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Who is Sai Baba?

The phenomenal spread, like wild fire of faith in Sri Sai Baba throughout this great country, within the last decade or two and its wonderful hold on the mass mind naturally roused the curiosity of many to put the above question and have necessitated the writing of a full and clear account. Those who know nothing of the personality in whom the faith of many centers, ought to know something of him. Those with prejudices or with wrong or defective views about him must be enabled to cast aside such prejudices and views and to acquire better and more accurate ideas about him. Those who have just a faint or superficial notion of Sai Baba must likewise be enabled to get a deeper, wider and more authentic idea about him, so that they may thereby extend or increase their contact with him.

Correct knowledge of any kind is good. But correct knowledge of facts connected with the lives of saints is not only good for the individual who knows them, but is beneficial to society as in the long run it promotes social unity and ethical, spiritual and religious study and endeavor. Lives of saints give not merely information for the brain of the reader, but food and strength for his heart, and they facilitate the general advancement of the temporal and spiritual interests of mankind. By the study of such lives, basic ignorance and illusions are dispelled. *Rajasic* and *Tamasic* qualities such as egotism, pride, hatred, and cruelty are checked or suppressed and noble virtues like humility, earnestness, love to all, service of saints, *Guru Bhakti* and *Jnana* are developed. These in due course lead to the goal of God-realisation. Apart from these, even the temporal benefits derived by individuals from appreciation and knowledge of Sri Sai Baba and the acquisition of a real living touch with him are great enough to justify an attempt to place a book like this before the public.

Further, there is even now an important section of readers, however small their number may be, that require something more than mere bread and butter or health, wealth and worldly comforts, whose spiritual longings should be met in some measure by a work which presents something of the facts about a unique

and perhaps one of the strangest of known spiritual personalities adorning the earth during recent times.

The task undertaken is however extremely difficult. There exists a mass of information about what Sai Baba said and did during his life time and about the experience of him which people who met him in life had. There is an even greater mass of evidence about the experiences of devotees who have after 1918, that is, after his *Mahasamadhi*, treated him as their true God or *Ishtadevata*. The difficulty however is to remove the grain from the chaff, to sift and arrange all the mass of evidence that exists and to present what, after enquiry and investigation, has to be accepted as true beyond reasonable doubt. If the evidence which exists regarding Sai Baba is properly sifted and carefully examined and selected, a trustworthy biography can be written and may form a useful inducement for progress in spiritual matters.

The difficulty of sifting the evidence before us is by no means slight. First, Sai Baba himself left his body more than thirty-six years ago. It is not therefore given to a biographer to go and ask him about the true facts and discover the truth. Very few who met him, or benefitted from him till 1918, made use of their contact with him to collect and record facts about him. Many of them did not understand him at all. For the mere sight of Sai did not enable a man to understand him. The right approach or mentality that is necessary for understanding a saint was wanting in many who met him, and Sai Baba himself once said: "They were coming for water to the supplier of water, but insisted on holding their pots with their mouths down, so unreceptive they were".

To many who saw him, Baba's deeds and sayings were rather confusing or perplexing. For instance, when he said, I am not at Shirdi, but everywhere.⁸ He who thinks Baba is in Shirdi alone has totally failed to see Baba.⁹ You have been with me 18 years. Does Sai mean to you only this 3^{1/2} cubits height of body?¹⁰

I am God, Allah"

such statements appeared to them like eccentric pronouncements of a mad man. In fact his queer unconventional ways, his habit of accommodating

himself to all sorts of people including Hindus, Mohammadans and others, and his fearless and unorthodox originality failed to impress many of his visitors. Sectarian prejudices and narrow views led many to think and pronounce all sorts of opinions about him. Even G.G. Narke¹² and Syama¹³ took him at first to be a mad man. Others such as Londa¹⁴ and Megha¹⁵ took him to be a communalist. A few people took him to be a hypnotist¹⁶, a black magician¹⁷ while others even denounced him as an immoral and dangerous man who was ruining Hindus and Hinduism¹⁸. When new comers like Dr. D.M. Mulky tried to go to Shirdi, railway personnel en route stopped several by their abuse and vilification of Baba.

This kind of attitude to Sai Baba is to some extent prevalent even now. Many are the persons who hate Sai, presuming from the name and residence at the mosque that he must have been an iconoclastic *Mussalman*, while others are indifferent to him, as they have not been fortunate enough to get proper information about him.

There can therefore be no doubt that there is a great need for a book of facts regarding Sai Baba like the present one. The difficulty of the task should not act as a deterrent. One very closely associated devotee of his, now living, still believes that Baba was only a *Mohammadan*. What can 'only a Mohammadan' mean? It means that even after 25 years of personal experience of him and 36 of his post mortem glories, the devotee treats him as a communalist just as he did when Baba was in the flesh. On the other hand, to Sri. M.B. Rege, a retired High Court Judge, Sai is only God, the *Paramatma*, and this view he held even in 1914.

Baba wished to convince the devotee, if he was a Hindu, that he was *Mahavishnu*, *Lakshminarayan*, etectra and he bade water flow from his feet, as Ganga issued from *Mahavishnu's* feet. The devotee saw it and praised him as *Rama Vara*, but as for the water coming from his feet, that devotee simply sprinkled a few drops on his head and would not drink it, coming as it did from a Mohammadan's feet. So great was the prejudice of ages that even one, who thought of him as Vishnu, thought he was a Muslim Vishnu. Prejudices die hard and the devotee wondered how people can believe that Baba was a Brahmin and

that his parents were Brahmins when he had lived all his life in a mosque and when he was believed to be a Muslim. It was only a few persons like S.B. Dhumal who saw clearly that Baba was neither Hindu nor Muslim, but above all castes, sects and religions.¹⁹

It is still fewer people that could rise to the level of accepting Baba's supreme claim²⁰ that he was *Paramatma* in all beings. Such persons naturally worship him as *Ishtadevata*.

Thus there are vast differences, sometimes poles apart between the various ideas which people have about Sai Baba. These render difficult the task of presenting the real Sai as distinguished from the popular distortions of him. His devotees and strangers alike said that Sai could not be understood and that nobody could know the secrets of Sai Baba. Syama called him *Deva*, that is God, but did not always behave as he would towards God.²¹

To a Haji who was proud of his Haj, Baba said "You do not know what is here", that is, in the Sai body or personality. A well known song is²²

"*More Babaku Mdrma na Janare koyi More*" "None knows my Baba's secret".

Till now, there has not been a good biography containing a fair, full and faithful description of his life. In Marathi, the work that can be thought of when facts about Sai Baba are wanted is Hemad Pant's alias Anna Saheb Dabolkar's Sai Satcharitra. This is a brilliantly written poetical work extending to 53 chapters and over 1000 pages narrating incidents connected with Sai Baba's life, and written in highly florid and resonant Marathi, serving excellently the purpose of *Puranic* study and daily *parayana*. Great as the merits of the book are from the standpoint of a *Bhakta*, it cannot be called a regular biography. It is rather a chronicle of reminiscences or anecdotes relating to him having no arrangement, not even chronological. There is a good adaptation of this Marathi work in an English garb by Sri Gunaji. Other small sketches or introduction to Baba's life have been published in English and other languages, but these also are too tiny to deserve the name of a biography, sketches of a few early incidents in Baba's life were issued as poetic pieces by Das Ganu Maharaj of Nanded during the life time of Baba in about 1906. He wrote 6 or 7 chapters on the whole about Sai Baba, and

he published them as part of big books namely, Bhakta Leelamrutha, Santha Kathamrutha and Bakthi Saramrutha. These 7 chapters are printed in Marathi. H.S. Dixit wrote a short biographical preface to Mrs. & Mr. Tendulkar's Sai Bhajan Mala in 1917.

A very short sketch of Sai Baba's life was issued in Gujarati by Amidoss Mehta. This was also before Baba's *Mahasamadhi* in 1918. A slightly more ambitious work was the Life of Baba in Tamil written by the present author. Actually only Part I of it appeared, but even that was not a full account. Subsequent to his *mahasamadhi*, there have appeared a few statements or sketches about Sai Baba, but they are scattered and do not deserve the name of a regular biography. Sai Samasthan itself published Rao Bahadur M.W. Pradhan's book 'A glimpse of Indian spirituality' but it ran upto only about 25 to 30 pages and set out just a handful of facts about Baba²³.

This list practically exhausts all attempts made hitherto to publish a biography of Sai Baba. A faithful and full account of Sai Baba's life based on a careful and critical study of the available material regarding his life and the incidents and anecdotes narrated about him by those who contacted him before and after 1918 is therefore urgently called for and will it is hoped be appreciated by his innumerable devotees.

The author has undertaken this work in a spirit of humility and as a true service of Sai Baba and in the sincere belief that Sai himself has directed him to undertake it. 'Obstacles and difficulties should not frighten us', says Bhartruhari. The most admirable of Sai Baba's charters is 'Why do you fear, when I am here?' This in itself is an answer to those who doubt and fear about the possibility of a successful biography of Sai Baba.

The arrangement of the work requires a few words of explanation. After giving as full and accurate an account of Baba's life, doings and teachings as can be gathered from the available evidence, the author has given a description of the various aspects of Baba and of the various functions which he performed. Further a sketch has been given of the more important disciples who contacted Sai Baba and benefited by such contact and of the circumstances which

attracted them to him. It will be seen that these disciples were mostly Hindus, though some of them were Muslims. In writing separate chapters about Sai Baba's doings and teachings and his disciples, it was inevitable that some teachings and incidents connected with the disciples might happen to be repeated more than once, but the author thought that it was better to allow the repetition so that each chapter may be complete and self-sufficient in itself rather than to leave the reader to go through the previous pages for the purpose of finding out references. As it is, the reader can take up any chapter and read it with interest and will not find himself handicapped for want of knowledge of the previous chapter. Further repetition is essential to ensure a deep impression.

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. "All things are possible to him that believeth". But faith is founded on experience and confidence is increased by tangible proofs. To create such faith and evoke such confidence. God or a God-man *Guru* has to confer wished for benefits on the disciple or devotee and the conferring of such benefits is the instrument with which God works. The less care a devotee has about his bodily or material comforts, the more perfectly he can carry out His will and programme. This book proves beyond doubt how Sai Baba took upon his shoulders the responsibility of looking after the maintenance, health and prosperity of his disciples and devotees.

The advent of Sai Baba was for the uplift of man-kind and a study of this work describing it will, shower upon the readers incalculable benefits both spiritual and temporal in this world and beyond.