

Babas Earlier Years at Shirdi

Baba's earliest years at Shirdi were passed in complete obscurity³¹. He was a poor *fakir*, whose name itself was not known, Sai Baba being merely a term of respect applied to wandering hermits of the Muslim faith. Very few incidents, therefore, of this period of his life are known. But such as are known are all significant as proving that Baba was a real *fakir* of sterling merit. Baba himself has observed³² that *fakirs* also are now seldom dispassionate, that is possessed of *vairagya*, and it is hard to find a *good fakir*. Baba had no home. *Fakirs* have none. Hermits are, therefore, to reside either at a tree-foot or *chavadi* or temple or other public places. When he came into Shirdi, Baba visited Khandoba temple at the outskirts of the village, and noting how solitary and calm a place it was, exclaimed, 'What a nice place this, for ascetics like me to live in.' Mahlsapathy, the man then in charge objected to this observation and said that no Muhammadan would be allowed to put his foot into the Khandoba temple. He was evidently thinking that Baba was a Muslim and that he would break the images and defile the temple. But Baba was just the opposite.

He had the same regard for temples and mosques, always wanted people to carry on their religious faith in their accustomed ways, and would never hurt the religious susceptibilities of any person. Baba, noting Mahlsapathy's attitude, left the place, and went to the *gode neem* tree which he used as his halting place off and on. He went about the village and the surrounding lands and had no particular arrangements for food. Luckily the village head, Ganapat Rao Patil Kothe and his wife Bayaji Bai, were greatly attracted by Baba's personality, and from the very beginning of his stay there, they undertook to feed him - even when he was running about. Gradually he gave up roaming and then went about the streets, halted at four or five places and from there collected whatever food was brought to him. For his stay and sleep, the dilapidated mosque of the village was

the only place, and it soon became his residence. He was never for wholly deserting society and living in mountain caves and deserts.

In his earliest days, even up to 1890, Baba had a youthful love of art and music, and at night he often went to the Takia, the resting place for visiting Muslims. There he would, with his very sweet and appealing voice, sing songs mostly of Kabir or songs in Persian or Arabic, which the local people could not understand. He tied tinklets to his ankles³³ and danced about in joy while he was singing his songs with rapt devotion. Baba's attachment was to *Allah*, or *Hari*, that is to a Personal God. But the impersonal *Nirakara* whom the mystics including Kabir sang of in their songs, had also seized his heart. As he mentioned several times³⁴ long years later, *Sakara* must necessarily have a strong appeal to youth as it has to the mass of mankind and he never lost sight of the *Sakara* or Personal God in his worship and songs. General speaking his worship was mostly mental³⁵ and he went through no external forms. He seldom performed the five *Namazes*, never bending on the knees and rising, as most Muslims do. He was an adept in concentration and he had reached the perfection of *Manolaya* on the *Atman*, the merger of the self in the Self. That is why he could say as he did. *Maim Allah Hum*. I am God. His worship never took him away from his social contacts with his neighbours, in relation to whom the key-note of all his thought and activity was service, absolutely selfless service.

At times when he was not absorbed in contemplation, he went about meeting people and noting their ailments. He picked up herbs or got cheap drugs from shops and with their use cured the villagers of their bodily illness. His knowledge of medicine and surgery appears to have been extraordinary for he cured not merely snake bite but also leprosy with snake venom and rotting eyes with *Bibba*, that is, washerman's marking nut³⁶ as an antiseptic alkali. He pulled out the rotting eye balls of some patient, washed them, applied *Bibba* as a caustic and replaced the eye balls and the disease was cured. He never accepted any payment for his medical or other services. He also rendered other kinds of services. He ploughed up the village common land, the very land on which his *Samadhi Mandir* now stands, and raised a flower garden thereon. He

watered the plants, carrying pots full of water on his own shoulders. He distributed the flowers and leaves freely to various Hindu temples and to Muslim holy places and never made any invidious distinction between Hindu and Muslim places of worship. From his supreme realised state, differences of caste, creed, position and learning, were nonexistent or meaningless. All persons were children of a common father or mother, and he felt a motherly or fatherly interest in all of them and helped them. So, he expected and accepted no recompense.

This is all the history of the early years of Baba. There might have been an incident or two remembered by some of the villagers about his early years, but they do not deserve mention in a serious biography. We shall proceed to mention how this obscure *fakir* grew into Sainath Maharaj, a well recognised *Samartha Sadguru*, possessed of the most extraordinary superhuman powers with a very large following of people of all classes from the highest to the lowest and from all places, from Bombay to Hyderabad, from Konkan to Ahmedabad, and finally from all over India, and how the worship itself was developing its forms and accessories as also its application to the highest purposes of individuals and the Indian Nation and how it promises to help humanity.

When he was an unknown *fakir* he was practically ignored and treated by most of the villagers as of no account. Suddenly one day an incident occurred which brought a thorough change in the situation. He always had his Mosque, wherein he lived, lit up with three or four -earthen lamps, according to the view common to both Hindus and Muslims that places of worship should be lit up at night. So, he went round begging for oil from the *Vanis* or, oil mongers. There were only two such shops and they supplied him with oil, gratis. The oil pressman also supplied him with oil. One day it struck these people that either they should make Baba realise their importance or should have some fun at his expense and they told him mockingly that they had no oil. Baba had to return to his mosque with his oil tin pot empty. It was already dusk. The *vanis* and *ganamdar* came behind him to see what he was going to do in the darkness and thereby to have some fun. Baba took some water from the water jar³⁷ and shaking up the little bit of oil sticking to the tin, drank it up. Then he too pure,

aqua from the water pot and filled his four earthen lamps with it. He placed in each of them a cotton wick and struck up a match and lighted it. The spectators thought at first that cotton soaked in water could not possibly be lit up. But to their great surprise, the lamps were lit up and went on burning the whole night³⁸ After a little time, consternation seized the guilty *vanis* and *ganamdar*, and being terribly afraid that Baba, having shown himself to be a man of mystic power, might curse them just as Viswamitra cursed Rambha and Konkanava killed a crane with a glance, fell at his feet and prayed that he should not curse them. Baba was the exact opposite of what they thought. He was not a magician resenting contempt and anxious to seize an advantage. On the³⁹ other hand, Baba was more like the *Bhikshu* Monk in *Bhikshugita*⁴⁰ and had a true motherly heart, and noted that these men now repenting were in the proper mood to receive instruction to alter their conduct, and he gave them wholesome advice which was what they needed most. First he asked them, 'You really had oil with you when you said you had none, eh?' They admitted that they had uttered falsehood. Then Baba told them never to utter falsehood. Falsehood displeases the God of truth. There was, therefore, no necessity for Baba to curse them. Next he pointed out to them how unsocial and wicked their conduct was. The lights were needed for the use of all who visited the mosque and the public would be inconvenienced if there were no lights. He asked them if they had not come to the Mosque to enjoy the pain which they expected him to endure while remaining in darkness. They admitted the fact. He then pointed out that persons who took delight in others' miseries instead of sympathising with them would be punished by God. God is mother to all and loves all equally. If you hurt a child and tell the mother that you have hurt the child, will the mother be pleased? Thus they had displeased God by coming to rejoice in his miserable plight or supposed miserable plight in the absence of lamp oil. He asked them never again to take pleasure in other's distress, or in the words of W.W. Wordsworth "never to blend our pleasure or our pride with sorrow of the meanest thing that feels". They promised. Thus, after giving them excellent pieces of advice, so badly needed by

them and by many people now, he dismissed them from his presence. The effect of this incident was marvellous.

The contemptible *pagal fakir*, as they called him, was turned overnight into the hero or the weird magician or the holy *Sadhu* of the place. Before this, Mahlsapathy and his two friends Tukaram Darji and Appa Bhil had been perhaps the only persons to worship him. Now other people also began to flock to his feet and worship him as a Divine Saint or God, much against his will, with waving of lamps, throwing of flowers and coloured rice over him and offers of fruit and sandal. However strenuously Baba tried to prevent his being worshipped as God or a Godman in the Mosque, he could not stem the tide of popular frenzy. They presently declared he was their God or Godman sent to bless them. It was thus, the *pagal fakir* became the God or Godman of Shirdi.

Such a change could not continue for long without obstruction. Worship of anything except the Impersonal God in a Mosque is forbidden by the Koran, and the Muslims, though few and poor at Shirdi, raised their protest against such worship. He himself might have felt at first the incongruity of his being worshipped at all and next the worship being carried on in a Mosque by the mass of Hindus to the accompaniment of all that Hindu worship implies, that is, the din, the bustle, the noise, the music, and the sacred rituals all of which would be totally unwarranted in a Mosque. Even his being debauched with sandal paste would strike any Muslim as extremely unorthodox and reprehensible, Abdul Rangari of Thana when visiting Baba noted that sandal paste was being applied by the Hindus to his forehead, and he told Baba, 'What is this? The Hindus are applying sandal paste to your forehead. This is not the custom among the Muslims.' Baba had to appease him by pointing out that he had to bend to circumstances. Baba's words were *Jaisa Desh Aiyas Vesh*. This means, 'While in Rome do as the Romans do'. Baba also told Rangari that he himself was a devotee of Allah. But if the Hindus wished to please themselves by worshipping him, why not allow them to do so? To other similar objectors Baba pointed out that if Hindus worshipped a Muslim in a Mosque⁴¹ then there was no loss to Islam but only loss to Hinduism. That seemed a very plausible argument and

contented many. But some were still dissatisfied with the *puja* that was being done to him, and some of the more vigorous opponents of his *puja* went to consult the Sangamnare Kazi for finding a remedy. That Kazi found that the only chance of obstructing this heterodox *haram puja* was by threat of force. The Hindus were no doubt the majority in the village, but the actual worshippers were only a handful, and a few muscular Muslims, standing at the entrance to the Mosque, and threatening force could stop this *haram*. Accordingly a very stout, muscular, powerful and well-built Muslim by name Tambuli and four or five others went up to the entrance to the Mosque and stood there with clubs one morning. The chief worshipper Mahlsapathy was a very slim, meek, and apparently cowardly sort of person, and they hoped to stop his *puja* by their threats. Tambuli went and explained to Mahlsapathy the exact position, namely, that he ran the risk of being clubbed by the Muslims if he entered the Mosque and applied sandal paste to Baba. Mahlsapathy in his great shock and grief prayed to Khandoba and hit upon an alternative. He went upto the compoundwall of the Mosque and without entering into the Mosque, used all the *puja* articles that he had brought on a plate, for worshipping a part of the compound wall itself into which by *Avahana* he invoked Baba. After such invocation or *Avahana*, he went on applying water, flowers and scents to the wall. Baba noted this and asked him what he was doing, Mahlsapathy explained that the Muslims there threatened to beat any one who would enter into the Mosque and worship Baba with sandal paste. Then Baba judged the situation very correctly and said, 'Come in. Go on doing your *puja*. Apply your sandal paste here, there and anywhere. Let me see who will beat you'. So saying he dashed his *satka*, a short club, which he had in his hand on the ground with such a thunderous sound that the few Muslims at the entrance trembled. They found that they would have to reckon with Baba himself if they wished to pursue their plan, and Baba, individually and physically, would be more than a match for them. Besides, Baba was a weird personality who could turn water in oil, and they had therefore still greater fear in trying to oppose Baba. So they considered discretion the better part of valour and retreated quietly. Mahlsapathy entered and carried on the worship.

Mahlsapathy feared that they might attack him on his way back home, and he told Baba of his fears. Baba then gave him the assurance that not merely these, but any others who would come to attack him not merely at that time but at any other time in any other place, and not merely in *this janma*, but in *future janmas* also, could do him no harm and Baba would see to it. Thus assured Mahlsapathy who finished *his puja* and was not molested. Thus all joined in Baba's worship.

Thus the first impediment was removed. The second impediment is more interesting. Baba had both Hindu and Muslim features in his body and in his actions and practice, and, his mission in life was to unify Hindus and Muslims into one compact mass with common religious, spiritual and worldly interests. As he had a Hindu *Guru*, namely, Gopal Rao Deshmukh alias Venkatesa or Venkusa, he was considered fitted to guide his Hindu followers. In order to guide his Muslim followers, initiation into Islamic scripture by a Maulana was essential according to public opinion. So, his destiny had to be fulfilled by his getting a second *Guru*, a Muslim. Jawar Ali Maulana was a distinguished Maulana of the last century, residing for some time at Rahata. He had extraordinary ability and learning, but had disagreed with his Rahata followers. He came to Shirdi and noted that Baba had a large Hindu following who worshipped him at the Mosque. He called upon Baba to come out of the Mosque and asked him whether he knew the Koran and the Shariat. Baba had learnt neither. So Jawar Ali Maulana ordered him to accompany him to Rahata and there Baba was living with this *Guru* for about two months. The *Guru* initiated him into the mysteries of Islamic spiritual literature. Baba did humble *seva* to this *Guru*, carrying water pots, fetching faggots, lighting up fire, doing hard physical work which others would complain of. But in the case of Baba, he accepted his position as the *sisya* of Jawar Ali with perfect sincerity and underwent with sweet complacency⁴² all the ordeal and the course of training given to him. The villagers of Shirdi headed by Mahlsapathy who were very anxious to have Baba back again permanently settled at Shirdi requested the Maulana to allow them to take Sai Baba with them. This was agreed to by the Maulana on the condition that with Baba he also should be taken to Shirdi, and that both he and Baba should be fed and

supported by the villagers of Shirdi. So both came and lived at the Shirdi Mosque. Some time later, Jawar Ali was drawn purposely into a dispute with Devadas, a noted Hindu saint living in a *chavadi* at Shirdi, and Devadas's questions cornered **Jawar** Ali. The latter had to make so many admissions that the surrounding spectators were moved to laughter. Jawar Ali resenting this humiliation left Shirdi and did not return there for long years to come. Baba's worship at the Shirdi Mosque went on and gathered strength. What appeared as the second impediment tended only to increase the devotees' attachment through *Viraha* and admiration and helped Baba's mission. It must be noted here that the worship mentioned here is individual worship, each one going to Baba and placing flowers on his feet and treating him as God, *Avatar* or *Guru*. Baba followed the rule for *Jnanis* "Avoid honours as poison. Ever welcome indignity, as nectar". *Manu smriti*⁴³