

# Sai Baba: The Double Utilization of Written and Oral Traditions in a Modern South Asian Religious Movement

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The Sai Baba movement, one of the most widespread and popular modern South Asian religious movements, owes its origin to a saint, Sai Baba of Shirdi (d.1918), who was probably born around 1838. Through his successor, Sathya Sai Baba (b.1926), the movement has become a transnational phenomenon in the late twentieth century and has also expanded the main centers of its charisma, including today Shirdi town in the Indian state of Maharashtra and Puttaparthi town in the neighboring state of Andhra Pradesh. While most of the available literature is hagiographical in nature, some aspects of the movement have been studied – the figures of Shirdi Sai Baba and Sathya Sai Baba, the middle-class constituency of the Sathya Sai Baba movement, role of miracles, and the pedagogical role of movement, for instance.<sup>1</sup> These studies are part of a growing interest in new religious and reformist movements in South Asia in the past century, their impacts on civil society and its institutions, and their relationships to the nation-state.

This article examines the interplay of the oral and the written, of revelation and memory, in the Sai Baba movement, while situating this relationship sociologically rather than according to a strictly textual enterprise. It is a part of work in progress on different aspects of the cult of Sai Baba, including its urban following, the reconstruction of tradition in it and its lines of the transmission of charisma.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, this article will be divided into four sections. This introductory section will examine briefly the categories of revelation and memory and their parallels in Islam and Hinduism in the South Asian context. I will suggest that in looking at the relationship between written and oral traditions in modern South Asian religious movements, we need to move to an understanding of social memory. The next two sections will situate the figures of Shirdi Sai Baba and Sathya Sai Baba biographically, sociologically and historically, and the role of the written and the oral tradition in their lives and messages. The concluding section will build on the claim made in the introduction that the category of social memory that incorporates the written and the oral is a useful heuristic device for the study of new religious movements such as the Sai Baba movement.

In moving towards an understanding of the Sai Baba movement in India, we might refer initially to a textual distinction that is made between what is culturally termed *sruti* and *smriti* in classical Sanskrit literature. *Sruti*, 'that which is heard', refers to that class of texts that are held to have been revealed to sages, primarily the Vedas. *Smriti*, 'that which is remembered', includes other texts such as the *Dharmasastras* (legal codes), epics, philosophical systems and mythological narrations, which are seen as historical and social

products that can be assigned authorship. Although the boundaries between them can be a bit fluid, the categories themselves are widely accepted. The *sruti* are accepted as having been primarily oral and aural in inspiration even though both kinds of texts have come to be codified in time and written and translated into various languages.

In most languages in India, the word *smṛiti* is commonly deployed as 'memory', 'remembering', or 'reminiscence'.<sup>3</sup> However, there is another closely related word less rooted in the association with classical oral and written traditions that suggests the problematic that I wish to set out for this article. This word is *smarana*, which also means recollection and memory. The practice of *smarana*, more than *smṛiti*, is embedded in recitations, narratives, musical, mimetic, devotional and performative practices where one individually or collectively remembers the name or form of god, a historical narrative, the deeds of ancestors, deities, paradigmatic individuals or mythic heroes. The nine stages of devotion described by the *Bhagavata* text, for instance, include remembering the divine, the name, qualities, powers, form and acts of God, by the devotee. This emphasis on recalling the divine accompanied by musical and oral praxis is also of central importance to numerous saints and their cults in India. *Smarana*-as-memory thus points to a tradition where the written the oral, the performative, the visual or the musical interpenetrate and enrich each other.

Approaching this from another angle, we might refer to the distinction made in Islam between the *Koran*, the word of God as revealed to the Prophet Muhammed, and the *Hadith*, the account of the life of the Prophet, which includes stories revealing an ideal mode of individual and social action. Revelation and memory, the oral and the written, however, are less separate than it first seems in everyday practice and religious understanding, and the *Hadith* is understood as the living, walking and talking *Koran*.<sup>4</sup> In the hagiographies of several Sufi and Bhakti devotional saints from South Asia, the Life is the message, inspiration and revelation. The relationship between oral and written traditions in South Asian religious movements is, therefore, a dialogic one, and the boundaries between them have to be teased out. In the case of Shirdi Sai Baba, I will ask, who is the figure remembered and how did he and his constituency participate in the production of that memory through written, oral and other means? As far as Sathya Sai Baba is concerned, I will ask, how does he and his constituency remember Shirdi Sai Baba, and how has the relationship of the written and the oral changed with the transmission of that memory? This will allow us to probe into the relationship of the written and the oral and also to enrich, sociologically, ethnographically and historically, the category of *smarana*-as-memory.

### The 'true story' of Shirdi Sai Baba

Most early accounts of Shirdi Sai Baba's words and life are testimonies of witnessed events. From descriptions of Shirdi Sai Baba's utterances, it appears that he spoke Hindustani and a local Marathi dialect, he often used terms which were Arabic or Persian in origin, and sometimes, alone at night in the mosque where he lived, was heard speaking in languages no one could identify. Those who wrote about him in his lifetime received these utterances and transformed them by placing them in the context of their own writings and worlds. Devotees also remembered his message as a particular complex of

his practices, his touch, his appearance in dreams, injunctions to carry out actions, his miraculous interventions, and so on, which intersected with their own life-histories.<sup>5</sup>

The earliest accounts are those of 'Das Ganu' who hailed from a Brahmin family in Akolner village in Maharashtra.<sup>6</sup> Das Ganu seemed to see Baba as the Krishna he worshipped in the Maharashtrian devotional tradition, Pandharpur being an important focus of this devotion for the poet-saints from Jnandev (1271–96) onwards.<sup>7</sup> The word master or lord (*malik*) that he uses to describe Baba in many of his couplets also points to another aspect of Baba's personality – his links with Sufi Islam. According to Das Ganu, Sai Baba was born in Selu, a village in the dominions of the Muslim ruler of Hyderabad. His Muslim parents were poor, and when his father died his mother took up a mendicant's life. Her young son accompanied her and, when he was five years old, arrived in Shelwadi village, which was controlled by a Brahmin by the name of Gopalrao Deshmukh; the latter assumed guardianship of the lad when he was twelve years old. Baba trained with Deshmukh, and his education there gave him a familiarity with Hindu (Vaishnavite) traditions in addition to the Sufi one in which he had grown up.<sup>8</sup>

The account of Shirdi Sai Baba's life that is regarded as authoritative is the *Shri Sai Satcharita*. This has a very wide readership among devotees and, indeed, is regarded as a sacred relic in an individual's possession. 'Hemadpant', a devotee, prayed to Baba in 1916 that he might be permitted to write a book and Baba, placing his hand on his head and giving him sacred ash (*udi*), stated that he himself would write his life through Hemadpant. This account of Baba's teachings and life, and the experiences of various devotees, was brought out in Marathi originally and translated into English in 1944.

From these and other accounts one can piece together certain details about the life of Shirdi Sai Baba, and attempt to partially unravel the role of the written and the oral in his life and practices, and that of his recollection for his devotees.<sup>9</sup> The *Shri Sai Satcharita* makes no claims about his birth as did Das Ganu, but claims that Shirdi Baba serendipitously arrived at Shirdi in 1854, a tall lad of about 16, and took up his seat under a neem tree. He stayed for three years in Shirdi from his first appearance and disappeared to return later with the marriage-party of a Muslim gentleman in 1858. Shirdi, at the time of Baba's arrival in the middle of the nineteenth century, was a little village in Ahmednagar district of Maharashtra with a cluster of houses surrounded by agricultural fields. The majority of the population was Hindu peasants, and Muslims, who comprised about ten per cent of the population, worked mainly as artisans or agricultural labourers.<sup>10</sup> Baba began to reside in a dilapidated mosque. Later on, every alternate night, he would stay in a set of rooms near the mosque while one female devotee, Radha-Krishna Mai, would clean out the mosque. Baba's own belongings at this time consisted of a pipe, tobacco, a tin pot, the long white robe that he wore, and a staff. The cloth on his head was not washed for weeks. He wore nothing on his feet and sat on a sackcloth in front of a sacred fire (*dhuni*) to ward off the cold.

Baba never used his own name but was referred to by others as 'Sai Baba'. The appellation springs from the words uttered by a goldsmith, the priest of a temple on the outskirts of Shirdi village, who is said to have addressed him with the words 'Ya Sai' (welcome saint). The term 'Sai' is of Persian origin and means 'holy one'; The other word, 'Baba', is probably of Hindustani origin and indicates a senior or older man.<sup>11</sup> Baba often referred to himself and God as the mendicant (*fakir*). The relationship of Baba to certain Sufi orders in Maharashtra and Bijapur (in Karnataka state), especially the Chisti, has

been suggested.<sup>12</sup> A number of Sufi brotherhoods existed in that region and Baba's dress and practices allow this possibility.<sup>13</sup> Baba sang and danced in the early years of his residence at the mosque, often with other Muslim saints and musicians, probably an indication of his links with the Chisti order. As far as the constant remembrance of the name of God (*dhikr*) was concerned, he seems to have chosen *Allah Malik* as his formula. This may have been derived from *al-Malik*, the fourth of the list of ninety-nine names of Allah, signifying that Allah is the universal king. Or from *Malik-ul-Mulk*, the eighty-fourth of the ninety-nine names signifying that Allah is the possessor of the kingdom and that all existence is dependent on him.<sup>14</sup> In Marathi, as in Hindustani, *malik* simply came to mean the lord, master or owner.<sup>15</sup>

At the time that Baba came to reside in Shirdi, few people came to him: villagers occasionally would approach him for medicines that he would make. The incident, which altered his presence in the village, was a miracle in which he apparently converted water to oil and almost overnight he seems to have been transformed from a mad mendicant to a holy saint. Worship was at first individual, with sandal paste and flowers, though at times Baba strenuously resisted it. The Muslims, who were a majority of his followers in the early days and regarded him as their saint, appeared to have objected to this kind of worship inside a mosque. Around 1897 Gopalrao Gund, an inspector who had been blessed by Baba with a son, began the practice of holding a festival commemorating the death of a Muslim saint (*urs*) at Shirdi. Later, about 1908, the transformation from individual to congregational worship began on the lines of the worship of the deity Vitthala at Pandharpur. Thus worship with silver whisks, maces and candelabras became a common feature and a palanquin, a horse and other regal paraphernalia were added to worship Shirdi Baba as a God-King. From 1909, large crowds would gather to revere him as he moved in a procession from the mosque to a set of rooms every other night. Around this time, Baba gave up his begging and the food brought by his devotees would be distributed after being blessed by him. In 1912, certain devotees decided to hold a *Rama Navami* festival (to celebrate the birth of the Hindu deity, Rama) along with the *urs*, since the two coincided and, with Baba's permission, this became an annual feature at Shirdi.

In 1918 Baba had an attack of fever, and seventeen days later he passed away. A dispute arose as to where he should be buried. The Muslim devotees wished that their saint be buried in an open piece of land in Shirdi, while the Hindu worshippers wished him to be buried in a building built by a devotee where a Krishna idol was to have been placed. Eventually a revenue officer was called to settle the matter: he decided a plebiscite should be held and the matter was settled in a way favourable to the Hindus. When Baba passed away, he had only 16 rupees in his hand and no property, while all the paraphernalia of worship came to be vested in the Sai Sansthan trust in 1922. The Sai Sansthan today is a vast organizational network, with hotels, rest rooms, a magazine and other publications to cater to the thousands of devotees of Shirdi Sai Baba.

The social context of the shift from individual to congregational worship and then institutionalization of his charisma and memory was the construction of the Godavari-Pravara canals. By the end of the first two decades of this century, it had transformed the Shirdi region into the prosperous, commercial 'Sugar belt'.<sup>16</sup> During this period, Bombay city began to shift in its economic profile as a mere export center in colonial India to a manufacturing magnet drawing labour from a vast hinterland. In Maharashtra, between 1901–1951, the share of agriculture declined and the share of manufacturing and the

services increased. Many occupations associated with modernisation under colonial rule expanded, especially administrative, medical and legal services. Except for a setback reported by the 1911 Census, the number of towns and the proportion of the urban population steadily increased between 1891–1941.<sup>17</sup> The devotees who began to flock to Baba in increasing numbers belonged to these strata – officials of the government, lawyers, Congress Party members, rich Parsis and well to do Muslims from Hyderabad.<sup>18</sup> Most of these strata were urban, and many of the Hindus seemed to belong to upper caste and merchant communities. They had some knowledge of English, were in contact with centers in other parts of the country through the press and the railway, and were exposed to the benefits of ‘modern’ education, as well as occupational opportunities opened up by the British Empire’s presence.

It appears, therefore, that with the change in the composition of his constituency, Shirdi Sai Baba’s Sufi practices became more overlaid with those identified with sectarian Hindu ones. This was accompanied by a shift in the way he was perceived and came to be remembered. To many of his devotees, then, he appeared to be a veritable guru. In fact, in many calendars and images depicting him today he is clothed in an orange-red robe often associated with Hindu ascetics, rather than the white one – closely identified with Muslim saints and mendicants – that he actually wore. Once he ceased to be perceived as purely a mad ascetic, Shirdi Sai Baba adopted modes of oral and scriptural instruction for his followers that interpenetrated each other and in certain ways participated in the production of his memory as a guru. To some, he recommended the reading of scriptures such as the *Jnaneshwar*, *Adyatma Ramayana*, the *Bhagavadgita*, or simply orally chanting the names of Rama, Vishnu or Allah. Others he sent to various temples, with gifts for other saints, or explained the meaning of certain sacred formulae personally or in dreams. Towards the last decade of the nineteenth century, in a practice that coincided with the *urs* celebrations and, a decade later, congregational worship, Baba began collecting sacrificial fees (*dakshina*) from the hundreds who began to flock to Shirdi. He stated that he only took from those who were formerly indebted to his *fakir*. The complement of this was the sacred ash (*udi*) that Baba distributed from what was formed by burning logs in the fire. Ash was used in all manner of cures: to remove a scorpion’s poison, to cure a woman of the plague, to cure someone of fits, to increase the food served to guests, and so on. It does appear, however, that this distribution of ash was an older practice of Baba’s. The sacred fire still burns in Shirdi, a site that links devotees to the memory of Shirdi Baba and his life, and sacrificial fees are often collected at the temple where his tomb lies dominated by an imposing white marble image of Baba.

Today, Shirdi has a number of other reminders of Baba’s presence. These include the stone on which Baba used to sit, the fireplace where he used to cook, a small temple that he sometimes visited, the mosque where he lived, his sacred fire, a show-case with his robe, pipe and staff, and so on. In addition to the *Rama Navami-urs* celebrations every evening, the *Shri Sai Satcharita* is read and devotional songs accompanied by stories are performed. Two important festival days, *Gurupurnima* (the annual full moon night dedicated to the worship of the guru) and *Vijayadasami* (the night on which Baba passed away), are celebrated. On Thursdays and other festival days a palanquin is taken out of the temple, and Baba’s photo and other belongings are also taken out in a procession. Shirdi is on the pilgrimage route for many Hindus and Muslims who regard Baba as a saint who still speaks from the tomb.<sup>19</sup> As social memory, the figure of Shirdi Sai Baba as

saint-guru appears to contain archetypes from two earlier traditions. The first, and arguably less dominant one today, is that of a *pir* or saint in a Sufi or Nathpanthi tradition, overlapping with the persona of Kabir.<sup>20</sup> The second is the figure of Vitthala at Pandharpur and the Maharashtrian saint tradition that popularised this devotion in the region. Thus, the cult today has become a complex palimpsest of material, oral, textual, performative, kinetic and visual traces some of which is owed to Shirdi Sai Baba's agency.

We have to acknowledge here that unlike other cults and movements that sometimes mask their own processes of becoming, the Sai Baba movement has not produced a sealed identity. Because it refers to various temporal, cultural and spatial layers, when we consider the development of the movement in the twentieth century through the figure of Sathya Sai Baba, symbolic structures, written, oral and others, become packed extremely densely into the cult. It appears as if the vastness of space traversed by the railways, air travel, media, bureaucracy, information systems and the imagination of multicultural groups in the late twentieth century requires this density of cultural practices.

### Sai Baba as Avatar<sup>21</sup>

Shirdi Baba's reassurances that even after his passing away he would continue to help his devotees has led to the belief among some that he would be reincarnated again. While a number of persons have claimed to be Baba reborn, the most famous claim of reincarnation is that of Sathya Sai Baba of Puttaparthi in Andhra Pradesh. Sathya Sai Baba was born on 23 November 1926, in Puttaparthi village in the state of Andhra Pradesh as Sathya Narayana Raju to a lower middle class peasant family. Sathya seems to have had a fairly ordinary childhood although biographers and oral accounts claim a number of mysterious events at the time of his birth and during his school years. At the age of 14, on 23 May 1940, after a prolonged period of 'illness' and erratic behavior which the family thought was a sign of possession, Sathya declared his spiritual genealogy:

I belong to Apasthamba Suthra [literally, aphorism, a reference to the texts called the Brahma Sutras]; I am of the Bharadwaja Gothra [lineage]; I am Sai Baba (Kasturi, vol. 1, 1968:43).

In October, he declared that he was no longer the Sathya they knew, but Sai, and his devotees were calling him. He cast away his schoolbooks and lived in the house of a Brahmin woman, Subbamma, till about 1950, when the construction of a separate ashram was completed in Puttaparthi. In the interim, he continued to perform a number of miracles, grant boons, give visions to various devotees who were beginning to pour in, and visit, occasionally, some towns and cities in south India. A second ashram came up subsequently in Whitefield near Bangalore city called 'Brindavan', and a third summer ashram in the hill-station of Ootacamund. Baba also maintains residences in the metropolises of Hyderabad, Madras and Bombay. Through the choice of these centers, Baba has created an alternative network of pilgrimage sites in southern India which contrast with older ones such as Tirupati in Andhra Pradesh, Kanchipuram in Tamil Nadu, Sringeri in Karnataka, and Pandharpur and Shirdi in Maharashtra. Four main festivals have been celebrated at the ashrams since the early years – Sathya Sai Baba's birthday, *Sivaratri* (dedicated to the deity, Siva), *Gurupurnima* and the autumn nine-day festival culminating

in *Vijayadasami*. Today, a number of others – his mother's birthday, Christmas, the birthday of Buddha, new year festivals, *Rama Navami*, and so on – have been added to the list, and the form of many of the older festivals have also become more elaborate.

The watershed in his career was 1957 when he left for a north Indian tour of cities and sacred sites, for after this year his public role came to be voiced distinctly. There were three interrelated aspects to this public role: first, the construction of his life path; second, the production of a number of oral discourses and written works; and third, the post-humous recasting of the memory of Shirdi Sai Baba.

Baba has categorized his life in terms of three time periods. He states that the first sixteen years of his life is a period when childhood miracles (*bala lilas*) predominate; the second period is one in which divine miracles (*mahimas*) dominate; after his thirty-second year, Baba states that his task is that of preaching (*upadesa*), and the guiding of humanity back into Eternal Righteousness (*Sanatana Dharma*). In concert with this project, in 1958, his thirty-sixth year, the newsletter *Sanathana Sarathi* ('The Eternal Charioteer', a reference to the deity, Krishna), 'devoted to the moral and spiritual upliftment of humanity through *Sathya* [Truth], *Dharma* [Righteousness], *Santhi* [Peace] and *Prema* [Love]', was inaugurated. The monthly newsletter contains as its centerpiece articles that are written by Baba, or transcriptions of speeches given by him. This was brought out at first in Telugu, his mother tongue, and is now published in over eleven languages including English. At his birthday celebrations in 1961 his official biography written by N. Kasturi (*Sathyam Sivam Sundaram*) was inaugurated.

What is the relationship between the written and the oral within this production of works? There is a vast and growing corpus of literature on Baba.<sup>22</sup> Apart from the official biography, *Sathyam Sivam Sundaram*, and publications of the Sathya Sai Central Trust that includes the *Sanathana Sarathi*, there are Baba's own discourses and works that are, of course, central to the movement. The first category within them is a set of books called *Prema Vahini*, *Dharma Vahini*, *Jnana Vahini*, *Sutra Vahini*, *Prasanthi Vahini*, *Upanishad Vahini*, *Dhyana Vahini*, and so on, which are discourses called 'streams' (*vahini*) on specific themes such as meditation, education, peace, or knowledge, aimed at the clarification of spiritual truths. Many of them are commentaries on the *sruti* class of Sanskrit literature, but they also include references to other devotional and sectarian traditions and modern figures such as Gandhi or Ramakrishna Paramahansa. These were lectures or articles by Baba first published in the *Sanathana Sarathi* and then regrouped thematically. The second category includes works that are his exegeses on different scriptures. There is first, the *Geetha Vahini*, which Sathya Sai Baba classifies as *sruti*. Second, there are two works conceived by him as his versions of texts dealing with divine incarnation, the *Bhagavata Vahini*, and the *Ramakatha Rasavahini*. Traditionally, the latter two would be regarded as *smriti* texts. All of these three appear to have been conceived as single and coherent bodies of works.

These two categories of produced works are important for through them we have a reorganization of the understanding of the classical *sruti* and *smriti* within the Sai Baba movement. As Sathya Sai Baba states:

The *Upanishads* are the very core of the *Vedas*, the very essence of their teachings. The *Brahma Sutra* and the *Bhagavad Githa* contain the very essence of the teachings of the *Upanishads*. These three scriptural texts are, therefore, designated as the *Prasthaana Thraya*, the *Three Source Texts*.

Since they have been learnt by listening to the Guru, they are, along with the *Vedas*, named *Sruthi*, the 'Heard' (*Sutra Vahini* 1992: 1).

This last sentence of the above quotation gives his speeches an added dimension: since Vedic wisdom was communicated by the guru, a practice that gives it the status of *sruti*, then his speeches assume the same value for his devotees. Sathya Sai Baba is an indefatigable public speaker – he speaks mainly in Telugu – and gives lectures to gatherings of devotees periodically. *Summer Showers in Brindavan* are speeches given by him to college students during courses held for them. Many of the others find their way into *Sanathana Sarathi*. Many of his speeches have been collected in more than thirty volumes over the years titled *Sathya Sai Speaks*. As the last title reveals, these speeches are given a primarily oral status. This production of speeches, written works, commentaries and renditions of *sruti* and *smriti* texts, as well as the newsletter and his authoritative biography, is a corpus that finds its rationale in the mission of preaching defined by Sathya Sai Baba for himself.

This mission, and the production of written and oral texts, carve out a different cultural space for the movement than existed previously. This is related to the third aspect of his public role, that of the recasting of the memory of Shirdi Sai Baba. On *Gurupurnima* day in 1963, he announced:

I am Siva-Sakthi born in the *Gothra* [lineage] of Bharadwaja according to a boon won by that Sage from Siva and Sakthi. Sakthi herself was born of the *Gothra* of that Sage as Sai Baba of Shirdi; Siva and Sakthi have incarnated as myself in his *Gothra* now; Siva alone will incarnate as the third Sai in the same *Gothra* in Mysore state (Gokak 1983:305).<sup>23</sup>

The recasting of the memory of Shirdi Sai Baba and Sathya Sai Baba as avatars has to be inserted within a larger institutional framework. The announcement in 1963 signaled a movement to the pan-Indian, and even international, role of Sathya Sai Baba and the beginnings of a cult organization dedicated to service (*seva*). The First All-India Conference of Sai Seva Organizations was held in Madras in 1967. At the First World Conference of Sathya Sai Seva Organizations at Bombay in 1968, after inaugurating the center of the World Council of Sai Organizations in Bombay called Dharmakshetra, 'the field of righteousness', Baba announced that he was the avatar or incarnation of Sai and he had come to establish *dharma*.<sup>24</sup> In June the same year he left for a tour of East Africa, his first and only foreign visit so far. 1968 was important in other ways: he established the Sri Sathya Sai Arts and Science College for Women in Anantapur in Andhra Pradesh; a similar institution was founded in 1969 for men in Brindavan near Bangalore city. The 'Summer Courses in Indian Culture and Spirituality' for college students began in 1972. In 1981 the 'Sri Sathya Sai Institute of Higher Learning', deemed a university, was set up. The most recent of the institutions associated with the movement is an enormous hospital complex in Puttaparthi set up in 1990–91, called the 'Sri Sathya Sai Institute of Higher Medical Sciences'.

The growth of the organizational bases of the movement and that of Puttaparthi into a miniature city with international links parallels three phases in the representation of Sathya Sai Baba's persona and the reconstruction of the memory of Shirdi Sai Baba. The first phase stretches from 1940 to about 1958 when he declared on various occasions that he was Sai Baba of Shirdi reborn. Then there is an intermediate phase till 1968, when



there is a suggestion of his avatar-hood, but chiefly as an avatar of Siva and Sakti. At the first world conference in 1968 came the explicit declaration that he was an avatar who had come to restore righteousness for all humanity. There are two giant architectural symbols of this last period of avatar-hood. The first is an arch at the entrance of the temple at the Puttaparthi ashram. The two pillars of the arch have statuettes of the ten avatars of Vishnu, the tenth depicting the future Kalki avatar seated on a white horse. The second, called the *Sarva Mathaikya Stupa* or *Sarva Dharma Stupa* is an enormous pillar between the main temple and the auditorium designed to hold a lotus on its peak; its base is made up of five sides with symbols from five 'world' religions – Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and Zoroasterianism.

## Conclusion

To return to the category of *smarana*-as-memory in this context, we have to place the idea of Baba as avatar and the recollection of Shirdi Baba within the larger reworking of social memory in the movement and through it. This has occurred through a series of redefinitions of categories of place, time and faith. Thus, sacred spaces were created out of and within Shirdi and Puttaparthi, Bombay, Bangalore and Ootacamund – dry land agricultural areas, the center of a colonial Presidency, a 'science city' and an ex-colonial hill-station – and contrasted with older pilgrimage centers. The ritual calendar at Shirdi and Puttaparthi, through its many accommodations, is today reminiscent of the avowedly 'secular' Indian state. The nature of piety and faith was also redefined; for instance, Shirdi Sai Baba explicitly mediated between sectarian Hindu traditions as well as Islamic Sufi ones and Sathya Sai Baba situates his project within what we may term theosophical universalism. This transformation of memory, which is a social act, is embedded in the new institutions and practices that both Shirdi Sai Baba and Sathya Sai Baba introduced, participated in or produced. These include kinetic practices such as processions during festivals, written ones such as the *Shri Sai Satcharita* and *Sanathana Sarathi*, oral ones such as the chanting of sacred formula and speeches, musical practices such as singing of devotional songs, and even architectural ones such as the mosque and *Sarva Dharma Stupa*.

There does seem to be a trajectory for the movement that social memory, encompassing written, oral and other devices, suggests. Before 1918 the cult of Shirdi Sai Baba largely participated in regional traditions of worship and was dependent on the presence and the power of a living saint. Although congregational worship emerged as mode during Shirdi Sai Baba's own lifetime, and various oral and written devices, it was after 1918 that new models were needed to represent the vast terrain that opened up, including the idea of the nation. Thus, the Sai Sansthan emerged as an organizational nexus for these flows and also for the preservation of the memory of Shirdi Baba in a systematic form as a saint who still 'speaks from the tomb'. In the second half of the twentieth century Sathya Sai Baba has come to stand at the epicenter of both national and transnational flows, in terms of constituencies, symbolisms and technological infrastructures. While the presence of Sathya Sai Baba is an important one, he also transcends his presence in many ways, through the institutional and information apparatus described earlier and not just through miracles that devotees recollect. Remembering Sai Baba thus occurs through many social and historical circuits, written and oral, and this recollection is by definition incomplete. The

role of a local fakir has been replaced by that of the recollected guru and then the global avatar as the Sai Baba movement has continued to develop.

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## Notes

1. See, for instance, Babb (1986), Gokak (1983), Rigopoulos (1993), Ruhela and Robinson (1976), Shepherd (1985), Swallow (1982).

2. Srinivas (1999), (2000).
3. In the *Bhagavadgita* ('The Lord's Song' which forms a central text within the Sanskrit epic of the *Mahabharata*) one of the manifestations by which the divine pervades the world is memory (*smriti*), a feminine form that displays divine excellence.
4. I am grateful to Ayesha Wada for this formulation.
5. See Srinivas (1999) for an exploration of some of these themes.
6. Das Ganu was employed in the police service and went to see Baba in 1890; after 1903, he spent his time performing religious discourses accompanied with devotional songs throughout the region.
7. As Vaudeville (1996) points out, Pandharpur is central to the Maharashtrian Bhakti tradition. The image of Vithoba or Vitthala there is regarded as the original form of Vishnu rather than as an incarnation of the same god. The place itself was, from the thirteenth century, known as the city of the god Pandurang, and as Vaudeville shows, this name was not an epithet of Vishnu but of Siva. In fact, most of the shrines in the vicinity of the Vithoba temple are Saivite. It is later in the Maharashtrian devotional tradition of Jnanadev, Tukaram and the other poet-saints, that Vithoba is associated with Vishnu. In the Varakari tradition, Vitthala is regarded as the cowherd Gopala who came from Dwaraka to Pandharpur.
8. This is reported by Shepherd (1985: 6–10).
9. See also Rigopoulos (1993), Shepherd (1985), and Srinivas (1999) for an account of the life of Shirdi Sai Baba. The account in this paper relies primarily on the *Shri Sai Satcharita* (1972), unless indicated otherwise.
10. Sources calculate that it had about 200 houses with a village population of not more than 1,000 persons (Rigopoulos 1993). Shirdi had a few shops managed by Gujurati, Marwari and Kutchi merchants. In keeping with accounts of Western Maharashtra at this point of time (O' Hanlon 1985; Omvedt 1976), one may categorise most of the villagers as belonging to the peasant/cultivating strata with few Maratha or élite families, if any. The former strata was certainly not homogeneous and contained a variety of castes.
11. See Rigopoulos (1993).
12. Shepherd (1985).
13. Many of Baba's practices – for instance, sitting at a sacred fire – link him to the Nathpanthi order which, at least from the eleventh century onwards, was associated with ascetics who were heterodox in their practices and were often connected to Muslim saints. There were many Natha brotherhoods in Ahmednagar, Tryambak being a centre from the thirteenth century onwards. In fact, as White (1976) points out, the head of the order was called a *pir* and performed intercession on behalf of his clients due to the possession of special powers much in the same way as Muslim holy men with their spiritual powers.
14. See Rigopolous (1993:284–294). He also remarks that if one compares Baba's life and teachings with the classical Sufi spiritual path (*tariq*), three stations of the path are attested to in Baba's life – poverty (*faqr*), patience (*sabr*), and surrender (*tawakkul*). Two other features – the practice of dance and music (*sama*), and the recollection of the name of Allah (*dhikr*) – common to many Sufi orders, are also evidenced in his life.
15. The choice of *Allah Malik* by Sai Baba achieves particular force in the political context of British rule in western India. Not only had the Peshwa ruler been deposed but rulership also was in the hands of non-local powers who had established a political figurehead in 1818. As has been suggested (O'Hanlon 1985), this had a powerful impact on regional culture: it brought to the fore the dispute between Brahmins and élite Maratha families, as well as claims about a new regional identity associated with martial prowess, rulership and an identification with land. Without stretching the argument about the use of *malik* as a ritual formula by Baba too far, it must nevertheless be placed amidst these polemics about power and claims to authority.
16. See Rigopolous (1993). Srinivas (1999) also makes this point and analyzes the lines of transmission of his charisma to urban centers in South India in the second half of the twentieth century.
17. See Krishnamurthy (1982); Markovits (1995); Visaria and Visaria (1982).
18. Interviews with devotees between 1936–38 document their social origin (Narasimha Swami 1989).
19. See Srinivas (1999) for an elaboration of the place of Shirdi within the transmission of Sai Baba's charisma.
20. Kabir, who Baba appears to be linked to most directly, is obviously the archetype of the dual heritage that Baba was known for. As Lorenzon (1987) suggests, we know nothing about Kabir the man except for the fact that he belonged to a family of Muslim weavers in Banaras and that scholars are divided as to his dates (between 1448–50 and 1504–1518). There is indication that he was in some way connected to the Nathpanthi tradition, although he himself was not a Nath *yogi*, but it is widely acknowledged that he

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represents the quintessence of the tradition of saints with elements drawn from Vaishnava Bhakti, Nathpanthi traditions and Sufism. See also Rigopolous (1993: 298–305) on the connections between Baba and Kabir, for instance, the fact that both used to define themselves as the servant of God or as *fakir*.

21. See Srinivas (2000) for an elaboration of this idea of Sai Baba as avatar and the reconstruction of tradition among his urban following. The following section of this paper owes itself largely to that article.
22. These include a) accounts of experiences of devotees, both Indian and international; b) accounts by devotees who have or had important roles to play in the organisation; c) analyses of researchers, including some devotees, of Baba and his philosophy; and d) biographies.
23. In 1990 Sathya Sai Baba also gave some details about Shirdi Sai Baba's birth and life in which he stated that Shirdi Sai Baba was born to Hindu parents who became mendicants and abandoned their newly born child (see *Sanathana Sarathi* 1990). The infant was found by a childless *fakir* and his wife and finally came to study with a pious scholar called Venkusa between 1839–1851. Sathya Sai Baba later gave the birth of Shirdi Sai Baba as being 27 September 1838 and not 28 September 1835 as he claimed in this discourse.
24. See Sathya Sai Baba (1976).