

## Preface

Rare are instances when an individual makes such a profound impact on the minds of people, irrespective of their caste and creed, as does my 'Shahi Baba' more than a century after His Incarnation.

Antonio Rigopoulos, in the prologue to his book, "The Life and Teachings of Sai Baba of Shirdi", says that "millions of people revere and worship him as a god, an *avatar*, and as a teacher of tolerance and mutual harmony between Hinduism and Islam". And, the whole purpose of an *avatar* is to make you realise that you are part of God.

Rigopoulos has surmised that "his ever-expanding fame is due, in the first place, to his alleged powers as a miracle worker and a healer".

"Besides this fundamental characteristic of the saint of Shirdi, his personality remains, overall, enigmatic and obscure. His birthplace and religious affiliation are a mystery to all, and to-day people still debate whether he was a Hindu or a Muslim".

"What is certain is that a young ascetic identified by the villagers as a Muslim, reached the hamlet of Shirdi one day in the last century (i.e. in the 19th century); that he was attributed the name of Sai Baba; and that he lived in the village (in Ahmednagar district of the State of Maharashtra) till the end of his days, dwelling in a dilapidated mosque".

He was of unpredictable moods - loving, harsh, humourous, abusive! But he had spiritual charisma whether he was speaking in parables or observing prolonged silences. "Sai Baba's whole persona, his movements, words and glances conveyed a tangible and immediate experience of the sacred".

"The holy preceptor by the word lighted a lamp; thereby was shattered darkness of the temple of the self; and the unique chamber of jewels was thrown up".

The people of Shirdi worshipped Sai as their God. He dwelt in Shirdi as the embodiment of pure Existence, Knowledge and Bliss - the Sadguru, who was King of Kings! King of Yogis! Absolute Brahman! While eating, drinking, working in their backyards and fields, doing various household chores they always remembered Sai and sang of His Glory. Initially, however, Baba did not allow anyone to worship Him, that is, to do *Archanam*. Whenever any one approached Him with the *puja thali* or platter, Baba would get angry and even upset the platter. But when He saw the pure devotion of the people He relented. Individual worship of Baba, in the mosque, existed even around 1894! There was an opposition to it by some Muslims, led by a kazi of Sangamner. Mhalsapati was ahead of most in his worship of Baba, followed by Nanasaheb Chandorkar. Megha also did his *puja* in style. But it was Dr.

Pandit a friend of Tatyasaheb Noolkar who earned the distinction of applying sandalpaste for the first time on Baba's Forehead by drawing a *Tripundra* i.e. three horizontal lines, as he did to his own Guru. Till then, only Mhalsapati used to apply the sandalpaste to Baba; and, that too, only to His Throat.

"For the worship of other deities, the articles required and the ritual are specific. But, for your worship, there is nothing in the world which is worthy of you!" says Das Ganu. The devotees worshiped the manifested Sadguru Shri Sainath *Maharaj* at Shirdi as they pleased. Baba used a sack-cloth for His seat, which the bhaktas covered with a small beautiful mattress, and put a bolster at His Back. Baba respected the feelings of His devotees and gave them full freedom to worship Him, as they liked. Some waved "chamaras" or whisks before Him, some played musical instruments, some laved His Hands and Feet, other applied incense and attars, some gave Him betel leaf and nuts, some offered *Arghya* for worship of His Feet, and some offered *Naivedya*.

Congregational worship of Sai Baba commenced with the Noon *Arati* around 1909; followed by the Bed-time *Arati* after the *Chavadi* procession from 10th of December 1909, on alternate days. The Morning *Arati* also took place at the *Chavadi* before Baba went to the *Dwarakamayi*. The practice of Evening *Arati* started much later.

It occurred to Govindrao Raghunath Dabholkar to present Baba's legendary life, while he was intermittently living in Shirdi from 1910 to 1916, after he witnessed Baba grinding wheat and then having the flour thrown on the village border limits to cast out cholera. This incident was the inspiration for "Sree Sai Samartha Satcharita" for Dabholkar, as he contemplated Baba's grinding, almost every day, not of the wheat, but sins and the mental and physical afflictions and miseries of his devotees. He sought Baba's permission to write about His life and it was granted. He was directed to make notes and maintain records which he did. The actual writing was undertaken after Baba's Mahasamadhi.

Dabholkar's poetic work runs into fifty-three chapters, modelled on the Eknathi Bhagvat, containing more than nine thousand ovis or verses. Every chapter is a mixture of philosophy, anecdotes and teachings. His book is akin to the Vedas for Sai's devotees.

More than two decades ago, a casual conversation with my Gurudev Sivanesan Swamiji, at Shirdi, launched me into reading the Sri Sai Samartha Satcharita in Marathi - or, rather, have it read to me, as I did not know the language at all.

Since then it has been a long journey. While struggling to absorb what my teacher, Mrs. Mohini Varde, taught, I began writing it out in English. After I had completed more than half the fifty-three chapters, the study was disrupted by a chain of events,

which included the death of my teacher's father and that of my own darling mother, Dhunmai.

Sivanesan Swamiji, whose guidance I sought, directed me into other channels, which resulted in the translation in English of the Sri Sainath Stavanamanjari, the Sri Sai Baba Ashtottarshat Namavali and the Sri Sai Sagunopasana, which were all published.

But my imagination had been fired by Swamiji and I reverted to the work on the Satcharita, anew, under the able guidance of Mrs. Usha Tembe, under whom I had brought out the other three publications.

Gurudev Sivanesan Swamiji is the fount of my inspiration for all my work - including this one - and I humbly dedicate this work to him.

"Meditation upon the image of the Guru is the only meditation; worshipping the feet of the Guru is the only worship; following the instructions of the Guru is the only Mantra; the grace of the Guru is the only cause of deliverance".

As Sivanesan Swamiji shunned the crowds, few Shirdi devotees came to know him, as he quietly lived there. So that the interested reader may get glimpses of his life, some salient features have been given about him at the end of this book. For deeper study, the reader is referred to the book "God's Rainbow and other short stories of Sree Sadguru Sivanesan Swamiji of Shirdi".

Even today, Swamiji's is the presence which guides me on so many turns in life's journey; his is the torch that lights up a particularly dark alley; his are the words that soothe and solace me through a bleak night. He is always there. For every turn in my life, for love's hurts and the mind's rages, for every path taken or not taken, for every twist and irony, for every ray of shimmering hope and every moment of sheer delight, there is always Swamiji.

My published works, prompted the Shirdi Sansthan of Sri Sai Baba to wonder if I had worked on the Satcharita. At the instance of the Sansthan, the manuscript was submitted to the Shri Sai Leela Magazine, which published it chapter by chapter, over many years. The need to publish it in book form was felt but not pursued.

It is thanks to Shri Motilal Gupta, Founder Chairman of the Shirdi

Sai Baba Temple Society, Sai Dham, Tigaon Road, Faridabad that Shri Vijay R. Raghavan of Sai Press India Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, came to Swamiji's Gurukulam at Shirdi about one year ago; and he enthusiastically undertook the task without a thought of any gains, monetary or otherwise, for himself. Heartfelt thanks are due to both of them.

Both of them have dedicated themselves to embellishing the publication with sketches and photographs, without sparing any time or effort, in addition to looking after every other aspect of the printing of the book.

Ms. Vinny Chitluri's book "Ambrosia in Shirdi - Part I" was published in July 2002. The photographs she had painstakingly collected were offered for the Satcharita, with complete devotion for Sainath, on our request. She also was instrumental in getting some sketches made and liaised closely with Shri Raghavan to enhance the value of the book. Indeed, words are inadequate to thank my dear friend for her precious inputs.

My dear and revered friend late Lt. Col. M. B. Nimbalkar's prose version of the Satcharita in Marathi has been of immense help and I am deeply grateful to him for his permission to reproduce the chronological index of events painstakingly prepared by him, which appears slightly modified towards the end. How I wish I could have placed this book in his hands!

Mr. Suresh Chandra Gupta of New Delhi has spared no pains in helping with the final proof reading and has given many valuable suggestions. We are truly privileged to have his help. This has been done to render his devotion to Sainath and also Sivanesan Swamiji, whom he knew well.

Needless to say that the translation would not have been possible without Mrs. Usha Tembe's patience, perseverance, erudition and dedication. She was a stranger when we embarked on this task, but grew into a friend. It was Mrs. Tembe who sought and obtained the help of the erudite Dr. Moreshwar Paradkar, Professor of Sanskrit, who worked on many a difficult passage of this devotional work to enable us to translate several chapters. Both Mrs. Tembe and I acknowledge our indebtedness to Dr. Paradkar.

With an upsurge of devotion to Sri Sai Baba of Shirdi currently sweeping the world, I trust that Sri Sainath's devotees will welcome the effort and will make use of this book for their daily prayers and inspire their families to do likewise.

The imperfections are mine; and I seek the readers' generosity in overlooking them.



'Nata- Shahi'  
69, Worli Sea Face,  
Mumbai- 400 025

30<sup>th</sup> October 2003