

Bucknell University

Bucknell Digital Commons

Faculty Journal Articles

Faculty Scholarship

8-2016

Shirdi Sai Baba as Guru and God: Narasimhaswami's Vision of the Samartha Sadguru

Karline McLain

Bucknell University, kmclain@bucknell.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.bucknell.edu/fac_journ



Part of the [Hindu Studies Commons](#), [Islamic Studies Commons](#), [New Religious Movements Commons](#), and the [South and Southeast Asian Languages and Societies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

McLain, Karline. "Shirdi Sai Baba as Guru and God: Narasimhaswami's Vision of the Samartha Sadguru." (2016) : 186-204.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Scholarship at Bucknell Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Journal Articles by an authorized administrator of Bucknell Digital Commons. For more information, please contact dcadmin@bucknell.edu.

Shirdi Sai Baba as Guru and God: Narasimhaswami's Vision of the Samartha Sadguru

Karline McLain*

Bucknell University

*Corresponding author: kmclain@bucknell.edu

Abstract: B. V. Narasimhaswami (1874–1956) never met Shirdi Sai Baba face to face, for he arrived in Shirdi eighteen years after Sai Baba's death in 1918. However, the overwhelming sense of loving union he experienced in Shirdi convinced him that Sai Baba was still accessible from beyond the grave. For the remaining years of his life he worked relentlessly to spread Sai Baba's name throughout India. This article examines the tension between inclusion and exclusion in Narasimhaswami's interpretation of Sai Baba. Narasimhaswami believed that Sai Baba was a divinized guru with two interconnected missions: The spiritual uplift of individuals and the temporal uplift of India. I argue that while Narasimhaswami's vision for independent India was broadly inclusive, seeking to bring together Hindus and Muslims, his advocacy of Hindu philosophy and ritual as the means for understanding and approaching Sai Baba promoted a divinization of this guru that has impacted his appeal to Hindus and non-Hindus in vastly different measures.

'I shall be ever active and vigorous, even after leaving this earthly body.' So proclaims one of the eleven Sayings attributed to Shirdi Sai Baba, an Indian holy man who died in 1918. Today, nearly a century since his passing, his activity and vigor can be seen in his ubiquitous presence in the public spaces of everyday life in India. Images of Sai Baba hang on the walls in cafes and other places of business; stickers depicting his face adhere to taxis and rickshaws with catchy slogans like 'Why Fear When I'm Here' and 'If You Look To Me, I Look To You'; street shrines to him have popped up in neighborhood after neighborhood throughout urban India; formal temples to him are being built in city after city; and he makes regular appearances in Indian television serials and films.

Despite his rampant presence throughout India today, scholarly literature on Shirdi Sai Baba is quite meager. Sai Baba has been discussed as the prior

incarnation of the Indian god-man Sathya Sai Baba (1926–2011) in recent books about Sathya Sai Baba by Srinivas (2010) and Srinivas (2008). However, while millions of devotees of Sathya Sai Baba do accept his declaration to be the incarnation of Shirdi Sai Baba, not all devotees of Shirdi Sai Baba accept this claim. Instead, for millions of devotees of Shirdi Sai Baba, he continues to be an active presence, even from beyond the grave. As one devotee politely stated to me in Shirdi, ‘When you have the original, what need is there of a Xerox?’¹ Shirdi Sai Baba has also been the focus of two book-length studies by Rigopoulos (1993) and Warren (2004). In these works, both authors seek to uncover Shirdi Sai Baba’s authentic identity and teachings. For Rigopoulos, Shirdi Sai Baba was a truly syncretic figure, one who was taught by both Hindu and Muslim gurus and whose lessons arise from both Hindu Vedanta and Islamic Sufi traditions. For Warren, Shirdi Sai Baba was a Sufi Muslim, whose life events can be seen as entailing the completion of four stages on the Sufi path. Both Rigopoulos and Warren agree upon—and lament over—what they perceive as an increasing trajectory of ‘Hinduization’ of Shirdi Sai Baba over the past century, which has resulted in a lack of understanding about his ‘true’ syncretic (Rigopoulos) or Muslim (Warren) nature.

B. V. Narasimhaswami (1874–1956) never met Shirdi Sai Baba face to face, and yet he became the most influential person behind the explosive growth of Sai Baba devotion in the mid-twentieth century. Narasimhaswami became a devotee of Sai Baba when he first set foot in Shirdi in 1936, eighteen years after Sai Baba had passed away. Although Sai Baba was no longer physically present, Narasimhaswami nonetheless felt an overwhelming sense of loving union with Sai Baba that convinced him that he was still ‘alive’ and accessible from beyond the grave. After accepting Sai Baba as his guru, Narasimhaswami spent the remaining twenty years of his life working to spread Sai Baba’s name throughout India, especially southern India. To do so, he authored numerous books and pamphlets about Sai Baba’s life and teachings, he went on lecture tours, and he founded the All India Sai Samaj in 1940.

Narasimhaswami lived during the rise of the anticolonial struggle against British colonial rule in India, and he witnessed both the victorious granting of independence to India in 1947 and the simultaneous tragedy of the partition of India and Pakistan accompanied by tumultuous bloodshed between Hindus and Muslims. In this historical context, Narasimhaswami was drawn to Shirdi Sai Baba not only for the intimate emotional connection that he experienced with him, but also for his composite identity. As a freedom fighter-turned-renouncer, Narasimhaswami left behind his political offices when he took up the life of a renouncer, but he could not fully renounce his concern with the nation’s political future. He hoped for a future in which India would be independent from British colonial rule and also at peace with itself, free of communal strife between Hindus and Muslims, so that its citizens could pursue meaningful lives while on earth and could strive to achieve liberation in the hereafter. Interpreting Sai Baba as a figure who was born as a Hindu Brahmin, but who embraced both Hinduism and Islam in his personal life

history, his teachings, and in his following, Narasimhaswami felt that Sai Baba was uniquely positioned to bring all of his followers to a state of spiritual liberation and all Indians to a state of national unity.

Yet Narasimhaswami has been criticized as the primary figure behind the 'Hinduization' of Shirdi Sai Baba. Warren, for instance, credits Narasimhaswami with 'almost single handedly introducing Sai Baba to South India', but critiques his orthodox Hindu interpretation of Sai Baba, noting that the majority of his informants were Hindus, primarily Brahmins from Bombay, and that he made no effort to investigate the Sufi community when he was compiling Sai Baba's teachings (2004, pp.13–4). Rigopoulos similarly notes that Narasimhaswami 'presents a Hinduized version of Sai Baba's life, overshadowing the Islamic influence and background', though he states that the comprehensiveness of his work makes it central to the entourage of his Hindu devotees (1993, p.xxv). In her field research at Sai Baba temples in the Indian city of Bengaluru, Srinivas demonstrates how Sai Baba is understood differently at different temples, noting that he is worshiped as a deified Hindu guru in the Someshvarapura Shirdi Sai Baba temple that was built in 1968 by Narasimhaswami's All India Sai Samaj. Discussing Narasimhaswami, she comments that despite Sai Baba's 'multiple heritages', he is now 'imagined in a way that resembles a guru, even a Hindu deity, with alternative elements being pushed underground' in the temples of the All India Sai Samaj (2008, p.228).

In this article, I examine the tension between inclusion and exclusion in Narasimhaswami's interpretation of Shirdi Sai Baba. Narasimhaswami believed that Sai Baba had two interconnected missions: The spiritual uplift of individuals and the temporal uplift of India. With regard to individual spiritual uplift, Narasimhaswami advocated a program of guru worship as the means for receiving Sai Baba's guidance on the path to God-realization. He described the experience of God-realization as a blissful comprehension of the monistic whole, wherein one's individual self is not separate from God. With regard to India's temporal uplift, Narasimhaswami advocated Sai Baba as a composite guru who could forge a religiously unified and peaceful national community. As Hindus and Muslims both turned to Sai Baba in devotion, they would be transformed by the loving experience of the unity of God-realization, and would cease their communal strife as they fostered a synthetic devotional community. I argue that while Narasimhaswami's vision for independent India was broadly inclusive, seeking to bring together Hindus and Muslims, his advocacy of Hindu philosophy and ritual as the means for understanding and approaching Shirdi Sai Baba promoted a divinization of this guru that has impacted his appeal to Hindus and non-Hindus in vastly different measures.

Narasimhaswami's quest for Guru and God

Narasimhaswami was born Narasimha Iyer on 21 August 1874, in Bhavani town of the Coimbatore district of the Madras Presidency (now Tamil Nadu). His parents, Venkatagiri Iyer and Angachiammal, were an orthodox Hindu Brahmin couple

devoted to the local god Sangameswar and goddess Bhavani, and to the Shankaracharya of Sringeri as their family guru. According to his biographers, Narasimha received a strong religious upbringing from his parents, who taught him to partake in regular worship at the local temple, and had him undergo all the proper religious rites of passage for a Brahmin boy (Saipadananda 1973, pp.1-2; Varadaraja Iyer 1974, pp.2-5; Vijayakumar 2009, pp.25-8). Narasimha also received a strong English-medium education at the behest of his father, who was a pleader at law. Narasimha completed his intermediate schooling at Madras Christian College in 1890, then earned a B.A. with distinction, followed by a Law degree in 1895. Narasimha's biographers describe him as both a successful lawyer whose debating skills earned him a large clientele and a sizable income, and a compassionate lawyer who regularly accepted pro bono cases (Vijayakumar 2009, pp.31-2). As Narasimha's legal practice and reputation grew in Salem, so also did his family. As was customary at that time, he had been married to his wife, Seethalakshmi, when he was sixteen and she was just ten years of age; together, they eventually had five children.

In the first decade of the twentieth century Narasimha grew increasingly active in local politics. He was elected a member of the Salem Municipal Council in 1902, and served as its Chairman from 1904 to 1920. As he turned his attention to national politics and the growing movement for Indian independence from British colonial rule, his reputation for integrity, efficiency, and honesty helped him gain election to further positions. His biographer Vijayakumar sums up his nationalist activism during this period:

[I]n 1914, he was elected to represent Salem, Coimbatore and Nilgiris in the Madras Legislative Council. He was also elected to the new Council established under the Montague-Chelmsford reforms. He continued to be a member of the Legislative Council till 1920 and, as a member of the Indian National Congress, he vigorously presented the national viewpoint on all issues that came up for consideration before the Council. (Vijayakumar 2009, p.32)²

Narasimha joined the All India Home Rule League when it was founded in 1916 and teamed up with Annie Besant, touring the Madras Presidency with her and conducting lectures to agitate for Home Rule (Varadaraja Iyer 1974, pp.5-6; Vijayakumar 2009, p.34). In 1917, as Britain was preparing for elections, members of the All India Home Rule League sought to persuade members of the Liberal Party in England to make the granting of political sovereignty to India an election issue. A delegation of three Indians was selected to sail to England, comprised of Narasimha Iyer, George Joseph, and Manjeri Rama Iyer. However, the delegation never arrived, for the British War Cabinet learned of the mission, detained the ship at Gibraltar, and arrested Narasimha and his colleagues. After fifteen days of detention, they were deported back to India (Vijayakumar 2009, p.34). Although the

mission was not successful, the effort nonetheless made Narasimha even more popular within pro-independence circles.

In 1920, Narasimha was re-elected to the Madras Legislative Council. However, that same year Mahatma Gandhi launched the Non-Cooperation Movement. Frustrated with the lack of progress toward Home Rule and the slaughter of many nonviolent Indians in the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre of 1919, Gandhi called upon all Indians to engage in a nonviolent boycott of British rule by refusing to buy foreign goods and by resigning from government-run educational institutions, courts, and other government employment.³ This movement gained widespread support throughout India, and Narasimha took part in it by resigning his position on the Council (Vijayakumar 2009, p.35). Although this resignation was motivated by politics, it was the first of several moves that Narasimha would make in the coming years to withdraw from public life in pursuit of the spiritual path.

In 1921, a pivotal turning point occurred when Narasimha's two youngest children tragically drowned. In his grief, Narasimha began to question why God would allow such a tragedy to happen. Ultimately, he came to the realization that this tragedy must have occurred to enable him to turn away from the householder's life and toward a larger purpose. He writes of this period in his life in the second volume of his *Life of Sai Baba* (here speaking of himself in the third person):

Even before the bodies of the children were taken out from water it had dawned upon him [Narasimhaswami] that this dreadful thunderstroke had a meaning and that Providence was directing him thereby not to use up his energies and attention in Law or politics and social or domestic affairs but to consecrate himself for the service of mankind by the search for God and the ascertainment and adoption of steps for realisation of God and the self. (Narasimhaswami 1983, pp.271-2)⁴

In 1925, Narasimha returned his legal certificate to the High Court, and then took formal vows of renunciation—including adopting the name Narasimhaswami by which he would henceforth be known.

From 1925 to 1936, Narasimhaswami roamed throughout India, visiting one holy person after the next, in the quest for his own guru. He believed that scriptural study could only carry a seeker so far: 'God-realisation is a personal experience and cannot be obtained or explained through the written word. Those who are familiar with Hindu thought and in fact with religious thought generally, can realise the importance of a Guru and absolute faith in a Guru for the quickening of spiritual growth' (Narasimhaswami 1980, p.8). Hence, Narasimhaswami advocated following the *guru marga*, the guru path, which he defined as 'that form of Bhakti Marga [the devotional path] in which faith in and devotion to the Guru is the only sadhana [spiritual practice] for achieving every end including salvation' (1980, p.86). Narasimhaswami spent extended periods of time with Ramana Maharshi, Siddharuda Swamiji, Narayan Maharaj, Meher Baba, and Upasni Maharaj, among

other living holy men.⁵ While Narasimhaswami felt that he had learned a good deal from these figures, he had not yet found his guru. Despondent at the end of this eleven-year quest, Narasimhaswami traveled north several kilometers after leaving Upasni Maharaj's hermitage, and arrived in Shirdi on 29 August 1936. To his great surprise, it was there at the tomb of Sai Baba that Narasimhaswami found his guru at long last.

Narasimhaswami had been seeking a living guru, but as he prostrated before Sai Baba's tomb he experienced a moment of silent communion with this holy man, now deceased for 18 years. He describes how Sai Baba reached out to him, 'radiating thought': 'A person seated before such a Mahatma [great soul] feels that his whole being is permeated, controlled, communed with and moulded by the Mahatma without the use of a single word and without direction that any book should be studied or any practice should be followed' (1980, p.xii). Narasimhaswami came to the realization that Sai Baba was still available in his afterlife, and conceived of him as a special type of guru, the *Samartha Sadguru*, which he defines in this way: 'He who teaches about God or Sat is called Sadguru. He who uses *all his siddhis and superior powers* to carry the shishya [disciple] right up to the goal is called "Samartha Sadguru"' (1980, p.78, emphasis in original). Such figures have attained God-realization during their lifetimes, and remain available even after they have left their bodies behind to aid others in attaining God-realization.

The study of scripture and philosophical debate can only point one down the path, but cannot bring about God-realization. Instead, according to Narasimhaswami, to truly know what God is, one must experience God-realization—and the key to this experiential knowledge is recognizing Sai Baba as the *Samartha Sadguru*. Through this experience, one immediately realizes the equation of the individual self with the All-Self, an equation that he explained through monistic Advaita Vedanta terminology: 'In getting [Sai] Baba as a Guru, one is helped on to the Supreme realisation of Jiva Brahma Aikya [identity of self and All-Self]. Those who refer to Baba as a single Guru or saint with a particular shape in one place are indulging in their tendency of materialisation, localisation, and fragmentisation. The real fruit of Baba's influence is perceiving him as the All – everything including one's old Guru, one's Ishta Devata [personal deity], and oneself' (1980, p.127). Just as Sai Baba began to help Narasimhaswami experience God-realization during his first visit to Shirdi through silent communion, he can help countless others as well: 'Thus [Sai] Baba's answer to the question "What is God" is that the question cannot be answered in words of course, as the real truth about God is one to be felt at heart. One should grow into God and then only he knows God. It is only by developing the little spark of Love that Baba will ignite in your heart, and blowing it into a name, that you can be transformed into a mass of love. God is love, nothing but love' (1982, pp.58–9).

Narasimhaswami felt utterly transformed by the 'little spark of love' that he believed Sai Baba had ignited in his heart that day in Shirdi. For the remaining twenty years of his life he pursued the *guru margā* with faith in Sai Baba as the

Samartha Sadguru. Narasimhaswami believed that his experience was replicable: Just as he had experienced God-realization through his devotion to Sai Baba, so could others. And through this communion with Sai Baba, they too would be transformed into masses of love. Furthermore, this transformative experience was not solely a spiritual one, but had very significant worldly consequences as well: 'If a person once realises that he is not this organism and this body, but is something very much wider, which may be the result of Baba's training him to pitch himself into all others' hearts and identify himself with those souls, then the present "necessity" and the desires and aversions formerly prevailing with oneself, all drop off. The scales fall from one's eyes. All values are different. The world looms as something totally different from what it did. One sets about it and acts in a different way' (1980, p.xiv). Thus, Narasimhaswami characterizes Shirdi Sai Baba's mission as the *Samartha Sadguru* as twofold: 'the uplift of mankind' in both religious and political realms, noting in the first volume of *Life of Sai Baba* that 'a study of this work describing [Shirdi Sai Baba] will shower upon the readers incalculable benefits both spiritual and temporal in this world and beyond' (1980, p.9).

Shirdi Sai Baba and the spiritual uplift of individuals

With regard to Shirdi Sai Baba's first mission, the spiritual uplift of individuals, Narasimhaswami saw Sai Baba as the *Samartha Sadguru* who could lead individuals to God-realization through the exact program of guru worship that Narasimhaswami had himself successfully followed. Narasimhaswami praised Sai Baba for allowing his disciples to worship him in whatever manner they chose, according to their differing religious upbringings, 'Sai allowed the Hindus to adopt their puranic method of worship and treat him either as an Avatar [incarnation of God] or Ishtadeva [personal deity] or a Gurudeva [guru-god], as they liked, while he allowed the Muslims approaching him to read their Koran and the Shariat at the Mosque and to join his flock as his devotees, treating him merely as an *Avalia* or a saint with remarkable powers' (1980, p.57). However, while acknowledging that devotees could worship Sai Baba in whatever manner they chose, and could conceive of him as either divine or near-divine, he argued that the pursuit of the *guru marga* was the most efficacious path, for he had tangible proof that it worked in his own experience of God-realization. In addition, Narasimhaswami maintained that the *guru marga* had the benefit of being approved of by Sai Baba in the final years of his lifetime.

In *Life of Sai Baba*, Narasimhaswami describes how the worship of Sai Baba grew more complex in the last decade or so of Sai Baba's life. Seeking to systematize their worship in keeping with temple traditions, his Hindu devotees hired a priest and composed devotional hymns. He explains that although Sai Baba despised all the pomp (1980, p.41), he nonetheless allowed his own worship 'with the prescience that it would be the means for providing temporal and spiritual benefits to

millions of individuals and also the means of solving Indian's national problems of communal and religious unity' (1980, p.55). Narasimhaswami explains that guru worship is essential to the quest for God-realization because through it 'one gradually progresses with lower and external forms till his inner kernel of devotion attains maturity and perfection' (1980, p.48). He then outlines a nine-point program of ritual worship that he states must be followed because it is found in the *Bhagavata Purana* and was accepted by Sai Baba. Of special significance to Narasimhaswami were the second and third points on the list, praising God in song form, and remembering God by chanting and meditating upon his names. Such recitations of a deity's names—*namastotram*—are typically composed in poetic Sanskrit verse and consist of 100, 108, 1000, or 1008 names. In premodern Hindu traditions the enunciation of a *namastotram* was thought to activate 'the deity's vibratory essence', thereby rendering the deity present to receive the devotee's praise and to bless the devotee in exchange (Rhodes 2010, p.83).

This idea of rendering the deity present through the *namastotram* was applied to Shirdi Sai Baba by Narasimhaswami, who composed the *Shri Sai Ashtotharam*, the 108 names of Shri Sai, in Shirdi in 1936–37 as a token of his devotion for his newfound guru. Composed in Sanskrit, this *namastotram* entails 108 verses in praise of Sai Baba. Narasimhaswami shared his composition with other devotees living in Shirdi, and the verses soon began to be chanted in their daily prayers before the tomb. Narasimhaswami viewed this as evidence that Sai Baba had accepted his devotion (Vijayakumar 2009, p.67). During the final two decades of his life, Narasimhaswami had the *Shri Sai Ashtotharam* printed in pocket-sized editions, which he distributed freely wherever he travelled as a way of spreading the name of Sai Baba and encouraging daily worship of him. Today, the *Shri Sai Ashtotharam* has received widespread acceptance within the community of Sai faithful, and is known by heart by millions of devotees.

Narasimhaswami opens the *Shri Sai Ashtotharam* with the following verses:

1. Homage to Lord Sai.
2. Homage to Lakshmi Narayan.
3. Homage to Krishna, Rama, Shiva, and Hanuman.
4. Homage to Shesha Shayi.
5. Homage to Him who resides on the banks of the Godavari.
6. Homage to Him who dwells in the hearts of his devotees.
7. Homage to Him who resides in the hearts of all.⁶

Here in these first lines of the 108 names of Shri Sai, Narasimhaswami is equating Sai Baba with the Hindu pantheon by proclaiming that these deities—Vishnu in multiple forms, including his avatars Krishna and Rama, as well as Shiva and Hanuman—are names and forms of Sai Baba. He then notes that Sai Baba also took physical form and dwelled along the Godavari River, and yet is simultaneously unmanifest, dwelling in immaterial form not only in the hearts of his

devotees, but in the hearts of everyone. Here in these simple verses we find a compact distillation of Advaita Vedanta philosophy as Narasimhaswami had come to understand it through his personal experience of God-realization. At the core of his understanding is the belief in the nondual nature of ultimate reality, whereby the self within is the same as God, which is also the universal All-Self. Shirdi Sai Baba is, therefore, not only the guru who leads one to that All-Self, but is that All-Self, which is located within us and all around us.

The next verses of the *Shri Sai Ashtotharam* continue praising Sai Baba's divine nature, noting among other things that he is eternal, beyond the boundaries of time and death (verses 9–15), and that he is the supporter of all living things and of the universe (verses 17–8). The poem next praises Sai Baba for the protection he offers his devotees (verses 19–20), and then considers the various benefits that devotees gain by worshiping him. Devotees may receive a bounty of worldly benefits, including food, clothing, health, wealth, sons, friends, and aid when in distress. The list of benefits begins to incorporate more otherworldly concerns beginning in verse 29, which praises Sai Baba as the one who 'bestows worldly pleasures, salvation of the self, heavenly bliss, and ultimate union'. Next Sai Baba is praised for his ability to deliver to his devotees limitless love, ultimate truth, bliss, and eternal happiness (verses 31–5).

After listing the worldly and spiritual bounties to be reaped by worshiping Sai Baba, the poem next praises Sai Baba as God, calling him the Supreme Lord, the All-Self, and the Father of Creation (verses 36–40). The next verses praise Sai Baba's intimate connection with his devotees, describing him as a parent who provides security from fear and unconditional love (verses 41–8). Sai Baba is able to destroy the karma of past deeds, opening up the pathway to liberation (verses 49–51). The remaining verses are largely dedicated to praising Sai Baba's various qualities. He is truthful, virtuous, all-powerful, invincible, beautiful, subtle, helpful, and all-knowing. Notable among these latter verses are number 97, which pays homage to Sai Baba as 'Him who preached and practiced the equality and oneness of all religions' and 98–9, which pay homage to Sai Baba as Dakshinamurti, a form of Shiva, and as Sri Venkateswara, a form of Vishnu. In these three verses we have a concise statement of Narasimhaswami's belief, which he would later spell out in greater detail in the volumes of *Life of Sai Baba*, that Sai Baba is both an intra- and inter-religious unifier. Narasimhaswami views Sai Baba as an intra-religious unifier for his ability to unite Shaiva and Vaishnava Hindus in conjoint devotion to him, once they come to the monistic realization that God as the All-Self is both Shiva and Vishnu, both Dakshinamurti and Sri Venkateswara. Similarly, he views Sai Baba as an inter-religious unifier because he accepted devotees from multiple religious backgrounds and taught them that God as the All-Self is both the Hindu God and the Muslim God.

The final verses of the *Shri Sai Ashtotharam* read:

- 107) Homage to Him who consolidates the true path of amity, unity, and understanding among all people.
 108) Homage to the Samartha Sadguru, Lord Sai.

Here Narasimhaswami concludes his devotional poem by declaring Shirdi Sai Baba to be a beacon of inclusivism, one whose primary work as the *Samartha Sadguru* is to bring the experience of God-realization to devotees and then unite them together in the loving harmony of shared devotion.

Narasimhaswami maintains that meditation upon Sai Baba as the *Samartha Sadguru* is absolutely necessary to experience God-realization. While acknowledging that any form of meditation could work in theory, he advocates Hindu ritual as the best program to progress toward the goal of surrendering the self within God. He believes that reciting the *Shri Sai Ashtotharam* in praise of Sai Baba on a daily basis will help devotees experience Sai Baba's presence from beyond the grave, just as Narasimhaswami experienced it himself in his first moment of silent communion with Sai Baba in Shirdi. From this first experience of Sai Baba's presence, one's devotion will grow as one continues to meditate upon Sai Baba:

That is how worship begins, and grows. Gradually . . . it leads the worshipper higher and higher so that he understands his own self and the Supreme self more and more until the Jiva [self] is absorbed in the Paramatma [All-Self]. There is a considerable distance of time, stages, and a vast amount of effort between the beginning of worship and the highest achievement; and Baba worship had and has all stages in it, and sorts of worshippers. Baba who first objected to his worship, did by his own Antarnana or prophetic vision foresee or ordain what was to follow, namely, not only individual benefits to millions but also national benefit, and ultimately benefit to the cause of religion itself for the sake of humanity. (Narasimhaswami 1980, p.32)

Ritual worship of Shirdi Sai Baba as the *Samartha Sadguru* is the means by which Narasimhaswami experienced God-realization. He, therefore, set forth this method, the *guru marga*, as the means by which others could also receive Sai Baba's blessing. Such spiritual uplift he describes as a monistic state of blissful God-realization known as *satchitananda*, wherein the disciple realizes his inner spirit is identical with both guru and God as All-Self. But spiritual uplift is only half of the picture; Narasimhaswami believed that this monistic experience of God-realization had temporal benefits as well, and advocated worship of Sai Baba as the means by which individuals could attain the spiritual bliss of *satchitananda* and India could attain the temporal bliss of peaceful union as an independent nation.

Shirdi Sai Baba and the temporal uplift of India

With regard to Shirdi Sai Baba's second mission, the temporal uplift of India, Narasimhaswami saw Sai Baba as the *Samartha Sadguru* who could 'unify all faiths by acceptance of him as the common Gurudeva' and thereby establish national peace (1980, p.62). Central to this second mission was the conception of Sai Baba as a composite figure. Narasimhaswami insisted that Sai Baba was born to Brahmin parents, and thus maintains a high caste Hindu identity for him.⁷ Yet Narasimhaswami simultaneously characterized Sai Baba as a figure who embodies both Hinduism and Islam, stating that he 'had both Hindu and Muslim features in his body and in his actions and practice' and had both Hindu and Muslim gurus who provided him with religious instruction as a young man (1980, pp.26–7). Due to his composite nature, Narasimhaswami believed Sai Baba was the ideal figure to bring together members of multiple faith communities in India, especially its two largest communities, Hindus and Muslims:

The only thing that could bring Hindus and Muslims together was a weird, saintly personality acting as a Guru or God-Man, absolutely neutral, allowing all sects, religions and creeds to have their own ways, and yet bringing them all to a common platform, namely, devotion to that saintly personality and enabling them to see that the differences are petty and ridiculous – unworthy of serious men of jnana or realisation. Sai Baba was such a person. In him, divine qualities, obviously superhuman powers combined with even-minded beneficence were so patently manifested that all alike, Hindus, Muslims, Christians, etc., who came to know about him felt that they were before a higher influence and that they could all approach and reach God through him, that he was the high water mark of saintliness or Godliness or God-head and they willingly made him their Gurudeva or protector. (Narasimhaswami 1980, pp.56–7)

Narasimhaswami conceived of the 'weird, saintly personality' of Shirdi Sai Baba in explicitly nationalistic ways. In the chapter on 'Baba's Mission' in the first volume of *Life of Sai Baba*, he writes that Sai Baba will unify India through 'the building up of one common central religion or faith' and in so doing will solve 'India's National problem of unifying conflicting groups' (1980, p.179).⁸

Narasimhaswami began writing his four-volume *Life of Sai Baba* series in 1953–54, just on the heels of India's independence from British colonial rule in 1947 and the partition of India and Pakistan, which entailed unprecedented communal bloodshed between Hindus and Muslims. While writing the series, he was painfully aware of the divisive nature of civil discourse as debates continued to rage over the place of religion in the newly established republic of India. Because of Sai Baba's composite nature and his ability to bring together in shared devotion members of multiple faith communities, Narasimhaswami argued that Sai Baba is crucial to the peaceful cohabitation of Hindus and Muslims in the newly independent and pluralistic nation of India.

Addressing Hindus as his primary audience, and as the majority religious community in India, Narasimhaswami first turns to the topic of Hindu divisiveness. He notes that Hindus are not unified in and of themselves, and, therefore, are often in conflict with one another across sectarian or caste lines. In the chapter 'Unification and Purification of Hinduism' in volume one, he argues that the 'essential substratum of all these faiths called Hinduism' is the monistic belief in God (1980, p.64). Sai Baba taught his Hindu followers that the Real is one, and, therefore, no matter what name or form of it one personally worships, there is no need for discord over such details. Vaishnavas, Shaivas, Shaktas—all of these Hindu groups should unite in the recognition that they worship different forms of the same divinity.

Furthermore, Narasimhaswami argues, Sai Baba taught his devotees that this belief in God or the All-Self is the common core not only of Hinduism, but of all theistic religions. He explains, 'This, being the central essence of all Theism, is or should be the central plank for unifying all branches and sects of Hindus and also unifying Hinduism with Islam and other theistic religions. In fact world unity of religions can be achieved mainly on this basis' (1980, p.67). Here Narasimhaswami positions Sai Baba not only as an intra-faith unifier, but also as an inter-faith unifier. Narasimhaswami feels that Sai Baba put into practice this principle of seeking unity by bringing together Hindus from various regions, castes, and sectarian backgrounds, as well as devotees from other religious traditions:

Those who came to him saw in him their only God, recognised him as their Guru Deva (and that was the highest religious sentiment that they had) and there was no possibility of their tearing themselves off into divisions, though their original loyalties were in other respects maintained. Baba hated intolerance and made people tolerate each other's views and peculiarities. He did not allow the Hindus under him to fight against the Muslim devotees. He removed asperities and made them work in unison as fellow-devotees, as brothers in Sai faith. Thus he worked out not merely the unification of Hinduism but also the unification of Hinduism with the other great religion in India, namely, Islam. (Narasimhaswami 1980, pp.68–9)

In volume four, Narasimhaswami expands upon this discussion of religious unification in two further chapters. In 'Sai Baba and Future of Religion', Narasimhaswami delves further into his theory that the essence of all religions is the same. It is over the 'externals', the peripheral details, that religious adherents quarrel: Temple versus mosque, this form of prayer versus that form. But the essence is the same, and for Narasimhaswami that essence is love of the one God: 'Let every person sit quietly directing his mind to the greatness of God and the grand qualities of God and allow himself to be lost in them. Then there is no possibility of his quarrelling with any other person or any other person quarrelling with him. The result of contemplation of love for God is Love. If we go into the

essence of religion, that is, if each tries to concentrate on God, the result will only be love and harmony and not a jarring set of crusades among people trying to trample on one another' (1982, p.88). By bringing Hindus, Muslims, and others to Shirdi and uniting them together in their common love of him, Sai Baba has set in motion a future in which the religious externals will be shed in favor of one synthetic religious community of Indians who together 'form the foundation of India's main religion of the future':

So far as India itself is concerned, the future of religion in India is largely a question of the fusion of the two great trends which appear to be so widely different, namely, Hinduism and Islam. The differences have led frequently to the breaking of heads and burning of temples, and recently even the breaking-up of the political unity of the country. So, the achievement of something like a basis for the unity of Hinduism and Islam is itself a very great and momentous task and may be justly viewed as affording a solution to the country's problem of fusing the two into one. (Narasimhaswami 1982, pp.84-5)

In the chapter 'Sri Sai and National Unity', Narasimhaswami continues this theme by explaining that Sai Baba worked to encourage Hindu-Muslim unity in three specific ways: His composite personhood, teachings, and personal example. As noted above, Narasimhaswami describes Sai Baba as having both Hindu and Muslim features in his body. Here he provides further examples of his composite physicality, including a story of Sai Baba calling his followers 'worthless fellows' for debating whether he was born a Hindu or a Muslim, and then stripping naked and challenging them to figure it out. Those present could not agree whether he had been circumcised (marking him as Muslim), nor whether his ears were pierced (marking him as Hindu) (1982, p.100). However, just a few pages later Narasimhaswami contradicts himself when he writes, 'there is not a particle of doubt that Baba's ears were bored', indicating his birth to Hindu Brahmin parents (1982, p.104). Nonetheless, he continues his discussion by explaining that just as Sai Baba embodies a composite identity, so also do his teachings. Sai Baba had previously studied with Hindu and Muslim gurus, and he encouraged his followers to read scriptures from both traditions (1982, pp.107-8). Finally, in his personal example he demonstrated how to allow the 'principle of love' to pervade in Shirdi by accepting all who came to him with an open heart (1982, p.109).

Narasimhaswami links this threefold method of encouraging Hindu-Muslim unity to an explicitly nationalist agenda in writing that Sai Baba was a freedom fighter who served in the Rani of Jhansi's army and fought against the British during the Indian Rebellion of 1857.⁹ Although Sai Baba had presumably left politics behind by the time of his arrival in Shirdi as a renouncer, Narasimhaswami states that he 'always encouraged patriotism' and that he encouraged Hindu-Muslim unity not only as an act of communal solidarity, but as an act of patriotism: 'As to the question of Hindu-Muslim unity, any person carefully studying the

subject would see that Hindu-Muslim unity is the one great desideratum to make India strong and prosperous. Baba also saw it, and so, he laid the foundations of Hindu-Muslim unity' (1982, p.103).

For Narasimhaswami, then, Shirdi Sai Baba is a *Samartha Sadguru* who remains available even after the death of his physical body to guide devotees down the guru path to God-realization. God-realization, as he conceived of it, entails a transformative experience of loving union, *satchitananda*, that words cannot fully describe. This loving union is not merely between guru and disciple, or God and devotee, but between the individual self and the All-Self that exists in everyone and everything. Thus, once one has awakened to God-realization, one sees the unity underlying everything. In addition to the spiritual bliss of *satchitananda*, it also has a tangible, this-worldly effect here and now, for no longer can former quarrels stand, no longer can divisions remain as devotees of Sai Baba experience loving union and realize their intimate interconnectedness with one another. Narasimhaswami thus set out to share this path to God-realization so that others might experience it for themselves, and in so doing would save not only their own souls, but also the very soul of a communally fractured India.

Divinizing Shirdi Sai Baba

It is impossible to know definitively Shirdi Sai Baba's birth identity, for he wrote nothing down himself and, therefore, what we know of his life and teachings is found in the accounts given by his followers, wherein he is interpreted in significantly different ways.¹⁰ In Narasimhaswami's influential account, Sai Baba is a divinized Hindu figure, both biographically and ritually. Scholars have focused on Narasimhaswami's discussion of Sai Baba's biography and his mission of individual spiritual uplift, and have lamented his 'Hinduization' of this guru. However, these scholars have overlooked Narasimhaswami's discussion of Sai Baba's second mission, the temporal uplift of India. My approach in reading Narasimhaswami carefully has been to focus on both of these interconnected missions to better understand Narasimhaswami's reasons for turning to Sai Baba and for promoting devotion to him. Stopping only at the first goal, that of individual spiritual uplift, could lead one to the precipitous conclusion that Narasimhaswami sought to reclaim for Hinduism's 'side' an ambiguous religious figure during a time of national strife between Hindus and Muslims. But in examining both goals together, it quickly becomes apparent that Narasimhaswami was not motivated by a communal Hindu agenda, but rather sought to confront orthodox Hindus and to promote an inclusive religious and national community.

At many points throughout his writings, Narasimhaswami specifically addresses a Hindu audience, calling upon Hindus at large, and orthodox Brahmins in particular, to turn to Shirdi Sai Baba to bring about both their own spiritual uplift and the temporal uplift of India. An examination of a six-page appendix included at the end of the first volume of *Life of Sai Baba* helps us to better understand what is at

stake in Narasimhaswami's interpretation of Sai Baba. Narasimhaswami addresses this appendix to those orthodox Hindus who object to worshipping Sai Baba on the grounds that he is a Muslim. He presents a multi-faceted argument for accepting Sai Baba as the *Samartha Sadguru*. The first point he makes is grounded in the need for direct experience: Auspicious gazing (*darshan*) upon Sai Baba will melt all such worries away, just as it did for Narasimhaswami himself. But, orthodox Hindus who feel that they cannot approach a non-Hindu for darshan need not worry, for Sai Baba was born to Brahmin parents.¹¹ After reassuring these hesitant Hindus that Sai Baba was Brahmin, Narasimhaswami then claims that although he was Hindu because he was Brahmin by birth and studied with a Brahmin guru, he was also Muslim for he was raised by a Muslim fakir, lived in a mosque, and commonly passed as a Muslim. Narasimhaswami next encourages his readers to look beyond caste and creed, arguing that Sai Baba's indifference as to whether people called him Hindu or Muslim is proof of his spiritual advancement, for caste is one of the eight attachments that Hindus are supposed to shed when taking refuge with a guru. Finally, Narasimhaswami concludes this discussion by citing passage after passage from authoritative Hindu scriptures (including the *Manusmriti*, the *Mahabharata*, and the *Chandogya Upanishad*) to remind his Hindu readers that the true definition of a 'Brahmin' is not one of birth or parentage, but of conduct (1980, Appendix IV). Properly chastised, these orthodox Hindus should now stop focusing on the question of Sai Baba's birth identity, and start focusing on their own conduct in pursuing the guru path to God-realization.

Narasimhaswami was convinced that Shirdi Sai Baba was the *Samartha Sadguru* who could unite in loving bliss all who turned to him. As more and more Hindu devotees accepted Sai Baba as their guru, he believed they would not only find the spiritual bliss of loving union with God, but also the temporal bliss of loving union with their neighbors. Given the communally fractured state of affairs in mid-twentieth century South Asia, Narasimhaswami felt a sense of urgency to spread Sai Baba's name and teachings throughout India. By growing the community of Sai faithful he could help usher in a new national order, one in which all Indians would be peacefully united together under the banner of Sai Baba. Narasimhaswami believed that in promoting devotion to Sai Baba, he was not promoting any one religion over another, but was promoting True Religion—the essence of all world religions—while letting go of all of the unnecessary 'externals' over which adherents of differing religious traditions too often fight. The future of religion in India entailed leaving behind the communal bloodshed of independence and partition, in exchange for a focus on the shared essence of Hinduism and Islam, the loving union of self with God and with neighbor.

For these reasons, after finding his guru in Shirdi in 1936, Narasimhaswami spent the next twenty years of his life working to actively promote devotion to Sai Baba. Returning to Madras in 1939, he founded the nonprofit All India Sai Samaj the following year with the mission of disseminating Sai devotion throughout the country. Through this Samaj he published books, magazines, pamphlets,

images, and other devotional matter about Sai Baba; he planned lecture tours to reach devotional communities throughout India; he organized All India Sai Devotees' Conventions; and he established temples for the worship of Sai Baba beyond Shirdi. By the time of Narasimhaswami's death in 1956, there were over four hundred branches of the All India Sai Samaj, which were together responsible for establishing eighty Sai Baba temples throughout India (Vijayakumar 2009, p.108). Forty years later, in 1995, there were 1003 Shirdi Sai Baba institutions affiliated with the All India Sai Samaj throughout India (Srinivas 2008, p.232). Narasimhaswami was very successful in his mission to grow the community of Sai faithful far beyond Shirdi, especially among Hindus living throughout the southern states of India.

In spite of his championing of Shirdi Sai Baba as a composite (albeit Brahmin-born) guru and his inclusive vision for independent India, however, Narasimhaswami's proselytizing efforts to spread Sai Baba's name found very little purchase among Muslims in India. Narasimhaswami reflected upon this briefly in the third volume of *Life of Sai Baba*, where he theorizes that orthodox Muslims are even more hesitant to embrace Sai Baba than orthodox Hindus, because at its core Hinduism is more tolerant than Islam:

But on the whole the Hindu population in India, especially in Bombay and some other States, are far more advanced in education and far more tolerant in their culture and ideas, than is generally believed, and great saints like Ramakrishna Paramahansa have widely scattered amongst educated people and even amongst uneducated people liberal notions of religion and God-head. More Hindus would naturally go to a Muhammadan [Muslim] saint who is not found to be an iconoclast and who is exercising his powers beneficially to all devotees than Muslims to a Hindu saint. A few Muhammadans, who had known Swami Vivekananda's work like Rajab Ali Mohamed of Bombay, appreciated Baba, and so had no prejudices, like the cultured and educated Hindus. But as for the others, their attitude towards Baba could not easily attain to the devotion of the Hindu devotees. (Narasimhaswami 1978, pp.159–60)

But rather than this essentialist explanation, I contend that there are two primary contextual reasons for Narasimhaswami's lack of impact among Muslims. First, Narasimhaswami focused his efforts on the Hindu community, and did not do active outreach among Muslims. From his writings it is clear that, like the nineteenth century Samajist reformers before him, Narasimhaswami cared deeply about reforming the religious tradition he was born into, and thus he selectively culled authoritative Hindu scriptures in the effort to convince orthodox Hindus that Hinduism at its core was a tolerant and inclusive religious tradition, rather than an exclusive tradition mired in caste and sectarian divisions.¹² He also felt that an end to communal bloodshed must begin with Hindus, as opposed to Muslims, given that Hinduism was the majority religious tradition in India.

Second, although Narasimhaswami allowed that devotees could conceive of Shirdi Sai Baba as either divine or near-divine, and could worship him in whatever manner they chose, he urgently advocated the *guru margā* as the most efficacious path toward God-realization. Though he stated that the ‘externals’ did not matter for the essence of all religions is the same—love of the one God—in divinizing Shirdi Sai Baba as God and in using Hindu philosophy and ritual to understand and approach this divine guru, he foreclosed the path to those who might prefer to worship Sai Baba not as divine, but as near-divine.

Acknowledgments

Research for this article was made possible by grants from the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) and the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), and by a sabbatical leave provided by Bucknell University. The author is grateful to all of the participants in the conference on the Study of Religions of India (CSRI) held at Drew University in 2013 for their feedback on an earlier version of this material, and especially to Corinne Dempsey and Karen Pechilis for their insightful comments.

References

- Falk, N. A. 2006. *Living Hinduisms: an explorer's guide*. Belmont (CA): Thomson Wadsworth.
- Gandhi, M. and Fischer, L. 2002. *The essential Gandhi: an anthology of his writings on his life, work, and ideas*. New York: Vintage Spiritual Classics.
- Lorenzen, D. 1991. *Kabir legends and Ananta-Das's 'Kabir-Parachai'*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- McLain, K. 2016. *The afterlife of Sai Baba: competing visions of a global saint*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Narasimhaswami, B. V. 1978. *Life of Sai Baba*, Vol. 3 (2nd edn). Madras: All India Sai Samaj.
- Narasimhaswami, B. V. 1980. *Life of Sai Baba*, Vol. 1 (3rd edn). Madras: All India Sai Samaj.
- Narasimhaswami, B. V. 1982. *Life of Sai Baba*, Vol. 4 (2nd edn). Madras: All India Sai Samaj.
- Narasimhaswami, B. V. 1983. *Life of Sai Baba*, Vol. 2 (3rd edn). Madras: All India Sai Samaj.
- Narasimhaswami, B. V. 2010. *Self realisation: the life and teachings of Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi* (3rd edn). Tiruvannamalai: Sri Ramanasramam.
- Narasimhaswami, B. V. n.d. *Shri Sai Sahasranamavali and Ashtotharam*. Bangalore: Sai Packaging Company.
- Narasimhaswami, B. V. and Subbarao, S. 1966. *Sage of Sakuri: life story of Shree Upasani Maharaj* (4th edn). Sakuri: Shri Upasani Kanya Kumari Sthan.
- Rhodes, C. E. 2010. *Invoking Lakshmi: the goddess of wealth in song and ceremony*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Rigopoulos, A. 1993. *The life and teachings of Sai Baba of Shirdi*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Saipadananda, S. 1973. *Sri Narasimha Swamiji, apostle of Sri Sai Baba, the Saint of Shirdi*. Madras: All India Sai Samaj.
- Srinivas, S. 2008. *In the presence of Sai Baba: body, city, and memory in a global religious movement*. Leiden: Brill.

- Srinivas, T. 2010. *Winged faith: rethinking globalization and religious pluralism through the Sathya Sai movement*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Varadaraja Iyer, P. S. 1974. *Search, discovery, and mission: Gurudev Narasimhaswamiji, apostle of Samartha Sadguru Sainath Maharaj*. Madras: All India Sai Samaj.
- Vijayakumar G. R. 2009. *Sri Narasimha Swami: apostle of Shirdi Sai Baba*. New Delhi: Sterling Paperbacks.
- Warren M. 2004. *Unravelling the enigma: Shirdi Sai Baba in the light of Sufism* (revised edn). New Delhi: Sterling Publishers.

Notes

- 1 Narasimhaswami does not mention Sathya Sai Baba by name in his writing, but he does state,

It is not necessary to discuss the claims of X, Y or Z, who occasionally put forward the claim that he is the successor of Sai Baba. A few such claims have been put forward. But they were all pooh-poohed . . . invariably, on investigation, it has been noted that any person, claiming to be Sai Baba, does not show even a very small fraction of Baba's nature. Mere power to read thought, mere clairvoyance, mere production of articles from empty box or hands and mere devotion to Sai or God, will not constitute one into an Avatar of Sai. So, we might conclude this chapter by saying that Sai left no successor to his seat, that there was no seat to succeed to (as God's seat can never be vacant) and that there is no person living who can be recognised by all as having the entire Sai spirit or Soul in his body, that is, who can be regarded as the Avatar of Sai. (Narasimhaswami 1983, pp.346–7)

- 2 Also see Saipadananda (1973, p.4). The Montague–Chelmsford reforms were introduced in 1918–19 by the British Government in India with the intention of gradually introducing self-governing institutions.
- 3 On Gandhi's Non-Cooperation Movement, see Gandhi and Fischer (2002, esp. pp.133–41).
- 4 Also see Vijayakumar (2009, pp.36–9); Saipadananda (1973, pp.5–6); Varadaraja Iyer (1974, pp.6–7).
- 5 Of these figures, Narasimhaswami spent the longest periods of time with Ramana Maharshi and Upasni Maharaj. For his accounts of their teachings see Narasimhaswami (2010) and Narasimhaswami and Subbarao (1966).
- 6 All translations of verses from the *Shri Sai Ashtotharam* in this article are the author's own.
- 7 This is in contrast with other Hindu devotees of Sai Baba, such as Das Ganu Maharaj, who believed that Sai Baba was born to Muslim parents. For more on Das Ganu Maharaj's interpretation of Sai Baba see McLain (2016, pp.54–90).
- 8 Also see Narasimhaswami (1980, p.63).
- 9 Warren argues that Sai Baba may have actually fought on the other side of this war, fighting for the British and not against them. See Warren (2004, pp.196–7 and 391–402).

- 10 For an overview of the different interpretations of Shirdi Sai Baba's life and teachings as set forth by his most influential followers during the past century see McLain (2016).
- 11 For a similar discussion of the Medieval poet-saint Kabir's hagiography and the increasing popularity of the assertion that Kabir was born to Hindu parents, not Muslim, and that he was initiated by a Brahmin guru see Lorenzen (1991, pp.3–22).
- 12 For an overview of the Samajist tradition in Hinduism see Falk (2006, pp.89–112).