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Be United, Be Virtuous

Composite Culture and the Growth of Shirdi Sai Baba Devotion

Karline McLain

ABSTRACT: In one popular devotional poster the Indian god-man Shirdi Sai Baba (d. 1918) gazes out at the viewer, his right hand raised in blessing. Behind him are a Hindu temple, a Muslim mosque, a Sikh gurdwara, and a Christian church; above him is the slogan, “Be United, Be Virtuous.” In his lifetime, Shirdi Sai Baba acquired a handful of Hindu and Muslim devotees in western India. Over the past several decades, he has been transformed from a regional figure into a revered persona of pan-Indian significance. While much scholarship on religion in modern India has focused on Hindu nationalist groups, new religious movements seeking to challenge sectarianism have received far less attention. Drawing upon primary devotional materials and ethnographic research, this article argues that one significant reason for the rapid growth of this movement is Shirdi Sai Baba’s composite vision of spiritual unity in diversity, construed by many devotees as a needed corrective to rigid sectarian ideologies.

KEYWORDS: Shirdi Sai Baba, composite culture, Hindu nationalism

In his 1972 study of the Shirdi Sai Baba movement, Charles White reported that Shirdi Sai Baba was “coming to be regarded as a major incarnation” in Bombay (now Mumbai), where posters of him were widely displayed and a temple recently had been built. White predicted that in coming years Sai Baba might “acquire the kind of

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pan-Indian devotion that figures like Sri Aurobindo and Sri Ramakrishna have.”¹ Sai Baba died in 1918 in the village of Shirdi, in the western Indian state of Maharashtra. During his lifetime he came to be regarded among a small circle of devotees from Hindu, Muslim and other religious backgrounds as a *sadguru*, an enlightened teacher. By the early 1970s, Shirdi Sai Baba devotion had become a vibrant movement throughout western and south-central India, including the city of Mumbai. In my own field research in Mumbai, Delhi, Bangalore and Jaipur, I have witnessed the rise in Shirdi Sai Baba devotion throughout the past decade, noting the establishment of Shirdi Sai Baba temples and street shrines in these cities. In Mumbai alone there are now dozens of temples and hundreds of street shrines to Shirdi Sai Baba, a dramatic increase over the one temple mentioned by White. The increasing number of temples throughout India and beyond testifies to the surge in the popularity of this figure in the last three decades, during which time Shirdi Sai Baba has indeed acquired a pan-Indian following.²

This article focuses on devotional texts and images³ produced by the Shirdi Sai Baba movement, and statements made by devotees during my field research in India to investigate the reasons behind this new religious movement’s substantial growth over the past several decades. Marianne Warren posits three reasons for this popularity: 1) the efficacy of prayer to Shirdi Sai Baba in the form of tangible worldly results gained by devotees; 2) the proliferation of books and films about Shirdi Sai Baba since the 1970s; and 3) the declaration of the popular god-man Sathya Sai Baba (1926–2011) that he was the reincarnation of Shirdi Sai Baba.⁴ All these are significant reasons; however, I argue that one more must be added to this list.

A primary reason for the transformation of Shirdi Sai Baba from a regional figure into a revered persona of pan-Indian significance is his message of the composite nature of Indian culture. The past three decades have witnessed rampant outbreaks of communal violence in India, in which Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and Christians have been targeted.⁵ In the wake of rising Hindu nationalism and increasingly vocal and at times violent calls for India to become a Hindu nation, as well as the rise in Islamic terrorism in major Indian cities, many Indians have begun working to overcome communal tensions by calling for recognition of India’s composite culture.

The term “composite culture” most commonly refers to the argument that Hindus and Muslims are not two completely separate communities; rather, “the unique genius of India worked to evolve, over the centuries since the coming of Muslims into the Indian subcontinent, modes of thinking and living which are a subtle intermixing or synthesis of the world-views and living habits of Muslims and Hindus.”⁶ Yet as Kathryn Hansen has argued, too often scholars have either overlooked efforts to promote composite culture in their focus on sectarian

movements and media, or presumed that concern with composite culture is limited to intellectuals and politicians, as the “polemics related to secular values and pluralism are frequently assumed to be too abstract or theoretical to figure in everyday life among the population at large.” This assumption, she states, “requires serious interrogation.”⁷

The rapid growth of the Shirdi Sai Baba devotional movement throughout India during the past several decades demonstrates the powerful appeal of composite culture in the everyday lives of many of those drawn to it. For a great majority of his newfound devotees, Shirdi Sai Baba’s life is a prime example of the synthesis of Hinduism and Islam, and his teachings provide a powerful foil to sectarian visions of India by calling for a united community that values not only Hindus and Muslims as equals, but Sikhs, Christians and others as well.

CHALLENGING HINDUTVA WITH A COMPOSITE VISION

Much scholarship on recent Hindu movements has focused on the rise of Hindu nationalist groups and the interconnections between religion and politics in colonial and postcolonial India. Hindu nationalism is an anti-secular movement asserting that Hinduism is the national religion and culture of India. A foundational definition of *Hindutva*, or Hinduness, was set forth in 1923 by V. D. Savarkar, who argued that a Hindu was anyone who regarded India as both motherland and holy land.⁸ Thus, adherents of indigenous religious traditions, such as Hinduism, Sikhism, Jainism and Buddhism, can be considered Hindus, but not Indian Muslims and Christians, who regard places outside of India (such as Mecca or Jerusalem) as their holy lands. Furthermore, according to Savarkar, India should be recognized as a Hindu land and governed accordingly.

Throughout the twentieth century, a handful of powerful Hindu nationalist groups arose that are collectively known as the Sangh Parivar (Family of Associations). Prominent among these are the Hindu Mahasabha, founded in 1915; the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), founded in 1925; and the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), founded in 1964. In 1980 the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was formed as a Hindu nationalist political party to oppose the pro-secular Congress Party, which had dominated Indian politics since independence in 1947. The BJP has gained a substantial following among the Indian middle classes. It won the majority of seats in national elections in 1996, 1998 and 1999, but it was defeated by the Congress Party in 2004 and 2009.⁹

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the BJP and other Sangh Parivar groups employed a range of tactics that drew upon Hindu religious symbolism in the effort to unify and mobilize a large voting bloc. One such tactic was the 1990 chariot procession (*rath yatra*) from Somnath to

Ayodhya coordinated by the BJP and VHP. This procession wound throughout northern India for over a month, and culminated in the city of Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh state, said to be the site of the prehistoric kingdom of Rama, an incarnation of the Hindu god Vishnu. Within Ayodhya, the final destination was the Babri Masjid, a mosque built in the early sixteenth century by the Mughal Emperor Babar. Organizers of this procession claimed the mosque had been built atop the ruins of a Hindu temple marking the very birthplace of Lord Rama after Babar ordered his Muslim henchman to tear it down.

Richard H. Davis has argued that the procession's message was two-fold, according to the intentions of its two organizing groups: for the VHP, the message was "religious, allusive, militant, masculine, and anti-Muslim"; for the BJP, the message was "political, realistic, and ostensibly inclusive, offering as an alternative opponent not Muslims as such, but the 'pseudo-secularists' who practice the 'politics of appeasement' on behalf of Muslims and other minorities."¹⁰ While the VHP sought to unite Hindus against Muslims, the BJP sought to unite Hindus against the current Congress Party government. Together, in the procession they utilized widespread devotion to Lord Rama among Hindus in northern India, and drew upon ritual traditions to mobilize a national Hindu identity.

Despite sectarian rioting that ensued in the wake of this procession, the BJP won the state elections in Uttar Pradesh and nearly doubled its share of the national vote in 1991 to emerge as India's largest opposition party.¹¹ On 6 December 1992 the VHP and BJP organized a rally in Ayodhya that resulted in the demolition of the Babri Masjid. Throughout the 1990s and into the twenty-first century, the campaign to (re)build the Ramjanmabhoomi (Rama's birthplace) temple has been a central component of Hindu nationalist politics.¹²

In tandem with the academic focus on Hindu nationalism, scholars of Indian visual culture have examined the connections between the ubiquitous "god posters" found in India and Hindutva sentiments. Devotional god posters began to emerge in India in the late nineteenth century with the arrival of the lithographic press. These mass-produced images were accessible to Indians in the lower and middle classes, and became widely popular in home-based Hindu ritual *puja* (worship) practices.¹³ Christopher Pinney has documented in detail the relationship between devotional images and Hindu nationalist, anti-secular politics in pre- and post-independent India in his study of the lithographs produced by Ravi Varma Press, Calcutta Art Studio, and Poona Chitrashala Press. He argues that the relationship between Hindu nationalist politics and images in postcolonial India is not a new development but a continuation of an earlier trend: "Seen in the light of this history one is struck by the powerful continuities in practice: the ubiquity of images of the Ram mandir [temple] recalls the ubiquity of

Cow Protection images [of the 1890s].”¹⁴ In her study of patriotic god posters depicting Mother India as the Hindu mother goddess of the nation, Sumathi Ramaswamy has similarly noted continuity throughout the twentieth century in the theme of the Hindu martyr who “is willing to surrender life and limb to the Indian national territory, much in the manner of Bhagat, Gandhi, and possibly Indira.”¹⁵

During the 1980s and 1990s as the BJP and VHP focused on Ayodhya, they issued new posters of the Hindu god Rama. Anuradha Kapur has argued that these posters entail an iconographic shift in images of Rama from a smooth-limbed, soft-bodied, tranquil deity to one who is “exercised, determined, ready to punish.”¹⁶ She discusses in detail an image produced by the VHP (and widely copied) in connection with its Ramjanmabhoomi temple-building campaign. In this image an angry Rama stands against a backdrop of dark clouds while the wind whips his hair and saffron loincloth. With his heavily muscled arms he holds a bow and arrow at the ready, prepared to face the coming storm, whatever it may be. He towers above a temple, beneath which is printed in Hindi, “The proposed Shri Ram Temple at Shri Ram’s birthplace in Ayodhya.”¹⁷

Commenting on such Hindu nationalist imagery, Gwilym Beckerlegge writes that the “promotion by the Hindu Right of Hindu mythological symbols as symbols of Indian nationhood may prove alienating to the sizeable number of Indians who are not Hindus, and offensive to those Hindus for whom the ideals of an inclusive secular state remain beacons of hope.”¹⁸ Indeed, it is in this context that the rapid spread of the Shirdi Sai Baba devotional movement during the past several decades must be understood. One widely printed devotional poster of Shirdi Sai Baba presents a very different vision of the nation for those alienated or offended by Hindutva and other sectarian movements [see Figure 1]. In a manner standard of the god poster genre, Shirdi Sai Baba is presented in a frontal position in the center of the image. His eyes make direct contact with viewers, blessing them with his gaze, while an auspicious ray of yellow light emanates from his hand raised towards viewers. Behind him, four buildings fill the background: in the upper-right corner is a Hindu temple, and beneath that is a Muslim mosque; a Sikh gurdwara is in the upper-left corner, and beneath that is a Christian church. Across the top of the poster, printed in the orange, white and green of the Indian flag, reads the Hindi slogan, *Ek Bano, Nek Bano*—“Be United, Be Virtuous.”¹⁹ Thus, as W. J. T. Mitchell suggests we should inquire of images,²⁰ if one were to ask, “What does this picture want?” one must reply: It wants all Indians to look at it—not just Hindus, but also Muslims, Sikhs and Christians. Furthermore, it wants all Indians to be transformed by this act of looking at Shirdi Sai Baba into unified, virtuous citizens of the nation.



Figure 1. *Shirdi Sai Baba's message to "Be United, Be Virtuous." Poster purchased at and reprinted with the permission of Sharma Fine Arts, Mumbai.*

In its inclusive vision, this image provides an alternative to Hindu nationalist images in two interconnected ways. First, instead of presenting an exclusively Hindu nation closed to Muslims and other minorities, it depicts multiple faith communities as equals under the national tricolor flag. Second, this vision of Indianness is not premised on acts of violent martyrdom for a bloodthirsty Mother India, or on destructive virility for an angry Lord Rama, but instead on acts of virtue and the union of all Indians under the tranquil blessing of Shirdi Sai Baba.

THE LIFE AND AFTERLIFE OF SHIRDI SAI BABA

Little is known with historical certainty of Shirdi Sai Baba's early years. He was born circa 1838, but the exact location of his birth and the identity of his parents are not documented. Details of his religious upbringing are also unknown, as is even his original name, for "Sai Baba" is an appellation meaning "saintly father."²¹ What is known of his life and teachings dates to the time he settled in the small village of Shirdi, in the western Indian state of Maharashtra, circa 1858, after

spending several years as an itinerant holy man. Assuming him to be a Muslim *fakir* due to his white robe and headwrap, the Hindu priest of the Khandoba temple turned Sai Baba away when he sought refuge there, pointing him instead to the nearby mosque. Sai Baba eventually made the dilapidated mosque known as Dwarkamai his abode, and remained in Shirdi for the next sixty years until his death in 1918.²²

By the final years of his life, Sai Baba had acquired a number of followers in Shirdi and the surrounding area, who were drawn to his reputation for possessing miraculous powers, especially the ability to grant offspring to childless couples and heal illnesses, and to his teachings from the Bhagavad Gita and the Quran. These early followers were male and female, high caste and low, Hindu and Muslim. Since his death, these and later followers have produced a wide range of devotional materials about his life and teachings.

My focus in this essay is on three types of devotional material: published hagiographies and testimonial memoirs; printed photographs and god posters; and oral histories of devotees collected during my field research in India in 2007–2008. To a scholar seeking to construct a critical historical biography of a revered figure like Shirdi Sai Baba, such devotional materials can be challenging due to their blending of fact, myth and legend; but they are incredibly valuable resources for charting the growth of this devotional movement over the past century, and for understanding the reasons behind Shirdi Sai Baba's appeal to his newfound devotees.²³ Together, these devotional materials reiterate a common message central to this movement's growth: Shirdi Sai Baba is an active presence working to bring peace to his individual devotees and to the nation of India and beyond through his composite vision of spiritual unity in diversity.

Hagiographies and Testimonial Memoirs

Perhaps the most authoritative source on Shirdi Sai Baba's life for his devotees is the *Shri Sai Satcharita*, a hagiography composed in Marathi by one of his early followers, "Hemadpant" Govind R. Dabholkar (1859–1929). Dabholkar came from a Hindu Brahmin family in Thane District, Maharashtra, and worked as a Resident Magistrate in Bandra (now a suburb of Mumbai). He records in the *Shri Sai Satcharita* how he first met Sai Baba in 1910. At the repeated behest of his friends,²⁴ Dabholkar finally agreed to visit Shirdi. He confesses that the recent death of a dear friend's only son had him pondering dejectedly the uselessness of holy men in the face of karmic destiny, asking, "Why go to Shirdi at all?" and "What can a guru do before destiny?"²⁵ However, upon arriving in Shirdi Dabholkar immediately felt transformed: "As I alighted from the *tonga* [carriage], my heart was so full of eagerness for Baba's *darshan* [auspicious sight],

that I could hardly wait to fall at his feet! Waves of joy surged up in my heart!"²⁶ Dabholkar describes in detail the impact of his first vision of Shirdi Sai Baba, writing of it as the highlight of his life: "Never before had I heard of or seen Baba's comely figure. Seeing it now, my eyes were calmed; hunger, thirst, everything was forgotten; all senses stood still . . . Sai's kindly glance destroyed the sins accumulated over past births and gave rise to the hope that his holy feet will bring me eternal joy."²⁷

In 1916, after spending several years in the company of Sai Baba and his close circle of followers whenever his work schedule permitted, Dabholkar retired from government service and asked Sai Baba for permission to write his biography. Sai Baba consented to this request, announcing to Dabholkar and the others present:

Make a collection of all the authentic stories, experiences, conversations and talks, etc. It is better to keep a record. He has my full support. He is but the instrument; I myself will write my own story . . . Listening to my stories, narrating them to others in a *kirtan* [chanted verses of praise], contemplating on them will propagate love and devotion for me, which will destroy ignorance, instantly. Wherever there is faith and devotion together, I remain enslaved forever.²⁸

This passage begins to suggest the significance of the *Shri Sai Satcharita* for devotees of Shirdi Sai Baba, for whom the words in this book are no mere recollection of Sai Baba's lessons and deeds as scribed by one of his early followers; instead they are the words of Sai Baba, written by Sai Baba himself after his death in 1918 through the medium of a chosen devotee. Furthermore, the stories are a primary form of devotional expression for Sai Baba's followers, who are instructed to read or listen and share them with others. Finally, in reading or listening, devotees continue to interact with Shirdi Sai Baba, who remains accessible—even enslaved—to them despite the fact that he is no longer embodied in human form.

The *Shri Sai Satcharita* comprises fifty-three chapters and contains within it Dabholkar's account of his own interactions with Sai Baba in Shirdi; a biographical account of Sai Baba's lifetime, focusing on his time in Shirdi; philosophical discussions of the nature of Sai Baba, his mission on Earth, and the greatness of the guru; ritual discussions of the importance of *darshan* and *udi* (sacred ash); spontaneous expositions given by Sai Baba on sacred scripture such as the Bhagavad Gita and the Isha Upanishad; stories of Sai Baba's many *leelas* (miraculous acts); and stories of the conversion experiences of many fellow devotees in Dabholkar's circle.

A recurring lesson encountered in these stories is Shirdi Sai Baba's all-pervasiveness and accessibility. One example is found in the story of

Balaram Mankar, a widower who went to Shirdi and became one of Sai Baba's followers. One day Sai Baba commanded Mankar to leave Shirdi and travel to Machchindergad to undertake meditative austerities. Mankar despaired of leaving Sai Baba and asked him, "What will I do there—where I cannot even have your *darshan*?" But he was a devout follower, so he bowed at Sai Baba's feet and left. Upon reaching Machchindergad, he promptly sat down to meditate. Suddenly, he experienced the *darshan* of Sai Baba. Dabholkar writes that this experience of meditative *darshan* was so strong that Mankar was able not only to see and be seen by Sai Baba, but also to communicate with him. Mankar asked why Sai Baba had sent him there, to which Sai Baba replied:

While in Shirdi, many notions, many doubts assailed your mind . . . For you I did not exist outside Shirdi and apart from this abode [i.e. body], three-and-a-half cubits in length, which is made up of layer upon layer of a mixture of the five elements, like the earth, water, etc. But I, whom you see here and now, am the same as the one there."²⁹

The lesson to be learned from this story is that Shirdi Sai Baba is not limited to a single place or time; he is all-pervasive, and with the proper devotional mindset he is accessible to his followers anytime, anywhere.

Marianne Warren has pointed out the Hindu gloss Dabholkar gives to Shirdi Sai Baba when seeking to explain his all-pervasiveness in the *Shri Sai Satcharita*, noting that Dabholkar was largely unfamiliar with Islam and Sufism, and therefore was "inspired merely to record what he saw, and when he did not understand the enigmatic mystic, he would rationalize sayings and events in conformity with his own religious background."³⁰ In the seventh chapter entitled "What was Sai Baba?" we can see Dabholkar struggling to understand Shirdi Sai Baba's religious identity:

If considered a Hindu, he looked like a Muslim; and if a Muslim, he exhibited all the qualities of a good Hindu. Who, even with all his proficiency and learning, can describe such an extraordinary *Avatar*? No one could trace in the least, whether he was a Hindu or Muslim, for his conduct towards both these was always the same . . . If a Muslim, his ears were pierced; but if a Hindu, his circumcision proved it to be otherwise. Neither a Hindu nor a Muslim—such was this Sai, the very incarnation of sanctity. If he is called a Hindu, he always lived in the mosque, and if he is called a Muslim, the fire burns day and night in the mosque.³¹

Here, in his reference to Shirdi Sai Baba as an *avatar* or incarnation of God on Earth, we can witness Dabholkar processing Shirdi Sai Baba

through his own Hindu filter, for Hindu theology, unlike Islamic theology, accepts that God descends to Earth in human incarnations at different historical moments. Yet, despite his usage of Hindu terminology, we see that Dabholkar nonetheless maintains that Shirdi Sai Baba is “neither a Hindu nor a Muslim,” but both.

Throughout the *Shri Sai Satcharita* this lesson of Shirdi Sai Baba’s composite identity is paired with the lesson of his all-pervasiveness and accessibility. It is this, in addition to Sai Baba’s efficacious miracles, that is central to the appeal of this figure to Dabholkar, for whom Sai Baba is available to help any and all attain spiritual peace and communal unity. He praises Shirdi Sai Baba in this chapter in particular for treating equally all who came to see him, whether Hindu or Muslim, high caste or low; for conjoining Hindu and Muslim festivals to resolve a dispute between the two religious communities in Shirdi; and for generally transcending sectarian differences during a time when the nation needed to unite in the effort to obtain home rule from the colonial power.

Several other contemporary devotees also wrote memoirs of their experiences with Shirdi Sai Baba during his final years, including G. S. Khaparde, Das Ganu, and Abdul Baba.³² The memoir of Abdul Baba, a Muslim who spent many years in Shirdi with Sai Baba and tended his tomb after his death, is significant as a counterpoint to Dabholkar’s work, for in it he describes Sai Baba not as an *avatar*, but as a Sufi master or *murshid*. Yet, despite his usage of Muslim terminology in his own effort to come to terms with Shirdi Sai Baba, we see that he, like Dabholkar, maintains that Shirdi Sai Baba is both Hindu and Muslim: “Sai Baba embodies the Vedas, as also Allah. We give Sai Baba all honours respectfully saluting and bowing before him. Sai Baba operates on two planes, in Shirdi and all over the world. Sai Baba is Supreme in both the present world and the next. The whole universe is vibrant with Sai Baba.”³³ Like Dabholkar, Abdul Baba was drawn to Shirdi Sai Baba’s composite nature and his all-pervasiveness.

By the time of his death in 1918, Shirdi Sai Baba’s name was known throughout Ahmednagar District, Maharashtra, and had been carried by devotees to the cities of Bombay and Pune and several surrounding districts. His devotees were predominantly Hindu, but visitors to Shirdi in his final years continued to include Muslims as well as several Christians and Parsis. After his death, these devotees continued to share the *Shri Sai Satcharita* and other devotional memoirs of Shirdi Sai Baba with each new generation.

Throughout the twentieth century, Shirdi Sai Baba devotion remained essentially a regional movement based in Maharashtra and south-central India. But during the past several decades—at the same time that Hindu nationalism has gained a widespread foothold

among the middle classes—there has been a significant rise in Shirdi Sai Baba devotion throughout urban India, accompanied by a substantial body of testimonial memoir literature produced by these newfound devotees, who are drawn to Shirdi Sai Baba's composite nature and who seek to testify to his all-pervasiveness and continued accessibility beyond the grave by sharing their personal experiences with him.³⁴

C. B. Satpathy, who was raised in a Hindu family and is a retired police officer in New Delhi, has written of his calling to Shirdi Sai Baba in his 2001 testimonial memoir, *Shirdi Sai Baba and Other Perfect Masters*. Like Dabholkar before him, Satpathy describes in detail his initial skepticism in undertaking his first trip to Shirdi in the mid-1980s, as well as the great impact his vision of Sai Baba there had upon him. Satpathy similarly describes this moment as the highlight of his life, explaining that this *darshan* experience allowed him to begin developing "Sai consciousness," by realizing that he is intimately intertwined with the all-pervasive Shirdi Sai Baba:

One look at His face filled me with a strange joy I had never known before. His face was so sublime and so familiar, as if an old memory of a childhood friend had suddenly come back to life. I hurtled back some seventy-two years in time. I was back to the Shirdi Baba's days. He was the same and very much there. Divine glory poured forth from His face, from every pore of His body. He appeared to gaze at me. There was a hint of a smile at the corner of His lips. What is happening to you, I asked myself? The inner voice echoed—this is the moment for which you have been waiting since your birth. A strange sense of separation and also reunion swept over me like giant tidal waves in succession. Everything felt so divine.³⁵

For Satpathy, this experience of Shirdi Sai Baba's presence was life-changing. While in Shirdi, he accepted Sai Baba as his *sadguru* and undertook a vow to serve him by having 108 Shirdi Sai Baba temples built throughout India to spread this devotional movement. He established one of the most prominent organizations currently working to spread Shirdi Sai Baba's message, the Shri Shirdi Sai Heritage Foundation Trust in New Delhi. When the 108th temple was completed, Satpathy decided that although he had fulfilled his vow he still had much work to do. Today, through the Trust, he has built more than 200 temples throughout India and has been instrumental in the recent globalization of the Shirdi Sai Baba devotional movement, with the completion of temples in Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia, Singapore and North America.³⁶

Aside from the intimate, personal connection Satpathy felt with Sai Baba upon visiting Shirdi, he was also drawn to Shirdi Sai Baba's composite identity and teachings. Satpathy understands Shirdi Sai

Baba as the latest in a long line of enlightened teachers from across the world's religions:

Even in ancient times the *Sadgurus* came on this earth as the Hindu *rishis* [sages] like Kapila, Vasistha, Suka, Vishwamitra, Bharadwaj and Dattatreya. In other countries they came as Hermes, Enoch, Orpheus and others. They reincarnated as Abraham, Zoroaster, Moses, Buddha, Christ, Prophet Mohammad, Adi Shankara and many others in different countries and at different times.³⁷

Thus, according to Satpathy, Shirdi Sai Baba devotion cannot be classified as either Hindu or Muslim. Like many devotees, he prefers to speak of this devotional movement as a spiritual movement rather than a religious movement; he believes that religious traditions are too often exclusive and divisive, while spiritual movements are all-inclusive and unifying. Whereas religious traditions are a source of conflict throughout the world, Satpathy views the Shirdi Sai Baba spiritual movement as the solution for the problems of the twenty-first century:

Today, when India and the whole world is torn asunder with religious conflicts, communal strife and armed clashes, the stream of compassion of the great humanist Shri Sai is yet flowing unabatedly . . . The growing multitude of Sai devotees signals that the historic Sai movement would establish in the coming century, "peace and amity" in India and abroad. Shri Sai is the incarnation of the age and therefore faith in Him is bound to spread with far-reaching consequences in the future. Only time will prove this.³⁸

Photographs and Posters

In addition to the *Shri Sai Satcharita* and other devotional texts, another authoritative source on Shirdi Sai Baba's life for devotees is the handful of photographs taken during his lifetime.³⁹ These photographs are significant for several reasons. First, for devotees living after 1918, they stand as historical proof that Shirdi Sai Baba lived recently in his embodied form. Discussing another nineteenth-century Indian holy man, Ramakrishna Paramahansa (1836–1886), Gwilym Beckerlegge writes that photographs of such historical figures have "generated in some devotees a greater confidence in the historicity of their own tradition," because the "details of the lives and teachings of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century Hindu religious personalities have been anchored in time and space in a way in which, say, the deeds of Ganesha and even Krishna have not."⁴⁰ Some Shirdi Sai Baba devotees question the factuality of centuries-old religious scriptures, but take comfort in the *Shri Sai Satcharita* because they have visual evidence of

Sai Baba's existence. Other devotees feel that Shirdi Sai Baba, as a modern Indian whose presence has been captured by modern technology, will better understand their current trials and tribulations, because he lived more recently than the incarnate gods or prophets of long ago.

Second, these photographs make it possible for devotees to interact ritually with Shirdi Sai Baba. Photographs of him looking directly into the camera allow for an exchange of glances to take place, wherein the devotee gazes at Shirdi Sai Baba and he in turn gazes back. This visual exchange, *darshan*, is central to Hindu ritual practice, for through it Hindus convey their devotion to the god, who is understood to be present in the image, and in turn they receive the god's blessing.⁴¹ This overlaps with the Sufi *baraka*, the "blessing power," believed to emanate from a Sufi saint's tomb or image.⁴² Thus, given Shirdi Sai Baba's lesson that he is all-pervasive and ever-accessible to all of his devotees having the proper devotional mindset, such images are ritually significant, not only to those from a Hindu background but also to some from Islamic and other religious backgrounds.

Finally, these photographs serve as the inspiration behind popular images of Shirdi Sai Baba that are now ubiquitous in every Indian city: stickers depicting his face adhere to taxis and rickshaws; posters of him are worshiped in home altars and at modest street shrines; and large temples featuring expensive paintings and statues of Sai Baba have been built recently or are under construction. These images testify to his transformation from a little-known regional figure into a highly revered persona of pan-Indian significance. These devotional prints provide another valuable resource, in addition to devotional texts, for charting the growth of this devotional movement and for understanding the significance of Shirdi Sai Baba's composite nature to his new-found devotees.

In his study of Ramakrishna, Beckerlegge points out that posters and other devotional images are largely dependent upon three of the five extant photographs taken during his lifetime, resulting in the usage of widely recognized stock poses in the depiction of this figure. Like Ramakrishna, popular devotional images of Shirdi Sai Baba are largely dependent upon photographs. This poster [Figure 2], for instance, is widely reprinted and can be found in home shrines and street temples throughout India. It is a simple close-up image of Shirdi Sai Baba gazing out at the viewer while wearing a headwrap alternately colored red, pink, saffron, green or white, depending upon the publisher's whim or clientele base. The line of his beard, the ear sticking out from under the headscarf, the lines around his eyes—all are realistic details modeled on the photograph. Here the eyes occupy the center of the image, drawing the viewer's focus in for a visual exchange of glances. In the top corners of the image are two Hindi words, *shraddha*



Figure 2. *Devotional poster of Shirdi Sai Baba modeled on a photograph. Poster purchased at and reprinted with the permission of Sharma Fine Arts, Mumbai.*

(faith) and *saburi* (patience), meant to remind devotees of the two qualities he sought in them. Without the addition of any narrative details of Shirdi Sai Baba's life, or any didactic text or visual symbols, this image stands apart from Figure 1, which was based on the same photograph, in its lack of an explicit message aside from the devotional call.

Like the devotional texts that circulate in this movement, devotional posters demonstrate that as a *sadguru*, Shirdi Sai Baba's life and teachings can mean many things to many people. To begin exploring the range of meanings, I want to compare and contrast two posters side-by-side. The first [Figure 3] presents Shirdi Sai Baba seated on a rock, his right leg crossed over his left knee and his right hand raised in blessing. As in the other posters, he is presented frontally and gazing directly at the viewer, modeled upon the earlier headshot photograph of him, but with the addition of a halo encircling his head. His begging cup sits at his feet, and he wears a simple robe and headwrap, both the saffron color worn by Hindu holy men. A pastoral background unfolds behind him: stars shine in the evening sky, a calm river glides by forested plains, and a Hindu temple sits on the opposite riverbank. The second poster [Figure 4] presents Shirdi Sai Baba standing, his

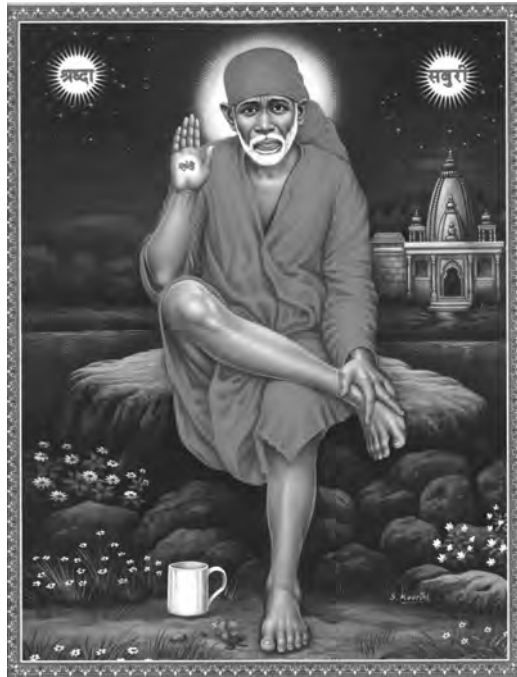


Figure 3. *Shirdi Sai Baba as a Hindu holy man. Poster purchased at and reprinted with the permission of Sharma Fine Arts, Mumbai.*

right hand raised with his index finger pointing towards the heavens. Again, he is presented frontally gazing directly at the viewer, again with the addition of a halo encircling his head. He is dressed simply, but here his robe, headwrap and shawl are the green and white colors worn by Muslim holy men. Again, a pastoral scene unfolds behind him: the sky is clear blue and the trees are flowering, a lotus-filled river flows down from the mountain range looming in the background, cattle graze upon the grass, and a mosque sits on the opposite riverbank.

These posters point towards the possibility for two very different understandings of Shirdi Sai Baba, as a Hindu holy man (*avatar* or *sadhu*) or Muslim holy man (*murshid* or *fakir*). Figure 3 and variations of it, including posters that depict the gods Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva in the heavens smiling down at Sai Baba, or Dattatreya in the background behind him, are typically used by devotees from a Hindu background, while Figure 4 and variations of it are typically used by devotees from a Muslim background. But when paired side-by-side, these posters point toward yet another possible understanding of Shirdi Sai Baba—that he is Muslim by day and Hindu by night; Muslim when dressed in green and Hindu when dressed in saffron; Muslim



Figure 4. *Shirdi Sai Baba as a Muslim holy man. Poster purchased at and reprinted with the permission of Sharma Fine Arts, Mumbai.*

when standing and Hindu when seated; Muslim when in the mountains and Hindu when on the plains; Muslim when at a mosque and Hindu when at a temple. Taken together, these posters point toward the reconciliation of opposites in a syncretic understanding of Shirdi Sai Baba as neither Hindu nor Muslim, but both.

Reflecting this composite understanding of Shirdi Sai Baba as a *sadguru* is a phrase regularly cited by devotees and printed on numerous devotional posters: *Sabka Malik Ek*, or “Everyone’s Lord is One.” One such popular poster depicts him seated, wearing a white robe, gazing out at the viewer. Above him are four religious symbols: Muslim crescent moon, Hindu Om, Sikh Ik-Onkar, and Christian cross. Behind Sai Baba’s glowing halo is a large hand, with the index finger pointing upwards to the heavens. Beneath Sai Baba, in bold Devanagari print, the phrase *Sabka Malik Ek* brings the message home: “Everyone’s Lord is One.” All paths lead to the One God.

In other posters this message is combined with a list of the “Eleven Sayings” or assurances Shirdi Sai Baba is said to have made to his devotees [Figure 5]. In this image, the phrase *Sabka Malik Ek* is printed at the top center. Under it, Shirdi Sai Baba occupies half the space, standing on



Figure 5. *Shirdi Sai Baba’s Eleven Sayings.* Poster purchased at and reprinted with the permission of Sharma Fine Arts, Mumbai.

the left side with his index finger pointing to the heavens and his eyes gazing out at the viewer. Occupying the right half are the “Eleven Sayings” stressing that Shirdi Sai Baba remains “ever active and vigorous” in his afterlife, and reinforcing the belief that he continues to guide all devotees who approach him with true love and devotion to God, no matter their particular religious upbringing.⁴³

Other posters present Shirdi Sai Baba as a syncretic figure in a different manner, by suggesting he has transcended religious boundaries altogether [Figure 6]. Here, in a poster based on another extant photograph, Shirdi Sai Baba is seated comfortably on the ground with his right leg folded up, his right arm resting atop his knee, and his right hand raised in a gesture of blessing as he gazes directly at the viewer. He wears a tattered robe and a headwrap and, significantly, he is dressed in white. This sartorial color-coding marks him as neither specifically Hindu (saffron) nor Muslim (green). This devotional poster also lacks other religious symbols—there is no Om, no Ik-Onkar, no crescent moon, no cross. Shirdi Sai Baba is presented once again in a pastoral scene, as in Figures 3 and 4, but here there is neither temple nor mosque. Smriti Srinivas has described this type of devotional image of Sai Baba as a “mobile signifier of holiness,” which is not grounded in a particular locality or history, in



Figure 6. *Shirdi Sai Baba as neither a Hindu nor a Muslim. Poster purchased at and reprinted with the permission of Sharma Fine Arts, Mumbai.*

contrast to images that document Sai Baba's historical presence in specific places and times.⁴⁴ I would add that devotional images of this type also are not grounded in a particular religious tradition, which makes them appealing to devotees who interpret Shirdi Sai Baba as a spiritual figure who is beyond religious boundaries.

A final type of devotional poster I will consider here is a montage depicting five images of Shirdi Sai Baba, some based on photos taken during his lifetime, and others based on the *murtis* (statues) that are the focus of ritual worship by pilgrims in Shirdi [Figure 7]. Images featuring these *murtis* are often purchased as souvenirs for use on home altars after returning from pilgrimage, or as gifts for family and friends unable to make the pilgrimage. But posters like this one featuring multiple Sai Babas within one devotional image can work also to remind devotees of the simultaneous multiplicity and singularity of Shirdi Sai Baba, by suggesting that he is both in Shirdi and elsewhere, both on Earth and in the heavens, both an embodied human being and an all-pervasive disembodied presence. In this way, they present a possible reading of Shirdi Sai Baba as neither Hindu nor Muslim, by pointing toward a monistic interpretation of him as the all-pervasive essence



Figure 7. *Montage of Shirdi Sai Baba images. Poster purchased at and reprinted with the permission of Sharma Fine Arts, Mumbai.*

of the universe and everything within it. Devotees familiar with the *Shri Sai Satcharita* may call to mind such statements as, “The mystical symbol ‘OM’ is expressive of me, and I alone, am the subject of that expression! Many are the things in this manifested Universe. But even these are all filled with me. Thus, where there is nothing different from the Self, what can one desire? I alone, pervade all the places in all the ten quarters of the Universe.”⁴⁵

Also relevant here is Abdul Baba’s statement, “Sai Baba operates on two planes, in Shirdi and all over the world. Sai Baba is Supreme in both the present world and the next. The whole universe is vibrant with Sai Baba.”⁴⁶ In this understanding, it is insignificant whether one is Hindu or Muslim, for the monistic stance insists that such distinctions are ultimately illusory: “To one, who sees only the Divine Spirit in the perceiver, the object of perception and the act of perceiving, all are equal—a Brahmin [Hindu] or a Pathan [Muslim], or anyone else.”⁴⁷

Oral Histories of Devotees

The final type of devotional material examined here is the collection of statements made by devotees during my interviews with them

about what Shirdi Sai Baba means to them and why they were drawn to this movement. Like the devotional texts and images, these conversations confirm that the meaning of Shirdi Sai Baba as a *sadguru* is interpreted with considerable flexibility.

I encountered many devotees from a Hindu background who described Shirdi Sai Baba as an incarnation of one of the Hindu gods—some held him to be an *avatar* of Shiva, some of Vishnu, and some of Dattatreya. As an elderly caretaker of a small street shrine in central Mumbai explained to me:

Baba is the incarnation of Dattatreya. You see, Dattatreya was born long ago as the combined incarnation of Brahma the creator, Vishnu the preserver, and Shiva the destroyer to fulfill some vow and make things right. Always when an incarnation happens it is because the God is needed here on Earth, because things are in very bad shape.⁴⁸

Similarly, I encountered a number of devotees with Muslim backgrounds who described Shirdi Sai Baba as a *fakir*. In the Dharavi settlement in Mumbai, one young Muslim man at a small shrine explained Sai Baba to me this way: “He is just like the Prophet was. He taught that Allah is One, he taught that we are all children of Allah, he was kind and fed the poor whatever food he had. He knows our struggles. Sometimes I think that he must be the Prophet Muhammad reborn for us now, here.”⁴⁹

Finally, a Sikh woman at a Shirdi Sai Baba temple in New Delhi explained that she understood Sai Baba in light of Sikh teachings about the guru as someone who shows the pathway to God.

Baba is the guru, who leads us to God. Each person will understand him a little differently, because each person is unique, each person comes from a different background. But he leads us to the same Truth, the same God. I personally believe he is the reincarnation of Kabir. When you read the *Shri Sai Satcharita*, you will see, there are so many similarities between Kabir’s verses and Baba’s.⁵⁰

Here she refers to Kabir, the fifteenth-century mystic-poet regarded as a saint by Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs, and who composed devotional songs to the unmanifest (*nirguna*) god whom he called both Ram (after the Hindu god Rama) and Rahim (one of the 99 Muslim names for Allah).⁵¹

This lack of consistency in interpreting the *sadguru* concept with regard to Shirdi Sai Baba could be a source of tension within this movement, and indeed tensions have flared occasionally, as when the community of devotees in Shirdi had to decide what to do with Sai Baba’s body upon his death, or over the initial decision to install a white marble statue of Sai Baba at Shirdi.⁵² Yet, the lack of consistency is a source of

tremendous appeal to many who are drawn to this movement, such as the Sikh woman described above, because they can interpret Sai Baba from within the familiar categories of their own religious tradition, even while recognizing that other religious traditions provide equally worthy doors into the ultimate reality, and that Sai Baba is available to all to help open those doors.

Thus my conversations with devotees confirm another theme found in devotional texts and images: Shirdi Sai Baba's composite identity is one of the most important reasons for the appeal of this movement to his newfound devotees. An example of this can be seen in the statement made by one devotee in Bangalore about why she began to make regular visits to a Shirdi Sai Baba temple. She explained the emotional connection she feels to Shirdi Sai Baba, commenting that images of him serve to remind her that he is still present and emotionally available to his devotees, although he is no longer in bodily form:

Sai Baba calms me when I am feeling some fear, or some anxiety. If I am worrying about some problem or difficulty, then he comes to me. He calms me that way. I will see him always when I am anxious. I may be riding in an autorickshaw, and he will suddenly appear on some sign, or on another rickshaw, with a saying under him like, "Don't worry, be happy," or "No fear, I'm here."⁵³

She felt that because Shirdi Sai Baba had lived so recently he could understand her human travails better than the Hindu god she was raised with.

Shiva is my god, but Sai Baba is my guru. That means he is the one I can talk to about anything . . . He can understand human problems better than Shiva because he was flesh and blood, he lived recently. So he knows human problems, he can understand. Shiva is above many of these regular problems. But I can see Shiva in Baba's eyes, when I look closely. There is a connection there. Through the guru I can reach Shiva, too.⁵⁴

She pointed to Shirdi Sai Baba's message of tolerance and love as another reason for her devotion:

Sai Baba taught tolerance, so he is very good that way, too. His message is needed now. We have lost that tolerance. You know about the blasts here? He grew up a Muslim, but he studied Hinduism, too, and he taught both. He reaches out to Hindus and Muslims; he teaches them tolerance of one another, service of one another, love of one another.⁵⁵

Our conversation took place in early August 2008 as we visited a Shirdi Sai Baba temple in Bangalore, just a couple of weeks after the

25 July serial bombing of the city. No one claimed responsibility for the seven bombs, but India's home ministry suspected an Islamic terrorist group. In this atmosphere of heightened fear and communal suspicion, this message of loving service and unity took on a renewed urgency for many devotees.

C. B. Satpathy, mentioned above as the founder of the Shri Shirdi Sai Heritage Foundation Trust, stated during my conversation with him at a temple built by his organization in 2002 in Gurgaon, Haryana, that he first felt an overwhelming emotional connection to Sai Baba while on pilgrimage in Shirdi. He wanted to make this experience available to as many people as possible, and therefore designed the Gurgaon temple as a replica of Shirdi for residents of Gurgaon. The main building is a replica of Dwarkamai, the mosque in Shirdi where Sai Baba lived. Next to the mosque is a Hanuman (Maruti) temple, a replica of the temple dedicated to the Hindu monkey-god in Shirdi where Sai Baba is reported to have paused to honor Hanuman. Between these two buildings is a replica of the Chavadi, the small village office in Shirdi. At the Gurgaon temple the Chavadi is used to host eminent visitors, especially Satpathy during his regular visits. While I sat with him in the Chavadi, Satpathy explained that the very architecture of the temple reflected Shirdi Sai Baba's "spiritual message of love of all." On my request, he elaborated:

Religion divides, but spirituality is universal. This is why Baba doesn't care what your religion is—he doesn't care if you are Hindu or Muslim, Sikh or Christian. He cares what is in your heart. Many Hindus come to Sai Baba, but anyone can come to this temple. You have already met Hindu and Sikh people here today. Muslims and Christians also come. This is because this temple is not about Hinduism, not about any religion. It is about spirituality. It is about love of God and service to humans—not even service just to humans, love and service to the world. Baba's message is love. Love of God, love of self, love of neighbor. In this time, we need this message. There are many difficulties here today because of religion. Not just here, in the whole world, in the U.S., too. But spirituality is above all of this, beyond all of this.⁵⁶

Throughout my field research in urban India, devotees repeatedly cited this message of loving service and unity as one of the most important reasons they were drawn to Shirdi Sai Baba, highlighting it as a way of combating religious violence in India and even around the world.

Another devotee, who in 2001 founded a non-profit organization that provides free health services to the poor and needy in New Delhi and Gurgaon, spoke to me about Shirdi Sai Baba in late September, less than two weeks after the 13 September 2008 serial bombings in New Delhi.

Sai Baba's basic teaching is *shraddha* and *saburi*—faith and tolerance . . . Have faith in Sai Baba, and develop tolerance for everyone. This means, tolerance means good works. Because of the *sadguru*, we are tolerant and we do good works. Even in spite of all of these disturbances, these bombs, we are tolerant. Maybe we shouldn't be so tolerant, but we are.⁵⁷

This interview took place in English, and it is significant that this devotee, like many others in this movement, translated the word *saburi* as “tolerance,” instead of more literally as “patience.” Her final sentence suggests the difficulty entailed in practicing what Shirdi Sai Baba preached. In a world fractured by communal bloodshed it is not easy to unite with love for all. But as these statements demonstrate, Sai Baba's message, as many of his devotees understand it, is not just that one should cultivate faith and patience or tolerance as an inner spiritual discipline, but that one has a duty to express love of all in the form of virtuous works (*seva*), in the effort to unify one's neighborhood, state and nation. This is the message proclaimed in the “Be United, Be Virtuous” poster above [Figure 1], in which the viewer encounters not an angry and exercised Hindu deity urging all Hindus to fight for a Hindu nation, but a decidedly un-muscular and calm Shirdi Sai Baba calling all Indians to join him peacefully in his composite vision of India. This message is now being spread throughout India and abroad through a range of new media, including comic books, magazines, television shows, films and the Internet.⁵⁸

CONCLUSION: BE UNITED, BE VIRTUOUS

Antonio Rigopoulos and Marianne Warren, the two scholars who have studied in detail the life of Shirdi Sai Baba, have lamented the increasing “Hinduization” of this syncretic figure since the latter years of his life, as can be seen in Hindu rituals commonly used to worship him, Hindu architectural elements used in new construction at Shirdi and other Sai Baba temple sites, Hindu symbols used in pictures of him, and Hindu terminology used to describe him. Warren writes:

In the eighty or so years since the death of Sai Baba, he has been slowly transformed from that of an obscure ascetic Muslim *faqir* into that of a popular Hindu saint worshipped with full traditional pomp, grandeur, rituals, *abhisekam*, garlands, *puja* and *arati*, in a manner usually reserved for Hindu deities. In fact many regard Sai Baba as the very incarnation of Divinity, and popular poster paintings of Sai Baba reflect this.⁵⁹

The vast majority of Shirdi Sai Baba's devotees do come from Hindu backgrounds, and frequently do interpret his life and teachings through a Hindu lens and express their devotion through Hindu ritual behavior.

However, a great many of these same devotees do not describe the Shirdi Sai Baba movement as Hindu. Indeed, they are drawn to Shirdi Sai Baba precisely because of his composite life and teachings, which they view as a powerful spiritual counterpoint to Hindu nationalism and other forms of religious fundamentalism.

Describing Hinduism in practice in urban India, Nancy Falk writes that there is a “massive Hindu revival in today’s India.” She classifies this revival into two broad categories: the “cluster of movements promoting Hindu nationalist sentiments,” and the “spate of new ‘spiritual’ movements” emphasizing self-transformation, service to others and the need to work for the good of all.⁶⁰ Scholars of modern Hindu movements and visual culture have paid serious attention to the former category, but the latter has received far less attention.

This article is one attempt to redress this imbalance through a study of the Shirdi Sai Baba devotional movement. Faith, tolerance, patience, love, service, unity and virtue are recurring themes in the movement’s texts, images, and statements of devotees. Its rapid growth throughout India and beyond over the past several decades testifies to the appeal of these themes to Hindus, as well as Muslims, Sikhs, Christians and others who join it. For these individuals, Shirdi Sai Baba is an accessible and all-pervasive presence, who provides recourse against religious sectarianism by guiding his followers actively toward a composite vision of spiritual unity in diversity.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Charles S. J. White, “The Sai Baba Movement: Approaches to the Study of Indian Saints,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 31, no. 4 (1972): 868.

² In my field research in Mumbai, New Delhi, Bangalore and Jaipur, I have photodocumented several neighborhoods to note the growth of Shirdi Sai Baba shrines and temples during the past decade. I have examined archives

of god posters to track the rise in the production of devotional images of Shirdi Sai Baba. I have examined the official *Maharashtra State Gazetteer: Ahmadnagar District* (Bombay: Gazetteers Department, Government of Maharashtra, 1976), which confirms the rising numbers of pilgrims to Shirdi in the 1960s and 1970s, noting: "During the last about quarter of a century Shirdi has become a place of pilgrimage, and Saibaba has become a favourite deity of millions in Maharashtra" (no page number). I have spoken with pilgrimage officials in Shirdi, and I have observed that pilgrims to Shirdi come from locations throughout India extending far beyond Maharashtra, with an increasing number traveling from abroad as well. However, further studies of the life and teachings of Shirdi Sai Baba and of this growing devotional movement are needed.

³ The pdf file for this article, with the devotional images in color, is available in the *Nova Religio* archive accessed through the link "Online Access" at <<http://www.novareligio.org/>> for vol. 15, no. 2 (November 2011). As a service to instructors, a pdf file containing color prints of the Shirdi Sai Baba god posters is available at no charge on the *Nova Religio* website under the link entitled "Photo Gallery."

⁴ Marianne Warren, *Unravelling the Enigma: Shirdi Sai Baba in the Light of Sufism* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 2004), 28–29.

Sathya Sai Baba (1926–2011) declared at a young age that he was the reincarnation of Shirdi Sai Baba, and he is venerated by millions of devotees throughout India and around the world. However, Antonio Rigopoulos writes, "the majority of Shirdi Sai Baba's *bhaktas* [devotees] have not shifted their devotion to the present Satya Sai. Many of them ignore him or are critical of him: when I was doing research at Shirdi, people preferred to avoid the issue altogether." See *The Life and Teachings of Sai Baba of Shirdi* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 249.

In my own field research, one Shirdi Sai Baba devotee politely deflected questions about Sathya Sai Baba by saying, "When you have the original, what need is there of a Xerox?" (Personal interview, New Delhi, 2008.) While all devotees were respectful of Sathya Sai Baba, polite variants on this statement were a common response to this line of questioning.

For studies of Sathya Sai Baba, see Lawrence A. Babb, *Redemptive Encounters: Three Modern Styles in the Hindu Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 159–201; Norris W. Palmer, "Baba's World: A Global Guru and His Movement," in *Gurus in America*, ed. Thomas A. Forsthoefel and Cynthia Ann Humes (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 97–122; Smriti Srinivas, *In the Presence of Sai Baba: Body, City, and Memory in a Global Religious Movement* (Leiden: Brill, 2008); and Tulasi Srinivas, *Winged Faith: Rethinking Globalization and Religious Pluralism through the Sathya Sai Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

⁵ Examples include the anti-Sikh riots in Delhi (1984), destruction of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya (1992), Bombay bombings (1993), Godhra train burning and ensuing Gujarat riots (2002), rising anti-Christian attacks since the late 1990s, and bombings in multiple cities in the past six years, including Ahmedabad, Bangalore, Delhi, Hyderabad, Jaipur, Mumbai and Varanasi.

⁶ Javed Alam, "The Composite Culture and Its Historiography," *South Asia* 22 (1999): 29. For a history of the composite culture of India from 1200 to 1750 C.E.,

see Catherine B. Asher and Cynthia Talbot, *India before Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

⁷ Kathryn Hansen, "Staging Composite Culture: *Nautanki* and Parsi Theatre in Recent Revivals," *South Asia Research* 29, no. 2 (2009): 153.

⁸ V. D. Savarkar, *Hindutva: Who Is a Hindu?* (Bombay: Veer Savarkar Prakashan, 1923).

⁹ For studies of Hindu nationalism, see Thomas Blom Hansen, *The Saffron Wave: Democracy and Hindu Nationalism in Modern India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); Christophe Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); Christophe Jaffrelot, ed., *Hindu Nationalism: A Reader* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); David Ludden, *Making India Hindu: Religion, Community, and the Politics of Democracy in India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005); Lise McKean, *Divine Enterprise: Gurus and the Hindu Nationalist Movement* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); and Peter van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

¹⁰ Richard H. Davis, "The Iconography of Rama's Chariot," in *Contesting the Nation: Religion, Community, and the Politics of Democracy in India*, ed. David Ludden (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 42.

¹¹ van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism*, 1.

¹² For scholarship on the Babri Masjid-Ramjanmabhoomi controversy in Ayodhya, see Davis, "Iconography of Rama's Chariot," 27–54; Jaffrelot, *Hindu Nationalism*, 279–98; David Ludden, "Ayodhya: A Window on the World," in *Contesting the Nation: Religion, Community, and the Politics of Democracy in India*, ed. David Ludden (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 1–23; and van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism*. See McKean, *Divine Enterprise*, on several other tactics employed by the VHP and other Sangh Parivar groups to unify and mobilize a large voting bloc by drawing upon Hindu religious symbolism, including the 1983 sacrifice for unanimity (*ekatmata yajña*) and the construction of a temple to Mother India (Bharat Mata) in Hardwar.

¹³ On the devotional use of Hindu god posters, see Gwilym Beckerlegge, "Hindu Sacred Images for the Mass Market," in *From Sacred Text to Internet*, ed. Gwilym Beckerlegge (Farnham, U.K.: Ashgate, 2001), 57–116; Christopher Pinney, *Photos of the Gods: The Printed Image and Political Struggle in India* (London: Reaktion Books, 2004), 181–200; H. Daniel Smith, "Impact of 'God Posters' on Hindus and Their Devotional Traditions," in *Media and the Transformation of Religion in South Asia*, ed. Lawrence Babb and Susan Wadley (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 24–50; and Vassilis G. Vitsaxis, *Hindu Epics, Myths and Legends in Popular Illustrations* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1977).

Devotional posters are also used by other religious communities in India. On the Indian Muslim use of such prints see Yousuf Saeed, "Mecca versus the Local Shrine: The Dilemma of Orientation in the Popular Religious Art of Indian Muslims," in *India's Popular Culture: Iconic Spaces and Fluid Images*, ed. Jyotindra Jain (Mumbai: Marg Publications, 2007), 76–89. On Sikh images see W. H. McLeod, *Popular Sikh Art* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991); and Susan Prill, "Representing Sainthood in India: Sikh and Hindu Visions of Namdev," *Material Religion* 5, no. 2 (2009): 156–79.

¹⁴ Pinney, *Photos of the Gods*, 203.

¹⁵ Sumathi Ramaswamy, "Maps, Mother/Goddesses, and Martyrdom in Modern India," *Journal of Asian Studies* 67, no. 3 (2008): 821. Bhagat Singh (1907–1931) was a revolutionary hanged by the British; Mohandas K. Gandhi (1869–1948), a prominent figure in India's independence movement, was assassinated by Nathuram Godse (1910–1949); and Prime Minister Indira Gandhi (1917–1984) was assassinated. Also see Sumathi Ramaswamy, *The Goddess and the Nation: Mapping Mother India* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010).

¹⁶ Anuradha Kapur, "Deity to Crusader: The Changing Iconography of Ram," in *Hindus and Others: The Question of Identity in India Today*, ed. Gyanendra Pandey (New York: Viking, 1993), 104.

¹⁷ This image and variations of it have been widely analyzed and commented upon by scholars. Anuradha Kapur sees it as a symbol of an increasingly virile form of Hinduism associated with Hindu nationalism; see "Deity to Crusader," 74–109. Kajri Jain sees this shift in depictions of Rama as part of a larger cultural emphasis in the 1980s and 1990s on muscularity and masculinity in posters, films and other mass media; see *Gods in the Bazaar: The Economies of India Calendar Art* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2007), 315–53. Pinney argues in *Photos of the Gods*, that this virile or martial Hinduism is not new, but is part of an alternative visual history of India and its freedom struggle (204–10).

Other significant analyses of god posters and Hindu nationalism include Christiane Brosius, "I Am a National Artist: Popular Art in the Sphere of Hindutva," in *Picturing the Nation: Iconographies of Modern India*, ed. Richard H. Davis (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2007), 171–205; Lise McKean, "Bharat Mata: Mother India and Her Militant Matriots," in *Devi: Goddesses of India*, ed. John Stratton Hawley and Donna Wulff (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 250–80; Erwin Neumayer and Christine Schelberger, *Bharat Mata: India's Freedom Movement in Popular Art* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008); and Ramaswamy, "Maps, Mother/Goddesses, and Martyrdom in Modern India," 819–53.

¹⁸ Beckerlegge, "Hindu Sacred Images for the Mass Market," 109.

¹⁹ For a discussion of earlier god posters featuring the theme of "unity in diversity," see Patricia Uberoi, "'Unity in Diversity?' Dilemmas of Nationhood in Indian Calendar Art," *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 36, nos. 1 and 2 (2002): 191–232.

²⁰ W. J. T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

²¹ Rigopoulos discusses Shirdi Sai Baba's upbringing in the first chapter of *Life and Teachings of Sai Baba of Shirdi*, esp. 5–15, citing reports from various devotees present in Shirdi during Sai Baba's lifetime that Sai Baba was born to a Brahmin family in the village of Pathri in Aurangabad District, entrusted at an early age to a Sufi *fakir*, and ultimately studied with a Hindu guru before arriving in Shirdi. For a re-reading of these same sources to understand better Shirdi Sai Baba's Sufi heritage, see Warren, *Unravelling the Enigma*. Aside from the work of Rigopoulos and Warren, no further book-length academic studies of this figure have been undertaken. Academic essays on Shirdi Sai Baba and the Sai Baba movement more generally are also scarce, and include White, "The Sai Baba Movement"; and Smriti Srinivas, "The Brahmin and the Fakir: Suburban Religiosity in the Cult of Shirdi Sai Baba," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 14, no. 2 (1999): 245–61.

²² Aside from Shirdi Sai Baba's death in 1918, all dates associated with this figure are approximate, based on his followers' recollections of key events. There is no general consensus on the exact dates of much of the chronology. On the multiple accounts of Sai Baba's first arrival and later permanent settlement in Shirdi, see Rigopoulos, *Life and Teachings of Sai Baba of Shirdi*, 45–46. In this article I have used the dates given in Govind R. Dabholkar, *Shri Sai Satcharita: The Life and Teachings of Shirdi Sai Baba*, trans. Indira Kher (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 2007).

²³ An important resource on hagiography in the Indian context is Robin Rinehart, *One Lifetime, Many Lives: The Experience of Modern Hindu Hagiography* (Atlanta: Scholars Press for the American Academy of Religion, 1999).

²⁴ Nanasaheb Chandorkar and Kakasaheb Dikshit, both committed devotees of Sai Baba.

²⁵ Dabholkar, *Shri Sai Satcharita*, 26.

²⁶ Dabholkar, *Shri Sai Satcharita*, 27.

²⁷ Dabholkar, *Shri Sai Satcharita*, 28.

²⁸ Dabholkar, *Shri Sai Satcharita*, 23.

²⁹ Dabholkar, *Shri Sai Satcharita*, 508.

³⁰ Warren, *Unravelling the Enigma*, 5.

³¹ Dabholkar, *Shri Sai Satcharita*, 104–05.

³² G. S. Khaparde, *Shirdi Diary of the Hon'ble Mr. G. S. Khaparde* (Shirdi: Sri Sai Baba Sansthan, 1997); Das Ganu, *A Humble Tribute of Praise to Shri Sainath*, trans. Zarine Taraporevala (Bombay: Sai Dhun Enterprises, 1987). Abdul Baba's Urdu diary has been translated into English in Warren, *Unravelling the Enigma*, 275–309.

³³ Warren, *Unravelling the Enigma*, 288.

³⁴ A representative sample of such testimonial memoirs includes Acharya E. Bharadwaja, *Sai Baba the Master* (Ongole: Sree Guru Paduka Publications, 1993); M. V. Kamath and V. B. Kher, *Sai Baba of Shirdi: A Unique Saint* (Bombay: Jaico Publishing, 1991); Ramalingaswamy, *Ambrosia in Shirdi: A Book Never Before* (Shirdi: Ramalingaswamy, 1984); Mani Sahukar, *Sai Baba: The Saint of Shirdi* (Mumbai: Somaiya Publications, 1997); C. B. Satpathy, *Shirdi Sai Baba and Other Perfect Masters* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 2001); and K. Venkataraman, *Beyond Shirdi: Stories of the Living Presence of Sai Baba* (Mumbai: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 2004).

³⁵ Satpathy, *Shirdi Sai Baba and Other Perfect Masters*, 30–31.

³⁶ These include the North American Shirdi Sai Temple of Atlanta (2009); Shri Shirdi Sai Sansthan in Los Angeles (2009); Shri Shirdi Sai Temple in Detroit (2008); Shirdi Sai Temple of Chicago and Suburbs (2004); Sri Shirdi Sai Baba Temple of Dallas-Fort Worth (2004); Sri Sai Baba Mandir in Dublin, Ohio (2003); Sri Saibaba Mandir in Minneapolis (2002); and Shri Shirdi Saibaba Mandir of Toronto (2002).

³⁷ Satpathy, *Shirdi Sai Baba and Other Perfect Masters*, 11.

³⁸ Satpathy, *Shirdi Sai Baba and Other Perfect Masters*, 20.

³⁹ These photographs are now housed in the Dixit Wada Museum at the Shirdi pilgrimage complex run by the Shri Saibaba Sansthan Trust.

⁴⁰ Beckerlegge, “Hindu Sacred Images for the Mass Market,” 80.

⁴¹ On the general significance of *darshan* in Hinduism, see Diana Eck, *Darsan: Seeing the Divine Image in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

⁴² For an important study of *baraka* in the context of images of a Sufi saint in Senegal named Amadou Bamba, see Allen F. Roberts and Mary Nooter Roberts, *A Saint in the City: Sufi Arts of Urban Senegal* (Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 2003).

⁴³ During my field research I have encountered various lists of the “Eleven Sayings of Shirdi Sai Baba” at shrines and temples and printed on posters. One representative list is printed inside the front cover of each issue of the *Heritage of Shirdi Sai* magazine (New Delhi: Shri Shirdi Sai Heritage Foundation Trust): 1) Whoever puts his feet on Shirdi soil, his sufferings would come to an end. 2) The wretched and miserable would rise into plenty of joy and happiness as soon as they climb the steps of My Samadhi [tomb]. 3) I shall be ever active and vigorous even after leaving this earthly Body. 4) My tomb shall bless and speak to the needs of My devotees. 5) I shall be active and vigorous even from the tomb. 6) My mortal remains would speak from the tomb. 7) I am ever living to help and guide all who come to Me, who surrender to Me and who seek refuge in Me. 8) If you look to Me, I look to you. 9) If you cast your burden on Me, I shall surely bear it. 10) If you seek My advice and help, it shall be given to you at once. 11) There shall be no want in the house of My devotees.

⁴⁴ Srinivas, *In the Presence of Sai Baba*, 24–25.

⁴⁵ Dabholkar, *Shri Sai Satcharita*, 43.

⁴⁶ Warren, *Unravelling the Enigma*, 288.

⁴⁷ Dabholkar, *Shri Sai Satcharita*, 48.

⁴⁸ Personal interview, Mumbai, 2008.

⁴⁹ Personal interview, Mumbai, 2008.

⁵⁰ Personal interview, New Delhi, 2008.

⁵¹ On Kabir, see Robert Bly, trans., *Kabir: Ecstatic Poems* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2007).

⁵² Rigopoulos, *Life and Teachings of Sai Baba of Shirdi*, 241–42, discusses the “Hinduization” of Shirdi Sai Baba at the time of his death, noting that Muslims wanted to bury him on open land, while Hindus wanted to bury him within the temple built by Buti. Warren, *Unravelling the Enigma*, 340, discusses the “Hinduization” of ritual at Shirdi in the years following Sai Baba’s death, including the installation of the marble statue, after which “many Muslims at once stopped coming” to Shirdi.

⁵³ Personal interview, Bangalore, 2008. She is referring to Shirdi Sai Baba’s ubiquitous presence on stickers and paintings on vehicles, and on signs and posters on storefronts and along the roads in India.

⁵⁴ Personal interview, Bangalore, 2008.

⁵⁵ Personal interview, Bangalore, 2008.

⁵⁶ C. B. Satpathy, personal interview, Gurgaon 2008.

⁵⁷ Personal interview, New Delhi, 2008.

⁵⁸ Examples of such new media featuring Shirdi Sai Baba and his teachings include the “Tales of Sai Baba” comic book in the *Amar Chitra Katha* series

(Bombay: India Book House, 1980); the quarterly *Heritage of Shirdi Sai* magazine (New Delhi: Shri Shirdi Sai Heritage Foundation Trust); and the Hindi TV series, “Sai Baba” (directed by Ramanand Sagar, 2006). Hindi devotional films include “Shirdi ke Sai Baba” (directed by Ashok Bhushan, 1977); and “Shirdi Sai Baba” (directed by Deepak Balraj Vij, 2001). The popular Bollywood films, “Amar Akbar Anthony” (directed by Manmohan Desai, 1977), and “Mumbai Meri Jaan” (directed by Nishikanth Kamath, 2008) feature key scenes highlighting Shirdi Sai Baba as a figure who crosses seemingly rigid religious boundaries.

⁵⁹ Warren, *Unravelling the Enigma*, 338. Also see Rigopoulos, *Life and Teachings of Sai Baba of Shirdi*, 241–42.

⁶⁰ Nancy Auer Falk, *Living Hinduisms: An Explorer’s Guide* (Belmont, Calif.: Thomson Wadsworth, 2006), 236–37.