

Sai Baba's Background

The life of Sai Baba before his final settlement in the village of Shirdi,¹ in the Ahmednagar district, Kopergaon *tālukā*, is basically unknown. No historical evidence is available concerning the time and place of his birth, the identity of his parents, or his religious affiliation and training.

Even his very name is unknown, since Sai Baba is not an appellation in the usual sense. *Sāī* is a term of Persian origin, usually attributed to Muslim ascetics, meaning “holy one” or “saint.”² *Bābā*, on the other hand, is a Hindi term attributed to respected seniors and holy men, and literally means “father.”³ The Sai Baba appellation thus comes to mean “holy father,” “saintly father.”

The *Shri Sai Satcharita*⁴ refers to the occasion in which this “name” was supposedly attached to him. Mhalsapati,⁵ the *pujāri* of the small temple of Khandoba,⁶ situated on the outskirts of the village, seeing the young man coming to Shirdi with a marriage party, addressed him with the words *Yā Sāī*,⁷ “Welcome, saint.” Following Mhalsapati’s example, others also addressed him so, to the extent that he became generally known as Sai.⁸ The term *Bābā* was probably added later on, as he grew older. Possibly this was after 1890, when his fame started spreading, although some of his closest devotees at Shirdi might have called him Sai Baba from early times as a sign of respect.

Such a casual and generic naming (since he never revealed his true name, if indeed he had one), indicates that Sai Baba never attributed importance to such mundane matters, nor did he appreciate speculations concerning his earlier life. In fact, he always discouraged his devotees from investigating his origins, whether he was born a Hindu or a Muslim, and so forth, considering all these to be mere distractions and even obstacles along the spiritual path.

Temporality is a mere accident within the flux of *saṃsāra*⁹ and is absolutely irrelevant. Thus, the Indian mind tends to devalue history and to emphasize rather those nontemporal elements which myth, with its power of symbolization, best illuminates. Along the path leading to liberation (*mokṣa*), the whole complex of *nāma-rūpa*

(names and forms) represents a hindrance, and the wise one tries not to identify himself/herself with it. The soul (*ātman*) alone constitutes what truly *is*, being the only permanent reality.

Viewed from this perspective, the real Sai Baba (i.e., his true nature, which is the *ātman*) never had an origin, a starting point, being one with the qualityless Absolute. This condition is of course shared by all individual souls (*jīvātmās*), though very few have realized it in their own life experience. Baba constantly taught this lesson to his devotees, often expressing himself in paradoxical ways.

To the question "Baba, who are you? From where did you come?" he replied: "I am the Attributeless, Absolute, Nirguna. I have no name, no residence."¹⁰

He would also say the following: "I am Parvardigar¹¹ (God). I live at Shirdi and everywhere. My age is lakhs of years. My business is to give blessings. All things are mine. I give everything to everyone. I am in Gangapur,¹² Pandharpur,¹³ and in all places. I am in every bit of the globe. All the universe is in me."¹⁴

From a dualistic standpoint, he would say: "I got embroiled by Karma,¹⁵ and came into a body. So I got a name and an abode. The Dehi, that is, the embodied, is my name; and the world is my abode. Brahman¹⁶ is my father, and Maya,¹⁷ my mother. As they interlocked, I got this body. The world is evanescent, mutable."¹⁸

With these and other utterances, typical of a nondualistic approach, Baba underlined the radical uselessness of any speculation concerning his earthly identity. Often, when pressed with questions concerning his origins or his Hindu or Muslim affiliations, Sai Baba would become angry, cursing and abusing people, even for hours at length. At other times, he would answer these questions in provocatory and ambiguous terms or refer to a previous birth, enjoying the bewildered reactions of his devotees.

The *Shri Sai Satcharita*, considering the understanding of the mysterious ways of saints to be an impossible task, and in accordance with its hagiographic character, opts for a miraculous interpretation of Sai Baba's origins. Thus, it says: "Namadev and Kabir were not born like ordinary mortals. They were found as infants in mother-of-pearls, Namadev being found in Bhimrathi River by Gonayee and Kabir in Bhagirathi River by Tamal.¹⁹ Similar was the case with Sai Baba. He first manifested Himself as a young lad of sixteen under a Neem tree in Shirdi for the sake of bhaktas."²⁰

There are, however, some important elements which should be noted. First of all, Sai Baba, from his very first appearance in the village of Shirdi and throughout his life, was commonly identi-

fied as a Muslim. The appellation *Sāī*, in this regard, is highly indicative.

The biography by Charles B. Purdom on the life of Meher Baba²¹ (1894–1969), written in 1937, states clearly: "Thousands of Sai Baba's devotees were Hindus, and, though he was a Mahommedan, they performed the ceremony of arti in his honour."²²

The main reasons for Sai's identification as a Muslim ascetic, at least in the beginning, were two: his dress style and the few words he uttered, which were not Hindi or Marathi but apparently Persian or Arabic. The sources tell us that he used to wear a long white robe, that is, a *kafnī* (*kaphan*) and a white cloth around his head,²³ a style of dress typical of Muslim ascetics. Moreover, the term Sai Baba used for referring to himself was, almost invariably, that of *faqīr*. This word, which literally means "a poor man," is commonly applied to Muslim mendicants who wander about subsisting on alms.²⁴ Such *faqīrs* and ecstasies of the *dervish* variety²⁵ are found all over India.²⁶ Since *faqīrs* stem from heterodox Sufi brotherhoods, it seems plausible to argue that Sai Baba received some kind of training from one or more Sufi adepts and that he himself belonged to some Sufi school.²⁷

The influence of the Madari order, possibly the most prominent among heterodox Sufi brotherhoods, seems not to be applicable to Sai Baba's persona, however.²⁸ On the Madarian, the Indian traveler Mohsan Fani (d. 1670) remarked:

Among the most celebrated of [unorthodox Sufis] are, in the first line, the Madarian, who, like the Sanyasis Avadhuts, wear the hair entangled; and the ashes which they and the Sanyasis rub upon their bodies are called *bhasma*; besides, they carry iron chains on their heads and necks, and have black flags and black turbans; they know neither prayers nor fasts; they are always sitting at a fire; they drink a great deal of bang; and the most perfect among them go without any dress.²⁹

As we shall see, the only element of this description applicable to Sai Baba is his habit of sitting at a fire.

It is well known that Islamic kingdoms were established in the Deccan area during medieval times, and Sufi activities have been prominent in places like Ahmednagar, Aurangabad, Khuldabad, Hyderabad, and Bijapur. Recently, Kevin Shepherd has proposed linking Sai Baba with those unorthodox Sufis known as *majzūbs*,

"someone 'attracted' to God." It usually denotes a person who has abandoned the path of strict Islamic orthodoxy in favor of the life of a wandering beggar absorbed in love of God.³⁰ The inspiration for this identification is drawn from the work of Richard Maxwell Eaton on the Sufis of the kingdom of Bijapur, situated south of Ahmednagar.³¹ We know that most *majzūbs* lived in the late seventeenth century or early eighteenth century, their number increasing in the period of the kingdom's decline. As a matter of fact, they appeared at this time in reaction to the values and life-styles of the urban and landed Sufis, who, in their opinion, had become corrupted. Apparently, many of these unorthodox Sufis were linked to the Chishti order of Shahpur Hillock, by either spiritual or family ties.³² Most *majzūbs*, who never left any writings, held the heretical position that man and God are identical, and they often ignored even procedural exercises, such as the practice of remembering Allah (*dhikr*). Their most startling feature, however, is represented by their bizarre and eccentric behavior. They are often described as cursing and abusing people, even hurling stones at them, or exercising their power of prophecy while dancing in ecstatic moods. As Eaton remarks: "Being a *majzūb* necessarily involved embracing doctrines that were heretical from the standpoint of Islamic orthodoxy, adopting practices like drinking bhang or wine that were condemned by the orthodox, and flaunting behavioral eccentricities such as nakedness that were offensive to the 'worldly people'."³³

Though some aspects of the teachings and eccentric behavior of *majzūbs* match Sai Baba's personality, it is not possible to establish any certain identification. The term *majzūb* never occurs in our sources on the *faqīr*'s life. Anyhow, it seems reasonable to suggest that Sai Baba belonged to or was strongly influenced by some Decani Sufi brotherhood or teacher, possibly of Chishti background.

The earliest Sufis came to the Deccan around the end of the thirteenth century. They established themselves around Devagiri, renamed Daulatabad³⁴ by the Muslim rulers, which is in the vicinity of Paithan, then the center of religion and learning. A most prominent Sufi figure was that of Muntajab-ud-din Jarjaribaksha, who, together with seven hundred fellow Sufis, established himself in the area of Khuldabad,³⁵ near Devagiri. This community developed remarkably liberal and even pro-Hindu tendencies, bringing about a peculiar blend of Islamic features and *advaita-bhakti* teachings. This kind of Hindu-Muslim cross-fertilization is one of the characteristic features of Maharashtrian spirituality.³⁶

The emblematic proof of this eclecticism is offered by the study of Marathi Muslim saint-poets. One of the most well known

is Sheikh Mahammad (1560–1650) of Shrigonde in the Ahmednagar district. The son of Raje Mahammad, a Kādrī Sufī, he was initiated by one of the latter's disciples, that is, Chanda Bodhale, who also happened to be the teacher of Janardana, the guru of the celebrated saint-poet Eknath (1533–99). It is interesting to note that Chanda Bodhale, although a Hindu, was a follower of the Sufi line and used to dress as a *faqīr*, proof of how fuzzy the boundaries between Hindus and Sufis can sometimes be in the Deccani milieu. In one of his poems, Sheikh Mahammad sings:

Through the grace of (god) Gopāla,
 I have transgressed all notions of purity and
 impurity.
 The jack-fruit has a thorny skin, but inside it
 are lumps of sugar.
 The bee-hive with all its humming bees contains
 the very nectar inside.
 (So also) Sheikh Mahammad may be an avindha,
 but in his heart he has the very Govinda.³⁷

Thus, criticizing both Hinduism and Islam, he proclaims his faith in the one God, his language and style clearly showing the influence of Kabir's poetry and teachings.³⁸

The fusion of the Sufi and Bhakti cults is also well reflected in other Muslim saint-poets, such as Latif Shah (sixteenth century), Shah Muntoji Bahamani (1575–1650), Husain Ambar Khan (1602–?), Shah Muni (c. 1756–1807).³⁹ As Shankar Gopal Tulpule aptly states: "Actually they (i.e., the Muslim poets) belonged to the cult of the Sufis which was close to devotional Hinduism and were trying to merge into the cult of Bhakti as propounded by the Marathi poet-saints. Their writings are an indication of this trend."⁴⁰

Bijapuri Chishtis also drew from the *bhakti* tradition to illustrate their doctrines. For example, their depiction of God as Lover or Friend finds a parallel in the *bhakti* ideal of a personal deity actively concerned with his devotees. Burhan al-Din (one of the Chishti Literati) frequently used Sanskrit technical terms in expressing Sufi concepts. For instance, he designated God as *Śuddha Brahman* (Pure Being) and the phenomenal world as *māyā*.⁴¹ As we have seen, such Vedāntic terminology was employed by Sai Baba himself.

Besides the Sufi element, the depth of Shirdi Baba's knowledge of the Hindu tradition and the breadth of his *advaita-bhakti*

sayings are indicative of a strong Hindu influence upon his formative years.⁴² Apparently, he often referred to a Hindu guru of his, whom he called "Venkusha."

I now come to a presentation of the various hypotheses concerning Baba's origins as found in the sources.

Mhalsapati, perhaps Sai Baba's closest disciple in the early days, stated that Baba had told him he was a *brāhmaṇ* from the village of Pathri who had been entrusted to a *faqīr* in his infancy. When Baba told him this, some people had just come to Shirdi from Pathri, and Baba asked them about certain people who lived there.⁴³ At that time, Pathri was located in the Parbhani district, in the Aurangabad Division of Hyderabad State,⁴⁴ and was the headquarters of the Pathri *tālukā*, which included an area of 784 square miles.⁴⁵

On another occasion, during the first days of October 1918, that is, about two weeks before his death, Baba supposedly said: "My fakir's wife left me with 'Venkusa' at Selu. I stayed with him 12 years, and left Selu. This brick (which Baba always lovingly used to support his arm or head) is my Guru's gift, my life companion. It is not the brick that is broken now—but my Karma (prarabdha) that has snapped. I cannot survive the breaking of the brick."⁴⁶

Sai Baba mentioned Venkusa or Venkusha on other occasions also. Once, when talking to a devotee, he said: "Nana, I am not angry with you. You, my children, can be angry with me. If Venkusha were alive, I could be angry with him."⁴⁷

Thus, according to this reconstruction, Sai Baba was born into a *brāhmaṇ* family and subsequently entrusted to a *faqīr* and his wife. The motif of the Hindu birth of reputed Muslim figures is often attested to in Indian hagiographic literature (for example, in the legendary tales concerning Kabir). It is also a useful device to explain Sai Baba's eclectic personality, although of course one cannot rule out the possibility that such were the historical facts. The most important datum of the account, however, is that Sai Baba's earliest religious education came from a *faqīr*, perhaps a Sufi belonging to some major brotherhood. Baba's habit of referring to God as *Faqīr*, may be due to his influence.⁴⁸ Narasimhaswami thinks that Sai Baba's stay with this *faqīr* and his wife did not exceed five years.⁴⁹ That such a short estimate could be correct seems quite improbable, however. Sai Baba must have remained under direct Sufi influence for a longer period of time, perhaps ten years or even more. Observing, listening to, and following the ways of his preceptor, young Sai received a basic education in Sufi tenets, the substance of which, unfortunately, eludes us completely.

V. B. Kher, a trustee of the Shirdi Sansthan from 1984 to 1989 and author of several research papers on Sai Baba, recently stated that Sai, at the tender age of eight, left his *brāhmaṇ* family in Pathri in the company of a Sufi *faqīr*. This would have taken place between 1846 and 1850. The boy would have come to Paithan and afterwards wandered all over Marathvada from the age of eight to the age of twenty-five or thirty.⁵⁰

According to Narasimhaswami's account, the *faqīr*, just before dying, directed his wife to take the young boy to Selu, which was the political center of the Jintur *parganā*.⁵¹ Here she was to leave him with a Hindu guru, namely Venkusha.

More information on this period of Sai's life was supposedly gathered in 1903 by Ganapat Rao Dattatreya Sahasrabuddhe, one of Baba's closest devotees, popularly known as Das Ganu Maharaj (1868–1962).⁵² In 1901 he went on a field-research trip to Selu, where he discovered many interesting details connecting Venkusha with the military and administrative system of the *peśvās*.⁵³ Venkusha was the pseudonym under which one Gopalrao Deshmukh was known when he was the provincial governor of the Jintur province.⁵⁴

Selu was the capital of the province, and Gopalrao resided in its fort. He was able to maintain political control over the region and was thus feared by the Islamic Nizām, to whom he was opposed.⁵⁵ Because of his devotion to his chosen deity (*iṣṭadevatā*) of Tirupati Venkatesha,⁵⁶ he was also known as Venkusha, which is a contraction of the term *Venkatesha*.⁵⁷

During his research on Sai Baba's early years, Das Ganu is said to have had access to a collection of family papers and legends referring to Gopalrao's life. From these reports we learn that Gopalrao or Venkusha spent much time in pilgrimages and the performance of sacred rituals. He was rich and liberal and he encouraged righteousness, piety, and study. Unlike the majority of *deshmukhs* and *zamindārs* of his times, who were known for their cruelty and lack of moral values, he is here pictured as a very pious man animated by an intense devotion for his *iṣṭadevatā*. The sources describe his purity, his self-control, his virtues, and his powers (*siddhis*).⁵⁸ Celebrated as a saint, the papers also describe his moments of identification with Venkatesha, when "he spoke words which were Venkatesha's words."⁵⁹

One of these family papers reports a curious story. Once, when Gopalrao was in Ahmedabad, he approached the tomb of Suvag Shah, a celebrated Muslim saint. The tomb (*dargāh*) then began to 'perspire' out of joy and spoke to him. It said that he,

Gopalrao, had been the famous Ramananda of Kashi in a previous birth,⁶⁰ and that he had now become a householder (*grhastha*) and a governor. All the same, his former devotee Kabir would be coming to him soon.⁶¹ Thus, the identity of Ramananda as Venkusha and Kabir as Sai Baba would be established. It was apparently after this "revelation," that the young boy was brought to Gopalrao by the *faqīr*'s widow. Venkusha, having recognized him as Kabir, enthusiastically accepted him as his *śiṣya*.

Young Sai would have then practiced a second period of spiritual training, this time within the framework of Vaiṣṇava *bhakti*. Such a training with a Hindu *ācārya* must have lasted a fairly long time. Sai Baba himself, in a tribute of love and devotion to his guru, is reported to have said:

For 12 years I waited on my Guru who is peerless and loving. How can I describe his love for me? When he was Dhyanaṣṭha (i.e., in love-trance), I sat and gazed at him. We were both filled with Bliss. I cared not to turn my eye upon anything else. Night and day I pored upon his face with an ardor of love that banished hunger and thirst.

The Guru's absence, even for a second, made me restless. I meditated on nothing but the Guru, and had no goal, or object, other than the Guru. Unceasingly fixed upon him was my mind. Wonderful indeed, the art of my Guru! I wanted nothing but the Guru and he wanted nothing but this intense love from me.

Apparently inactive, he never neglected me, but always protected me by his glance. That Guru never blew any mantra into my ear. By his grace, I attained my present state.⁶²

The *bhakti* element is here expressed in all its intensity. In Sai's formative years, the themes of devotion and surrender to the teacher's will may indeed have constituted the backbone of his religious upbringing. We shall later see how other themes relate to this central core of *bhakti* and *śaraṇāgati*.⁶³

The Selu manuscripts describe in some detail the transfer of spiritual authority from Venkusha to the boy (*guru-paramparā*), Venkusha's death, and the boy's departure from the town. This story will play a considerable role in the tradition of Sai Baba's cult, and thus it is important to relate it in full:

Baba's⁶⁴ being favoured by the master evoked considerable jealousy amongst the Guru's retainers and some of them

resolved to kill young Baba by hurling brickbats at him. During a "chaturmasya" (August to November) Gopal Rao was in a garden, and young Baba was attending upon him. The villains hurled bricks at Baba. One of the bricks came very near Baba's head, but the Guru saw it, and by his order it stood still in mid air, unable to proceed further or hit Baba. Another man threw a second brick to hurt Baba. But Gopal Rao got up and got the brick on his head. This led to profuse bleeding. Baba was moved to tears, and he begged his master to send him away, as the master was getting harmed from his unfortunate company. But the master declined to send him away. As for the injury, the master bandaged it with a shred torn from his own cloth, and then suddenly he said: "I see that the time has come for me to part with you. Tomorrow at 4 P.M. I shall leave this body, not as a result of this injury, but by my own yoga power of Sveccha Marana.⁶⁵ Therefore, I shall now vest my full spiritual personality in you. For that purpose, bring milk from yonder black cow." Young Baba went to Hulla the lambadi (herdsman) in charge of the cow, who pointed out that the cow was barren, had not calved and could not, therefore, yield milk. All the same, he came with the cow to the chieftain Gopal Rao who just touched it from horns to tail and told the lambadi: "Now pull at the teats." The lambadi's pull drew out plenty of milk, and this milk was given to Baba with Gopal Rao's blessings that the full power and grace of the Guru should pass on to young Baba.

This was the Diksha, the investiture, of the Guru's personality which young Baba underwent.... The villain whose brickbat had hit Gopal Rao, the chieftain, fell down dead, the moment Gopal Rao was hit. His companions were horrified and they came with repentance to Gopal Rao's feet and prayed for pardon not only for themselves but also for their dead companion whom they begged Gopal Rao to revive. The chieftain pointed out that the power of revival now rested in the young man, and that they should appeal to him.⁶⁶ They accordingly appealed, and Baba took some of the dust of his Guru's feet and placed it on the corpse. The dead boy rose at once. The Guru's declaration that he would pass away from this life the next day...was fulfilled. After making the fullest preparations for settling all his temporal affairs, Gopal Rao with his full consciousness sat up in the midst of a religious group carrying on puja, bhajan, namasmarana, etc., in the presence of his Ishta Devata Sri Venkatesha and at the solemn hour he had

himself fixed for departure, his soul left in perfect peace and happiness like Parikshit in Srimad Bhagavata. Before leaving the body, the master waved his hand westward to the young boy and bade him leave Selu...and Baba by slow degrees moved on from place to place and arrived at Shirdi and after some time made it his permanent residence.⁶⁷

Such is the reconstruction of Sai Baba's early period which Narasimhaswami upholds.⁶⁸

At first sight the details of this story, clearly couched within a hagiographic framework, appear unrealistic. It seems hard to believe that a pious Muslim would ask his wife to entrust his young disciple to a Hindu, who, among other considerations, represented a political and military threat to his coreligionists within the Nizām. Moreover, to accept Gopalrao as guru and also as military and political chief doesn't seem very plausible.

The first objection might be countered by positing the high degree of religious tolerance of this *faqīr*, possibly a Sufi of high spiritual attainment. The syncretistic, blending milieu of the Decan might in fact have contributed to a kind of vision in which there is, so to speak, "no more Hindu nor Muslim," all being but expressions of one same reality. Illustrious examples of Islamic openness to Hinduism are historically represented by Akbar⁶⁹ (1556–1605) and Dārā Shikōh's (1615–59) syncretistic mysticism.⁷⁰

With regard to the second objection, one could argue that there have been numerous examples of reconcilability, within Indian history, of the religious and political spheres. Numerous ministers, as the famous Sayana and his brother Madhava of the Vijayanagara Empire, combined spiritual life with administrative and political duties.⁷¹ In more recent times, the figure of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869–1948) comes immediately to mind.⁷² Other examples could be added, though perhaps not so famous.⁷³ After all, such an effort, striving to reconcile active and contemplative life, is typically Indian from the time of the *Bhagavadgītā*.

Let us now consider the more "realistic" aspects of Das Ganu's reconstruction, notwithstanding its hagiographic character. In the first place, Sai Baba's exposure to both the Sufi and Hindu traditions would account for his eclectic persona and teachings. His early training under a *faqīr*, and afterwards under the Hindu guru Venkusha at Selu, seems to have been confirmed by Baba himself. Moreover, it would not be methodologically correct to reject Narasimhaswami's testimony *in toto*. Thus, the hypothesis of a sort of "double-phased" spiritual biography appears plausible.

The description of Sai Baba's *brāhmaṇ* origin and subsequent tutelage by a Muslim couple, follows a traditional hagiographic pattern that aims at the Hinduization of the *faqīr*. We find the same in legends concerning Kabir's life.⁷⁴ It appears, however, that Sai Baba himself affirmed his *brāhmaṇ* origin. He would say: "This is a Brahmin's mosque."⁷⁵

And again (referring to himself): "This is a Brahmin, a pure Brahmin, a white Brahmin, who will carry thousands on to Subhra Marga."⁷⁶

Arthur Osborne has proposed taking Sai Baba's use of the term *Brahmin* as symbolical, however, expressing a state of spiritual election.⁷⁷ I agree.

Sai Baba's birth at Pathri is not historically proven, though Baba himself seems to have "revealed" this to his *bhakta* Mhalsapati.⁷⁸ The claim of Baba's birth at Pathri and of his *brāhmaṇ* origin is also found in two more recent accounts that I shall shortly examine.

All in all, the hagiographic character of Das Ganu's reconstruction does not eliminate the possible historicity of some of the structural elements of the narrative.

In more recent times, however, the *ācārya* E. Bharadwaja in his biography *Sai Baba the Master*, has questioned the credibility of Das Ganu's reconstruction: "He [Das Ganu] admits that he does not even remember which facts of Baba's life were conveyed to him by which native of Selu."⁷⁹

He adds: "All that he could gather was that a hundred years earlier, there lived an old man in Selu; that a fakir came and stayed with him; that some people had killed the old mahatma for some grouse which they had against him; that the fakir had finally escaped."⁸⁰

Bharadwaja points out the vagueness of Das Ganu's findings. It may be observed, however, that if the "old mahatma" lived in Selu a century prior to Das Ganu's researches (i.e., around 1801), this would not necessarily contradict Narasimhaswami's report, which says that Gopalrao was nominated *deshmukh* of Selu between 1800 and 1825.⁸¹ Young Sai could have then known Gopalrao, since the *Shri Sai Satcharita* argues that Baba was probably born around 1838.⁸²

This argument was nonetheless rejected by Lakshmikanth Malharrao Subhedar of Selu, apparently one of Gopalrao's sixth-generation descendants, who told V. B. Kher that Gopalrao was born in 1715 and died in 1802 (Subhedar is said to have produced documentary evidence in support of his statement).⁸³ Of course, if

this is true, Sai Baba could never have been Gopalrao's disciple.

If one accepts Bharadwaja's and Kher's rejection of Das Ganu's report, we are left with a missing link in regard to Sai Baba's allusions to Selu and Venkusha.

Bharadwaja further argues: "When I was gathering information about the life of Hazrat Tajuddin Baba of Nagpur, one of his disciples told me that a fakir came to the Baba for instructions, and that he was Sai Baba. I found a similar claim from the devotees of Sri Svami Samarth of Akalkot. His devotees claim that Sai Baba was his disciple. I found that the source of all this confusion is the custom of referring to fakirs as Sai (a saint)."⁸⁴

Bharadwaja aptly remarks about the generic quality of the *Sāi* name and the tendency present among other religious groups of "appropriating" Baba's persona. Evidencing the ambiguity of many of Sai Baba's statements concerning his guru, he says: "Sai Baba told his early devotees of Shirdi that his guru's tomb was underneath the local neem tree. He told Svami Sai Sarananandaji, that Roshan Shah was his guru. On another occasion, he told Hemadpant⁸⁵ that he met his guru in a forest."⁸⁶

These allusive statements of Baba, however, seem not comparable with the persistence of the references to Selu and Venkusha.

The first testimony concerning his guru's tomb refers almost certainly to one of his previous births.⁸⁷ We shall get back to it shortly. The second testimony, which makes one Roshan Shah, obviously a Muslim, Sai Baba's teacher, is not attested to in any of our chief sources. Such a reference might be purely symbolical, since Bharadwaja himself notes how Baba often mentioned the term *Roshan* in his parables.⁸⁸ The third testimony, relating how Baba met his guru in a forest, is a well-known one. This story, however, is almost certainly allegorical. No historical value is attached to it by any of our sources, with the exception of A. Osborne, who posits that this anonymous guru might be identified with Venkusha.⁸⁹

Indeed, Baba loved indulging in allusive as well as paradoxical talk. Instances of his incomprehensible and bizarre speech are numerous. In one curious dialogue, we read:

One devotee: Baba, what is your native place?

B.: I came here from Aurangabad. My maternal uncle (Mama) brought me down here.

Devotee: What is the name of that Mama? Where is he now?

B.: (laughing) He was a mad man, having no name. He must be living somewhere now.⁹⁰

The *Shri Sai Satcharita* reports this same dialogue, adding however that Baba said that his uncle's name was Nasatya.⁹¹ The Nasatya, according to Hindu mythology, are the twin Ashvins, the gods' divine physicians.⁹²

It seems that Sai Baba's first intention was that of disconcerting his listeners. The name Nasatya is not at all common among humans!⁹³ Thus, to follow each of these allusions as possible autobiographic hints would certainly lead us astray.

The fact remains that the references to Selu and Venkusha, although within a fragmentary frame, are the only recurring elements within the majority of the hagiographies.

The story of the brick that hit Gopalrao finds a correspondence with another statement Sai Baba seems to have made just a few days before his death: "This brick...is my Guru's gift, my life companion. It is not the brick that is broken now, but my Karma.... I cannot survive the breaking of the brick."⁹⁴

Moreover, on another occasion, when asked by a magistrate: "Your Guru's name?" Sai Baba apparently replied, "Venkusa."⁹⁵

Texts report various utterances attributed to Baba, in which he connects and sometimes identifies himself with Kabir.⁹⁶

Kabir,⁹⁷ the fifteenth-century⁹⁸ Muslim weaver (*julāhā*) of Benares, was certainly the greatest poet-singer of the North Indian *Sant* tradition.⁹⁹ Considered a Sufi by the Muslims and a *bhakta* of the Ramananda school by the Hindus, he represented a peculiar blending of traditional Hinduism, the Vaiṣṇava *bhakti* of the great reformers, and the yogic Nātha schools.¹⁰⁰ His iconoclastic monism might be classified as *nirguṇi bhakti*, of which he was the initiator; a *bhakti* directed to the qualityless (*nirguṇa*) aspect of the supreme Reality, which he called "Rām."

The *Bhakta-mālā* of Nabhaji, a Vaiṣṇava poet who lived c. 1600, gives us a valuable description of Kabir:

Kabir refused to acknowledge caste distinctions or to recognize the authority of the six Hindu schools of philosophy, nor did he set any store by the four divisions of life (*āśramas*) prescribed for Brahmans. He held that religion (*dharma*) without devotion (*bhakti*) was no religion at all (*adharma*), and that asceticism, fasting, and alms-giving had no value if not accompanied by adoration (*bhajana*). By means of *ramainīs*,

śabdīs, and *sākhīs*,¹⁰¹ he imparted religious instruction to Hindus and Turks alike. He showed no partiality to either but gave teaching beneficial to all. With determination he spoke and never tried to please the world.¹⁰²

The Maharashtrian *Sant* tradition of the *Vārakārī sampradāya*¹⁰³ is surely anterior to Kabir. Its foremost saint-poet, Namdev (1270–1350), together with Jaydev¹⁰⁴, is mentioned by Kabir as a great saint of the *Kali* age and as his “predecessor.” Namdev, like Kabir, magnified the greatness of the *sadguru* and similarly never named his own human guru. On the religious plane, there are striking similarities between Kabir and the *Sants* of Maharashtra. As Charlotte Vaudeville puts it:

Though immersed in a hopelessly corrupt world, the “Sant”... alone remains unsullied by it: through the Satguru’s grace, he is able to resist the lures of the all-powerful *Māyā* and the enticements of “woman and gold.” Through the constant invocation and inner contemplation of the divine Name, he is able to bring into subjection passions of the flesh and to control the fickle Mind. Thus, firmly clinging to the “Name of Rām,” he crosses over the Ocean of Existence and reaches personal salvation, whilst the whole world goes to its doom.¹⁰⁵

Kabir’s stature within Maharashtra’s culture is considerable and reflects the typical blending of this region, of Muslim and Hindu components. An important hagiographic treatment on Kabir’s life is found in the *Bhaktavijaya* of Mahipati (1715–90), written in 1762.¹⁰⁶ Through such literature, one can acquire valuable insight into how Kabir was and still is perceived at a popular level.¹⁰⁷ The allusive and often paradoxical poetic style of many of the saint-poets (Muslim as well as Hindus; cf. Tukaram), also reveals the depth of Kabir’s influence.¹⁰⁸ Sai Baba’s understanding of Kabir’s *persona* certainly reflected the Deccani characterization of it.

Baba’s choice of Kabir as an exemplary model is attested to in the following dialogue with a magistrate:

Commissioner: What is your name?

Baba: They call me Sai Baba.

Com.: Your father’s name?

B.: Also Sai Baba.

Com.: Your Guru's name?

B.: Venkusa.

Com.: Creed or Religion?

B.: Kabir.

Com.: Caste or race?

B.: Parvardigar (i.e., God).

Com.: Age, please?

B.: Lakhs of years.¹⁰⁹

Sai Baba's statement of belonging to "the religion of Kabir" is an important point. It could imply his connection to the vast movement of the Kabīrpanthīs or even his being a member of it.¹¹⁰ Indeed, many Baba devotees consider him an emanation from the vast spiritual movement which Kabir originated. During my research in India, the first word uttered by N. Kasturi, late biographer of the present Satya Sai Baba,¹¹¹ when asked about Shirdi Sai Baba's origins, was "Kabīrpanthī."

Apparently, Baba also claimed to have been Kabir in a previous birth: "I was Kabir and used to spin yarn."¹¹²

On other occasions, Baba spoke of himself as a weaver, perhaps on analogy with Kabir, the weaver (*julāhā*).

In the *Charters and Sayings*, we read: "As a boy I was weaving shawls, and my father was once so pleased with my work that he gave me a present of Rs. 5 or so."¹¹³

And again, "Once I wove cloths, turbans, pitambar,¹¹⁴ rugs, etc. but still I could not get enough to satisfy my hunger."¹¹⁵

Of course, such statements could refer to a previous birth of Baba's, not necessarily identifiable with that of Kabir. Some of these allusions do not, in fact, strictly coincide with a *julāhā*'s job.

It is also reported that Sai Baba stated that Kabir had been his guru: "At the foot of the Margosa tree¹¹⁶ is the tomb of Kabir. Thus, Kabir's body became flowers.¹¹⁷ Kabir was my Guru. I put up at that tree foot, for that reason. God will bless those who burn incense here, on Thursdays and Fridays."¹¹⁸

Such an utterance might signify either a past identity as Kabir's disciple or the belonging to some kind of Kabīrpanthī circle.

Such statements all seem to imply that Sai Baba viewed Kabir's life and teachings as exemplary: his *imitatio* of Kabir grows

to the point of identifying with him. Due to Baba's link with Kabir, many devotees, as well as some scholars, are of the opinion that he might have been connected to the vast pan-Indian movement of the Nātha yogis of Gorakhnath.¹¹⁹

To be sure, the presence of Nātha yogis in Maharashtra, with a center at Tryambak, is attested to from the thirteenth century. Jñāndev, the founder of the Marathi *bhakti* movement, is said to have been initiated into the Nātha cult by his elder brother Nivr̥tti, who was himself a disciple of Gahininatha, the fourth Nātha in the legendary Marathi lineage. As Charlotte Vaudeville puts it:

Concerning the Marathi branch of this sect of northern origin, it seems to have first established itself in the region of Tryambak, near the Godavari source, probably around the 12th or 13th century. From Tryambak, the Nath Yogis spread all over Maharashtra: thus, from the "Gazetteer" of the Satara district (Southern Maharashtra), we learn about the existence of a mountain named "Macchendragadh" and of a tamarind tree named "Gorakh-chincha," sacred to the memory of Gorakhnath. According to the Nath tradition of Maharashtra, Matsyendra himself instructed Gorakhnath while on the "Saptasingi" mountain, north of Nasik,¹²⁰ where a famous sanctuary sacred to the Devi is located.¹²¹

Nātha brotherhoods are present in the Ahmednagar district, and images of Nātha gurus are even seen inside the Shirdi temple (*mandir*) where Sai Baba's *samādhi* (tomb) is located. In particular, the sacred fire (*dhunī*) that Baba always kept burning is often considered a Nātha influence. The most important characteristic of a Nāthapanthī monastic center is indeed the *dhunī* (perhaps from a Sanskrit root *dhū*, "to kindle"), that is, the continuous fire. The use of keeping a burning fire, however, is not a prerogative of Nāthas alone: we find it widely attested to among Sufi orders and *faqīrs*.¹²²

Another popular belief identifies Sai Baba with an *avatāra* of Dattatreya.¹²³ Thus, in the prologue the *Shri Sai Satcharita* notes:

The well-known Marathi work viz. Gurucharitra is familiar to all the people of Maharashtra. It is read and studied daily by all the devotees of the God Dattatreya all over the country. The author Sarasvati-Gangadhar describes in this book the miracles and teachings of Shri Shripad Shrivallabha and Shri Narasinha Sarasvati Swami, the two prominent Incarnations

of the God Dattatreya. According to the opinion of an expert Marathi scholar, Mr. L. R. Pangarkar, these two Incarnations flourished in the 14th and 15th centuries.... There were other later Incarnations of Dattatreya: prominent amongst them were Shri Manikprabhu in the Nizam's dominions and Shri Akalkot Maharaj in the Sholapur district, and lastly, Shri Sai Baba of Shirdi in the Ahmednagar district, who took his samadhi in 1918. Shri Sai Baba is believed by some devotees to be the Continuation-Avatar of Shri Akalkot Maharaj.¹²⁴

The process of identification of Sai Baba with Dattatreya is such, that the *Shri Sai Satcharita* is often called "the modern *Gurucharitra*."¹²⁵ Such popular belief is not confined to Maharashtra, being present in other parts of India as well.¹²⁶

Indeed, Sai Baba himself is reported to have claimed such an identity. One day, he told a devotee: "Are you puffed up? Where was male progeny in your destiny? (In answer to the prayer you offered before Datta at Gangapur) I tore up this body and gave you a son."¹²⁷

Baba apparently manifested himself in Datta form on occasion.¹²⁸ We read:

In 1911, on Datta Jayanti day,¹²⁹ Mr. Balawant Kohojkar went to Baba at Shirdi.

At 5 P.M. Baba said: "I am having pangs of labour and cannot bear the pain." So saying, he drove everyone out of the mosque.

He was evidently identifying himself with Anasuya. A little later, Baba called all people in. Kohojkar went first, and on Baba's gadi¹³⁰ saw not Baba, but a small charming three-headed baby, i.e., Datta. In a moment, Datta disappeared and Baba was seen instead.¹³¹

Like Datta, Sai Baba came to be identified by many as an *avadhūta*, that is, a yogin who has attained the highest realization, free from all ties.¹³² Sai Baba's love of dogs, with whom he often identified,¹³³ may be another reason why he is viewed as an *avatāra* of Datta. Though dogs are generally considered impure animals in India (and are thus not household pets!), they are also believed to be an incarnation of the deity Khandoba. He, like Datta, is surrounded by dogs both in myth and iconography. In many Dattatreya temples, dogs are regularly worshipped.¹³⁴

I must stress, however, that Baba is reported to have identified himself with almost every deity of the Hindu pantheon, thus

impressing on his *bhaktas* the unity of God. On various occasions, he declared he was Mahalakshmi,¹³⁵ Vithoba of Pandhari,¹³⁶ Maruti,¹³⁷ Ganapati,¹³⁸ Krishna,¹³⁹ and so forth.

In the same way, he would tell his Muslim followers, "I am God (Allah)."¹⁴⁰

Sai Baba's appearance in the form of other gurus or Sufi adepts is also reported. Indeed, the sources abound in the description of such wonders.¹⁴¹

To be sure, Sai Baba never gave preference to any particular form of Hindu God over others. He preferred describing God in terms of *nirguṇa Brahman*, the attributeless Absolute. Throughout Baba's life, the name of Allah remained his favorite expression. Also, he would sometimes describe himself as just a poor *faqīr*, with normal limbs and organs.¹⁴²

Thus, there was no particular preference on Baba's part for Dattatreya's form. Such a specific identification, rather, was attached to him by his devoted *bhaktas*, particularly after his death. As Mani Sahukar aptly puts it: "The Hindus thought him to be an Avatar of some God-head; the Muslims said he was a Pir¹⁴³ sent by Allah to liberate men. To one man he was the Avatar of Dattatreya, to another he was Akalkot Maharaj re-incarnated. Each individual saw in this unique Saint a personification of his own favourite deity, an incarnation of his own chosen ideal, and worshipped him as such."¹⁴⁴

We now come to the presentation of two more recent reconstructions of Baba's origins, ones certainly unknown to Das Ganu, Narasimhaswami, Osborne, and others.

The first one, proposed by one Sri Mittha Lakshmi Narasaiyya, a popular lawyer of Hyderabad, is quite disconcerting and can hardly be applicable to the habits of the *brāhmaṇic* caste in last-century India. It is summarized thus:

Baba was born in Jaffa Gate, the old city of Jerusalem, on the 11th of March at 9 P.M. in the year 1836. His parents, Nandlal and Jamunabai, were Vaishnav Brahmins who lived in Gujarat in the later half of the 19th century. Having no issue, they were visiting all the holy places, during which they happened to come in contact with a Muslim Fakir who took them to Mecca. After visiting all the holy places in and around Mecca, they eventually came to Jerusalem where at Jaffa Gate Jamunabai gave birth to a male child.... They returned to India and lived for a while at Pathri village in Aurangabad district in the Nizam State which is now in Maharashtra.¹⁴⁵

No explanation is offered concerning the sources of this story. Such a bizarre elaboration clearly aims at the brāhmanization of Baba's origins, while at the same time framing it within the sacred geography of Islam. The apologetic concern is evident. The reference to the village of Pathri is again utilized, perhaps in hopes of linking the birth story to attested data.

The second recent reconstruction of Sai Baba's early life bears more interest. Not many years ago, the living saint Satya Sai Baba, who claims to be the reincarnation of the Baba of Shirdi,¹⁴⁶ offered a lengthy narration relative to his "previous birth." Such narration is so informative and evocative of the atmosphere of Indian village life, it seems useful to review it in detail:

Ganga Bhavadia¹⁴⁷ was a poor boatman, who used to ferry his passengers across a river flowing placidly by the little hamlet of Pathri, near Manmad. His wife Devagiramma¹⁴⁸ was a kind devout soul, who after completing her domestic chores, devoted her time worshipping God in the form of Parvati. Her husband paid his homage to the form of God he loved most, which was Shiva, consort of Parvati. They were a devoted but childless couple. One evening when Ganga Bhavadia had returned home from work, he noticed the gathering clouds on the horizon.... That night, a furious storm broke over Pathri and the normally placid waters of the river were surging wildly, sweeping everything away in a rushing torrent. Ganga Bhavadia hurried to the river bank to strengthen the moorings of his boats and look after their safety during the storm.

After a while an old man took refuge from the storm into the verandah of Ganga Bhavadia's house. He requested Devagiramma to provide him with food and shelter for the night. She served some food to the old man and permitted him to rest on the verandah. After some time, the old man knocked on the door and complained to Devagiramma that he could not sleep and wanted a lady to maalish (massage) his legs. The lady of the house was taken aback at this strange request from a strange man, particularly as she was all by herself in the house. Nevertheless she did not wish to disappoint the old man. So she left the house by the back door to visit the houses of a couple of courtesans, who might help her out of this peculiar situation. However no courtesans were available.... She was in a state of confusion and began to cry. Interspersed with bitter sobbing, she prayed to Parvati for help...¹⁴⁹ Just then she heard a knock on the back door.... She opened the door

and found a woman standing there. She had come to offer her services to Devagiramma. This woman was from one of the houses visited earlier by her. That is what the woman told Devagiramma.... She took this woman to the old man in the verandah and firmly bolted the door behind them. No sooner had she thought of settling down for the night when a tap was heard on the front door. As Devagiramma opened the door, she was absolutely amazed by the vision she beheld. In speechless wonder she knelt and bowed low before the Divine Pair. God had manifested before her in the form of Lord Shiva and Parvati, to bless her. Parvati said: "Let us bless her together." Shiva replied that as He had come here specifically to test her, He would bless her separately. Parvati blessed her with two children¹⁵⁰ and Shiva announced that He Himself would be born to her as her third child, a Son. With her eyes brimful of tears, Devagiramma looked up. The Divine Pair had vanished.¹⁵¹

The storm had abated, and Ganga Bhavadia returned home in the early hours of the morning. When his wife related to him her experiences of the previous night, he thought they were hysterical utterances of a woman left by herself on a stormy night and promptly dismissed the matter. However, subsequent events proved otherwise.

The childless couple bore two children. Years rolled by and it was apparent that a third child was on the way. In the meantime Ganga Bhavadia began to lose all interest in his everyday work and domestic life. He developed an intense yearning to see God face to face. Just as Devagiramma was approaching full term with her third child, his craving for Ishvara Darshan¹⁵² became so intense that he decided to leave his family and home. Devagiramma argued that all that had been told by Shiva and Parvati had been fulfilled, and as Shiva Himself was due to take birth as her next child, what was the necessity of leaving home in search of God. Ganga Bhavadia replied that he was not going to be satisfied with the vision of God through the human body of his son. He wanted to see the pure splendour of Divinity without the agency of a human mask.¹⁵³ And so he set forth on his quest. The dictates of dharma¹⁵⁴ left no choice to Devagiramma, except to follow her husband. The two children were sent to her mother's house and she followed her husband into the wilderness.

Very soon Devagiramma experienced the first symptoms of her impending delivery and she asked her husband to wait for