

Two

Babas Earliest Period

The birth and parentage of Sai Baba are wrapped in mystery. We have not come across a single person who has any direct" knowledge of them. Sai attained his fame at Shirdi in the Bombay state by the end of the 19th Century when he was already grey. It is known that he was not a native of Shirdi. He was

very young when he first came there. In the beginning he left Shirdi off and on, and returned to it. The date of his first arrival at Shirdi cannot be fixed. A very old lady, the mother of Nana Chopdar, said in 1900 that when she was young she first saw Sai Baba at Shirdi, when he was a prepossessing and attractive lad without a moustache, probably in his early teens, and of, whom nothing was known. That so little is known about his early life proves that even then he was leading a secluded life, a real fakir not hankering after the good things of the world but concentrating his attention on higher aims. He was often in solitude, not infrequently under the well known margosa tree called the *Code neeni*, meaning that the leaves of one of its two big branches are not so bitter as margosa leaves usually are and as the leaves of the other big branch are. He had no fixed residence - real *fakirs* have none. He would roam about in the fields and squat at any tree-foot, and had no interest in any worldly matter. One of his later visits to Shirdi, probably the final visit, was on the momentous occasion of Chand Bhai Patel's advent to Shirdi. Chand Bhai Patel was a rich and influential village Patel or Headman, of Dhupkeda village in the Nizam's State not far from Shirdi. His wife's newpew was to be married to a bride at Shirdi, and so in 1872, he came in the evening or night with a huge procession and Sai Baba accompanied him on that occasion from Dhupkeda to Shirdi. After that time except for two months when he was under Jawar Ali Msulana, Sai Baba never left Shirdi but only made a few occasional visits off and on to the neighbouring villages of Rahata or Nimgam, from which he immediately returned to Shirdi. So his final residence was Shirdi from about 1872 till the end of his life in 1918. He discouraged questions on parentage, and gave mostly mystifying answers. On one occasion, he said, his father was *Purusha* and his mother was *Maya* or *Prakriti*, and that in consequence, he came in as the *Dehi* into this world of phenomena²⁴. At another time he said that his uncle had brought him to Shirdi from Aurangabad²⁵. On one momentous occasion, very late in his life, he revealed to Mahlsapathy²⁶ the interesting fact that his parents were Brahmins of Patri in the Nizam's State. Patri is part of Parvani taluk, near Manwath. Sai Baba added, in explanation of the fact that he was living in a Mosque, that while still a tender child his Brahmin parents

handed him over to the care of a *fakir* who brought him up. This is fairly indisputable testimony, as Mahlsapathy was a person of sterling character noted for his integrity, truthfulness and *vairagya*. All persons including Sai Baba, H.S. Dixit, and others held him in very high esteem, and none would doubt his veracity. Sai Baba occasionally showed his interest in Patri and Parvani when people from those parts came to him, by questioning them about the residents of those places. This does not take us very far. But this is practically all that we have about the birth and parentage of Sri Sai Baba.

But who ever his parents were it is quite important to remember that from his earliest infancy he had all the associations or dissociation or detachment a true *vairagi* or *jnani* should have. Having no parents or kinsmen, and being brought up by a *fakir*, he easily picked up his foster-father's *vairagya* and spiritual turn of mind²⁷. Even *that fakir* passed away within four or five years after taking charge of him. The *fakir* directed his wife to take the young child, Baba, and leave him in charge of a noted saintly *zamindar*, Gopal Rao Deshmukh at Selu. The appellation *Deshmukh* was not meaningless in the case of Gopal Rao but denoted an actual appointment as *Deshmukh* or Provincial Governor for Jintur Parganna, and the title or *sanad* of *Deshmukh* had been conferred on him by the descendants of the Peshwas. The exact date of the title cannot be discovered. There are ballads and some old manuscripts in the possession of Deshmukh's descendants which show that somewhere about the first quarter of the last century, the Peshwas recognised his military capacity which enabled him, Gopal Rao, to bring Jintur Parganna under his control with his own horsemen and other followers. Young Baba, left under the care of this Gopal Rao Deshmukh spent the best and the most impressionable part of his life at Selu which was the centre of that Parganna, and which had a fort and castle wherein the Deshmukh resided. The young boy was very greatly attached to his master, and the master in turn was deeply interested in the boy. Consequently the boy was with the master at all times, whether the latter was in the field or at *puja*, whether he was in the garden or in the court. Baba seems to have had no education given to him at any time, that is, no book study, and no masters either in the regional

language which must have been Marathi or Telugu or in any other language. But real education of the highest sort, he had in plenty. This Deshmukh, unlike many other Deshmukhs or *zamindars* of his times, was not a dissolute and sensuous person of brutal nature revelling in cruelty and violation of all moral rules or scruples. On the other hand, he was an extremely pious devotee greatly attached to Tirupati Venkatesa whose image he worshipped daily in his own castle. He was rich, and liberal, and patronised learning and piety. Hence an abundance of real education could be picked up by the young child Baba when attending on his master. This Deshmukh's worship of Venkatesa was not of the ordinary sort. He had direct communion with his *Ishta Devata*, and the guidance of that *Ishta Devata* in all His affairs made his life a-remarkable spiritual and temporal success. He maintained his political sovereignty against all odds, and the ballads of his time show that his regiment was greatly esteemed by the Peshwas whom he helped and feared by the Muslim Nizam whom he opposed. This Deshmukh, however, spent much of his time in holy pastimes. He went round visiting holy places, and at one of those places a remarkable incident took place showing his nature. He occupied, with his retainers, a haunted house. The original owner of the house had died and become a *Brahma-Rakshas*, who would appear suddenly at midnight and kill the occupants. But Gopal Rao, the devout worshipper of Venkatesa, was not afraid. He carried on the *puja* of Venkatesa and Saligram right up to the middle of the night. The evil spirit, dishevelled and hairy all over, appeared and demanded in a terrific voice, 'Who are you? How dare you come to my house?' Then Gopal Rao coolly replied that the statement that the house was his was a mistake when there was nothing in common between him and the materials making up the house. The spirit, infuriated, tried to approach him, though with some fear. Gopal Rao waited, and when the spirit came within a few yards, he hurled the *abhikshekam* water on the head of that spirit. At once this effected a marvellous change. The spirit fell down prostrate, and recited its past history and prayed that Gopal Rao should take possession of the vast hoards of wealth which the spirit had made when alive and which it had kept in the house and watched over and to utilise all that; to release it from its

Brahma Rakshas state. Gopal Rao agreed, and carried away the treasures to Kasi where he performed the requisite rites for the liberation of the *Brahmarakshas*.

Another noteworthy incident in his travels²⁸ was at Ahmedabad. There at the tomb of Suvag Shah which he approached, a remarkable incident occurred. The tomb actually perspired with joy and spoke to him. It stated that Gopal Rao was formerly Ramananda of Kasi and that now he had become a *grihasta* and a ruler but all the same, his former devotee Kabir would be coming to him soon. It was after this, that young Baba was brought to him by the *fakir's* widow, and Gopal Rao recognised him as Kabir.

Amongst the influences that mould the character of young boys, perhaps the strongest is that of the father or the -mother living with them, and shaping their mind from hour to hour. Baba had no mother or father to mould him but he had first a foster father, the *fakir* and next a master who ultimately became his *Diksha Guru*. So, the nature and character of Gopal Rao Deshmukh must first be understood to know how Baba's nature and character developed. This Gopal Rao, though a *zamindar* or rural chieftain of ancient days maintained a character and reputation unattained by any other *zamindar* of his time. One incident in his life illustrates this point. One evening as he sat on the ramparts of his fort, it was quite dusk, and in that half darkness, a fair damsel of some twenty years came very close to the ramparts on the ground level, and thinking that there was nobody, sat down and exposed her body. Seeing a nude usually provokes lust. Others in his position would have immediately ordered some one to go and carry away the damsel and bring her for their gratification. With Gopal Rao the sinful impulse lasted only for a moment. His conscience rebelled, and he at once thought of Venkatesa and appealed to him for forgiveness. He viewed every woman other than his wife as really in the position of a mother to him. *Matruvat Paradarmscha* says the *niti sloka*. That is, no lustful thoughts should be directed to any person other than one's wife. So, treating this lustful thought as an enormous sin, he rapidly went down to his worship room, and there, before his *Ishta Devata's* image Sri Venkatesa, he repented with bitter tears this momentary

lust, and then resolved to punish his eyes for having cast lustful glances at a mother, which is nothing short of incest. He at once seized two sharp needles and poked his eyes with them. Blood issued, and he moaned. His relations soon came up and noting the fact, blamed him for the folly of losing his eyes for such a trivial matter. As his eye sight was absolutely essential for guarding them and the Jintur Parganna from the Muslims, and as they were necessary also for purposes of worship, his *Guru* asked him to pray to Lord Venkatesa for recovery of sight. Accordingly he prayed and recovered sight. The fame of his purity, nobility of character and ability to draw Venkatesa's power for curing ailments, spread abroad. Blind people and others came to him, and his very touch was curative. To a woman born blind, he applied chillies to her eyes with Venkatesa's name on his lips. This cured her and restored her sight. This incident, therefore, shows the nature and characteristics of Baba's *Guru*, Gopal Rao Deshmukh. In his highest moments of absorption, Gopal Rao uttered words which were the words of Venkatesa. He became one with Venkatesa at that time. So Baba always referred to his *Guru* as Venkusa, a contraction of Venkatesa. Perfect chastity, thorough self-control, invariable rectitude, perfect truthfulness, generosity, and serviceability to all which were the leading characteristics of his *Guru* became - transplanted and took deep root in the disciple, Sri Sai Baba.

We shall next proceed to narrate how the full personality including curative power, descended from the *Guru* to Baba.

Baba's being favoured by the Master evoked considerable jealousy amongst the *Guru's* retainers and some of them resolved to kill young Baba by hurling brickbats at him. During a *chaturmasya*, between August to November, Gopal Rao was in the garden and young Baba was attending upon him. The villains hurled bricks at Baba. One of the bricks came very near Baba's head, but the *Guru* saw it, and by his order it stood still in mid air unable to proceed further or hit Baba. Another man threw a second brick to hurt Baba. But Gopal Rao got up and got the brick on his head. This led to profuse bleeding. Baba was moved to tears, and he begged his Master to send him away as the Master was getting harmed from his unfortunate company. But the Master declined to send him

away. As for the injury, the Master bandaged it with a shred torn from his own cloth, and then suddenly said, "I see that the time has come for me to part with you. To-morrow at 4 p.m. I shall leave this body, not as a result of this injury, but by my own *yoga* power of *Swechcha Marana*²⁹. Therefore, I shall now vest my full spiritual personality in you. For that purpose, fetch milk from yonder black cow". Young Baba went to Hulla the *lambadi* in charge of the cow, who pointed out that the cow was barren, had not calved, and could not, therefore, yield milk. All the same he came with the cow to the chieftain Gopal Rao who just touched it from horns to tail and told the *lambadi*, 'Now pull at the teats.' The *lambadis* pull drew out plenty of milk and this milk was given to Baba with Gopal Rao's blessings that the full power and grace of the *Guru* should pass on to young Baba. This was the *Diksha*, the investiture of the *Guru's* personality, which young, Baba underwent. So far as mystic powers were concerned, immediately an opportunity arose for proving the transfer of power *Saktinipata*. The villain whose brickbat had hit Gopal Rao, the Chieftain, fell down dead, the moment Gopal Rao was hit. His companions were horrified, and they came with repentance to Gopal Rao's feet and prayed for pardon not only for themselves but also for their dead companion whom they requested Gopal Rao to revive. The Chieftain pointed out that the power of revival³⁰ now rested in the young man, and that they should appeal to him. They accordingly appealed, and Baba took some of the dust of his *Guru's* feet and placed it on the corpse. The dead man arose at once.

The *Guru's* declaration that he would pass away the next day from this life into the beyond, was fulfilled. After making the fullest preparations for settling all his temporal affairs, Gopal Rao with his full consciousness sat up in the midst of a religious group carrying on *puja*, *bhajan* and *nama smaran*, in the presence of his *Ishta Devata* Sri Venkatesa and at the solemn hour he had himself fixed for departure, his soul left in perfect peace and happiness like Parikshit in Srimad Bhagavata. Before leaving the body, the Master waved his hand westward to the young boy, and bade him leave Selu and proceed westward to his new abode. Shirdi lies on the banks of the Godavari due west of Selu, and Baba by slow

degrees moved on from place to place and arrived at Shirdi and after sometime made it his permanent residence.