtra whose founding father was Sant Jnaneshwar Maharaj (1275-1296)
<b>Vijayadasami</b>	: annual Indian festival in September/October, celebrated by Sai devotees as the day of Baba's <i>mabasamadhi</i>
<b>vimana</b>	: heavenly sky chariot
<b>Vishnu</b>	: one of the gods in the Hindu trinity; Vishnu is the preserver
<b>Vittal</b>	: (also called Vithoba) one of the names of Krishna, who is an avatar of Vishnu; the presiding deity at Pandharpur
<b>viveka</b>	: discrimination
<b>wada</b>	: house, residence and/or guesthouse

# Index

- Abdul Baba 61, 72, 76, 101, 125  
Abdul Baba's cottage 113  
*abbisbekam* 91, 139  
accommodation 129  
*advaita* xvi-xvii  
Ahmednagar District Court 137  
airports 128  
*Aithareya Brahmanam* xiv  
Allah 6, 21, 24, 43, 87, 117  
Ambaram (Nausari) 65  
Amir Shakhar 87  
animal statues in Dwarkamai 53  
Anna Chinchanihar 65  
*arati* 2, 21-24, 49, 64, 70, 81-82, 91-96, 111, 135, 139, 140-142  
*Arati Sai Baba, the Psalm Book of Shirdi Aratis* 5, 7, 22, 94  
Arunachala xvi, 135  
Avasthi 57
- Baanai 15  
Babugir (Ramgiri Bua) 100  
Babuji, Sri xi, 7-8, 22, 25, 40, 47-48, 62, 82, 94, 96, 102, 124, 126, 141-142  
Bade Baba 50, 87  
Bala Ganapat Shimpri 99  
Balaji Patil 45  
Banne Mia, fakir 87  
banyan tree 16  
bathing stone 51  
Bayajabai Kote Patil 41, 105-106, 119, 121  
Bayaji Appa Kote Patil 41, 121  
bell (in Baba's mosque) 60  
*Bhagavata Purana* 114  
Bhagoji Shinde 73  
Bhagoji Shinde's house 115-116  
*bbajan* 16, 66-70, 81, 98, 124, 131, 139  
Bhakta Niwas 129-130  
Bhau Maharaj Kumbhar 105  
Bhishma, K. J. 112  
*bbupali* 91, 139  
Bombay (*see also* Mumbai) 1-2, 33, 47, 53, 72, 90-91, 128-129  
bookshops 130  
Booty, Gopalrao 83-86  
Booty Wada 102, 109, 111  
bus station 14, 129, 137  
buses 128
- canteen 131, 138  
Chaitanya Mahaprabhu xiv  
*champa shashti* 16  
Chand Bhai Patil 9, 14  
Chavadi 18, 33, 68, 72, 98, 100, 113-114, 119, 139  
Chavadi procession 55, 59-60, 66, 98, 104, 106  
chillims 28, 45, 82, 93, 115  
*chopdar* 95  
climate 128  
cloakroom 137  
cooking hearth 56  
cooking pots 56, 93
- Dabholkar, G. R. *see* Hemadpant  
Dada Kelkar 40, 111, 126  
*dagadi wada* 85, 86  
daily programme in *mandir* 139  
*dakshina* 50-51, 118  
Damu Anna Rasne 125  
*darshan* 80-82, 89, 139  
Das Ganu Maharaj 136  
Dattatreya (Datta) 48, 73, 78  
Dave, Y. D. 21  
Deshmukh, Radhabai 118



## Experiencing Sai Baba's Shirdi

- Devi Bhagavatam* xv  
Devidas 98, 116  
Dhumal, S. B. 84  
*dhuni* xii, 25, 30, 36-38, 40-42, 46,  
74, 93, 119, 139  
display of Baba's articles 93  
Dixit, G. K. 21  
Dixit, H. S. ("Kakasaheb") 21,  
24-25, 33, 65, 85, 107, 112, 137  
Dixit Wada 22-24, 26, 101, 112, 131  
Dusserah 126  
Dwarka 35  
Dwarkamai (*see also* mosque) xii,  
9, 28-54, 65-66, 69, 73-76, 87, 94,  
96, 98-99, 107, 119, 122, 124, 131-  
132, 139  
    origin of name 35  
Eknath xiv, 2, 134  
festivals 26, 81, 123, 127  
fire-walking 16  
five *samadhis*, the 73, 101  
flags in Dwarkamai 125  
Gabaji (carpenter devotee) 125  
Ganesh temple 99  
Ganga (the river) xv  
Gangapur 2  
Goddess Ganga 15  
grinding stone 43  
Gund, Gopalrao 32, 124-126  
guru (*see also* sadguru) xvi, 17-20,  
114  
Guru Purnima 36, 40, 57, 123, 126  
*Gurucharitra* 118  
Gurusthan xvi-xviii, 9, 16, 17-25,  
49, 74, 96, 111-112, 131  
*haj* xiii  
Hanuman (Maruti) Mandir 98, 104  
Harda 58  
Hari Bhau 46  
Hemadpant 4, 31, 43, 53, 60, 67,  
111-112, 118, 120, 138  
hotels 129  
*bundi* 50  
Indra xiv  
Islamic tradition 6, 29  
Iyer, V. P. 108  
Jaikar, S. R. 47  
Janabai 2  
Janakidas 116  
*japa* 7, 30, 118  
Javhar Ali 98  
Jejuri 15, 117  
Jnaneshwar xiv, 2, 134  
Jog, Bapusaheb 85, 111  
Jog, Mrs 85  
Kabir 8, 18, 26  
Kammu Baba 53  
Kanifnath Temple 74, 100, 131  
karma xvii  
Khandoba 15  
Khandoba Temple 11, 16, 22, 116  
Khaparde, G. S. 3, 45, 94, 111  
*kirtan* 7  
*kolamba* 41, 119  
Kondaji (carpenter devotee) 125  
Kopergaon 14, 108, 129-130  
Kopergaon station 128  
Kothare, Dr R. 21  
Kushalchand 87  
*lalkari* 70  
Laxmibai Shinde's house 114, 118  
*leelas* of Baba 30, 35, 50, 60, 78,  
83, 93, 120  
Lendi Gardens 2, 26, 62, 72-77,  
85-88, 101-102, 124, 130, 132, 137  
*lingam* in Gurusthan 22, 24  
Madhva xiv  
Mahadev Temple 54, 99  
Mahalaxmi Temple 99, 121  
Maharashtra 1-2



- Manmad 128  
 market 131  
 Mecca xiii, 30, 42  
 medical facilities 131  
 meditation hall 131  
 Meera (medieval poet-saint) xiv  
 Megha Shyam 22, 111  
 Mhalsa 15  
 Mhalsapati 9, 14-15, 42, 65, 68, 74, 83, 93-94, 124, 134-135  
 Mhalsapati's house 116-118,  
 monsoon 128  
 mosque (*see also* Dwarkamai) xvii, 2, 20, 57, 93, 102-104, 106-107, 114-117, 119, 125-126  
     repair work 32, 51  
 Mukh Darshan 96, 130  
 Mumbai (*see also* Bombay) 1, 128-129  
 Murlidhar 85-86  
 Museum Hall 113  
 Muzafar Shah 38  
  
 Nagpur 83  
 Naik, Sagun Meru 21  
*naivedya* 42, 139, 142  
*nama* 66, 142  
*namasaptaha* 7  
*namaskar* 48  
*namaz* 42  
 Namdev xiv, 2  
 Nana Chandorkar 55, 112  
 Nana Nimonkar 32, 125  
 Nanavalli 102-104  
 Nanda Deep 73, 76-77  
 Nandaram Marwari 42, 121  
 Nandi bull 91  
 Narasimha Temple 100, 120  
 Narasimhaswami, B. V. 19, 77, 117, 133  
 Nasik 2, 51  
 Nath sect 36, 74  
 Navalkar, R. S. 112  
 neem tree 9, 17-25, 34, 36, 83, 111, 117  
 Neroy, D. D. 53  
 Nevasa 45  
*nimbar* 30, 42, 125  
 Nimon 119  
*nishta* 50  
  
*padukas* 16, 20-22, 30, 38, 40, 48, 53, 57, 60, 68-70, 74, 82, 115, 118  
 palanquin 57-58, 60, 67, 69, 93, 124  
 Pandharpur xiv, 1-2, 134  
 Panduranga *bhakti* xiv  
*parayana (potbi)* 111-112, 118, 124, 139, 141  
 Parayana Hall (old) 62  
 Parayana Hall (new) 61, 74  
 Parvardigar 8  
 Parvati 15  
 pilgrimage, importance of xiii-xviii  
 plague 117  
 portrait 46-49  
 post office 131  
*pradaksbina* 20, 57, 76  
 Pradhan, M. W. 47, 72, 125  
 Pradhan, Mrs 48, 84  
*prasad* xviii, 30, 42, 49, 70, 82, 131, 142  
 Prasadalaya 19, 49, 124, 129-130, 137-138  
 psychotronics xvi  
 Public Relations Office 137  
 publications (Sansthan) 130  
 puja pillar 40  
 Pune 128, 129  
 Puranas xiv, xv  
 Purandhare, R. B. 37, 58  
  
*qawali* 26, 124  
 Queue Complex 54, 74, 81, 96, 130  
 Radhakrishnayi 37, 45, 58, 61, 66, 120



- Sathe Wada 18, 20-26, 108, 111  
 Shama 47, 60-61, 84-87, 98, 113, 125  
 Shama's house 118  
 Shamsuddin Mia, fakir 87  
 Shani 99  
 Shanti Niwas 78  
 Shinde Wada 115  
*Shirdi Diary* 45, 94, 111  
 Shiva 15, 23-24  
*Shivalingam* 21  
 Shyam Sunder 55, 62, 66-67, 78, 93  
 silver throne (*in mandir*) 91  
 siren 96  
*Skanda Purana* 35  
 Shri Sainath Hospital 131  
*Sbri Sai Leela* magazine 138  
*Sbri Sai Satcharitra* 4, 6, 16, 30, 37-38, 42-43, 49, 55-56, 68, 84, 99, 112, 118, 120, 124, 130, 133, 142  
 stone Baba sat on 30, 51-52  
 storage rooms 57  
 Sufism xiii, 9, 36  
 Sulabh Shauchalya 138  
 Sutar, Balabua 53  
*takia* 26  
 Talim, Balaji Vasant 90  
 Tarkhad, Mr 49  
 Tarkhad, Mrs 2, 37, 49  
 Taty Kote Patil 33, 42, 50, 66-67, 69, 99, 105, 116  
 Tatyasaheb Noolkar 23, 41  
 Temple Complex 3, 19, 77-78, 99, 112, 129-131, 138  
 three small temples 99  
 tiger 53, 99  
 Tirupati 1  
 tortoise tile (in Baba's mosque) 55  
 trains 128  
 transport to Shirdi 128  
 trees planted by Baba 76  
 Tryambaka Rao 54  
 Tukaram (Sant) xiv, 2, 134  
 Tukaram (carpenter devotee) 125  
 tulsi brindavan 51  
*udi* 38-40, 107, 118, 142  
 Upasani Maharaj xviii, 16, 21, 83, 132  
*urs* 78, 124  
 Vallabha xiv  
 Vaman Gondkar 41  
 Vaman Sakharam Shelke 41, 119  
 Varkari tradition xiv, 134  
 Venkusa 8  
 Vijayadasami 36, 87, 90, 122-123, 126  
 Visitor Reception Centre 137  
 Vittal xiv, 1  
 Vittal Temple 74, 100  
 Walking Tour (what it is) 11  
 websites 136  
 well (Lendi Gardens) 78  
 wheelchair 66, 88  
 wooden bed 65  
 wooden post (in Baba's mosque) 56  
 Zoroastrianism 36











In the middle of the last century a mysterious young fakir appeared in the small hamlet of Shirdi and, settling in a run-down mosque, remained there for the rest of his life. Known as Sai Baba, he became an object of adoration for a great number of devotees, which has been increasing ever since. Today he is widely worshipped throughout India and is renowned as the saint who fulfils our desires, both spiritual and temporal. This is, in fact, one of the promises that Baba himself gave, and millions of people flock to Shirdi to seek blessings at his tomb.

*Experiencing Sai Baba's Shirdi* takes us on a journey through this sacred village, acquainting us with the saint of Shirdi and the significance of the places which he sanctified with his presence. As well as detailed accounts of events and anecdotes that occurred here, the Guide also offers practical information such as how to get there.

The visitor is invited to walk in the footsteps of Baba, to be guided along the road and thereby experience Sai Baba's Shirdi in a fuller way!

*Saipatham*



*Shirdi*

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