

**Seven**

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## Worship, Its Further Expansion

We have stated so far how the worship of Sri Sai Baba expanded and assumed vast proportions during his lifetime. This however did not stop with 1918 but continued to expand further and further, not merely as to the forms and modes of worship but also in respect of the populations and areas covered and further extended in its inwardness and heightened its results. In describing the *post-Mahasamadhi* developments, and the introduction of Southern modes of worship the spread of Sai faith to all parts of India and beyond will be dealt with more fully. One feature of present day worship will be noticed by any one touring the Indian States, and that is the fact that there are over a hundred institutions named after Sai, carrying on Sai *Puja*, Sai *Bhajan*, Sai *Prachar*, often called Sai *Samajs* or *Sammelans*, *Bhajan* groups. Most of them have Sai *Mandirs*. A good number of decent buildings with suitable compounds sometimes with *gopuras* or towers are seen dotting the face of the country. In Madras City alone we have the Mylapore All India Sai Samaj Sai Mandir, the Guindy Sai Mandir and the Egmore Sai Mandir, At Kurnool, Coimbatore Ventrappagada, Tenali, and other places there are notable *Mandirs* attracting thousands to worship there. These are but the nucleus of what is to be, a tiny patch of cloud prognosticating the vast rainy clouds that will soon screen the sky and flood the whole country. Sri Sai Baba has ordained all this expansion.

Baba's gradual permission of his worship has been noted, and it has been specially stressed that Baba 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 India's national problems of communal and religious unity as *Sarva loka malapaha*.<sup>65</sup> In India we have not merely Hindu and Mohammadan divisions but various subdivisions of religion, among the major communities also. In their ideas and modes of worship they differ widely from one another. Till recently, religion meant differences between group and group and, therefore, mutual conflicts, preventing the unification of India or even of Hinduism, urgently calling for its purification and unification<sup>66</sup>. Sri Vishnu and Siva conflicts have been going on for centuries. Also Hindu-Muslim conflicts. To

Akbar must be given the credit for trying to solve the problem of religious disunity in India by using his powerful position and influence to unify and consolidate the two chief religions, namely, Hinduism and Islam, by making the representatives of both gather at one place to worship the common father of all, *Din Ilahi*, Akbar's attempt though slightly successful during his days, perished with him. His successors did not take up the idea and some of them took up the opposite idea of oppressing the non-Muslims with a view to inducing them to embrace Islam -Aurangzeb being the most notable of such successors. What Akbar tried in the region of statesmanship and politics was attempted in the field of literature and religion by Kabir, Guru Nanak, and others, and they tried to establish the bedrock of ideas on which Indian unification in religion could be accomplished. Each had some degree of success, but even their efforts fell short of that completion and perfection which we shall find in Baba's performance Sai Baba declared on one occasion that in a former *janma* he was Kabir, and it may be noted that Baba, as Kabir, was suiting the narrow views of former centuries, while Baba of the 19th and 20th centuries had broader views and more efficient means of reaching unity. Kabir brought under his own leadership Hindus and Muslims who gave up former labels and were called Kabir *panthis*. But a little later, a short time after his demise, the spirit of division came in, and there were Hindu Kabir *panthis* and Muslim Kabir *panthis* separating each from the other. Guru Nanak also accomplished the same remarkable feat in bringing Islam and Hinduism closer to each other. But the Sikhs, who now represent the fruits of his labours, cannot provide any basis for the religious unification of India. Sai Baba fully grasped the difficulties of the problem. 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 super-human powers combined with even-minded beneficence were so patently manifested that all alike, Hindus,

Muslims and Christians, 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 watermark of saintliness, or Godliness or God head and they willingly made him their *Gurudeva* and protector. Some of them treated him as their god. The result was that Sai, by allowing his worship to be done at the Mosque by different people with varying sets of ideas, was drawing all to Mysticism, the common essence of all Religion and thus building up, by a slow but inevitable process, a united community engaged in common worship which ultimately could include at least the whole of India. Sai devotion means tolerance towards all, faith in God and in Sai as *Guru*, and the acceptance of the basic principles found in all religions. These factors were stressed by Sai Baba from time to time and many a time. Sai allowed the Hindus to adopt their puranic method of worship and treat him either as an *Avatar* or *Ishtadeva* or a *Gurudeva*, 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. All alike noticed that Sai was the soul of love and purity, and a storehouse of superhuman power and superhuman enlightenment. It is such a person that has succeeded in drawing the otherwise jarring and warring sects into a peaceful flock of Sai devotees. When his *puja* is gone through during the day time with all the din, bustle, and formalities of *mantras* and rituals of Hindu worship in the Mosque or *Dwarkamayee*, the Muslims do not interfere. When the Muslims on *Idga* Day have their rituals or prayers at Baba's Mosque, the Hindus do not interfere. During the day, Hindu *puranas*, *Tukaram gathas*, *Ramayan*, *Vedas*, were being read or recited and at night the Koran or *shariat* was read or repeated either by Abdul or by a person known as the *Rohilla* or by some other person, offerings brought to Baba were distributed by him to all after *fatia* was pronounced in true Muslim fashion. Though Baba did not himself perform the five *Namazes* every day, he encouraged the orthodox Muslims to do so at his place. Baba was displeased and showed his anger when any religious intolerance was exhibited. On one occasion a devotee came up and deplored the fact that the newly

appointed *Foujdar*, that is, Police Sub-Inspector at Ratha was neither a Hindu nor a Muslim but a Christian, Baba's immediate reply was, 'What of that? He is my brother'. Again, H.S. Dixit, though generally observing all propriety, once fell into the unfortunate mood of decrying Christianity and Christ when talking at his quarters with some others. After that, he went up to Baba to pay his respects. But Baba severely said "Don't come near me". At once Dixit felt that, by decrying Christ and Christianity he had offended Baba, and immediately he repented. It was only thereafter that Baba allowed him to approach him. Baba expressly declared<sup>67</sup> that when devotees were quarrelling amongst themselves, he was feeling great pain, whereas if they all put up with each other and pulled on amicably, he felt happy. In effect, his message was "Love ye one another even as I love you all". Baba's love and wonderful power of reading and controlling hearts was mainly responsible for the almost perfect concord between Hindus and Muslims that always reigned at Shirdi. In other places when a Muslim festival came on the same day as the Hindu festival, battles were fought, and heads were broken. But at Shirdi there was not a single occasion of a Hindu-Muslim class fight. When Baba's picture was carried in procession through all the streets including the neighbourhood of the Muslims, no one felt the least repulsion or objection. On the other hand, in front of, and behind the palanquin carrying his picture, Hindus and Muslims vied with each other for the honour of carrying various insignia of devotion, namely, whisks, umbrella and Maces etcetera. Baba distributed *prasad* brought by members of any community to all, and they were accepted by members of all communities. The chief point to note about Baba's unification is that there was no fixed book or doctrine to which he wanted all people to subscribe; and no fixed observance was forced on any one<sup>69</sup>. The main mass of the devotees were Hindus, and they carried on their worship of Baba at the Masjid with rituals based on the Pandharpur *Arti*. Their *bhajans* were full of allusions to Hindu mythology, but the Muslims who were present on such occasions were free to ignore all the above and simply regard Baba as their kindly disposed *Avalia-lheir* Guardian. Christians and Parsis also had the same freedom and they adopted whatever course they thought was

proper. There was no compulsion of any sort in the matter of religion before Baba. The common point was attachment through powerful love to the personality of a weird *Guru* who exercised all his vast and wonderful powers of seeing or knowing, everything everywhere and of even doing the impossible for the benefit of his devotees. Love, keenest and burning love was the means and the end. Love is really what every one wants, with relief from distress and attainment of desired objects. At Baba's feet they were obtained by any person-Hindu or Muslim, Parsi or Christian, and the question of a difference of religion did not arise at all as love to the *Guru* was the common plank of all, the other planks being different. To many a Hindu, Baba was identified with various gods or *Avatars*. Each man saw in Baba sometimes the very form of the deity that he wanted to worship. A South African doctor would respect none but Rama and did not care to approach a Muslim as Sai Baba was supposed to be. But when that South African Brahmin doctor came to the Masjid on the express stipulation that he would not bow to a Muslim Baba, he stayed for a few minutes outside and, afterwards, darted into the Mosque and fell at Baba's feet. When asked for an explanation, he gave the answer. 'I saw that Baba's form was really the wonderful form of *Nila Megha Syama Rama*. As I found my Rama in Baba, I worshipped him' and Baba later filled him with *Parama Ananda* and love. This is a typical instance. A Sub-Inspector of Police M.S. Nimonkar had regard for nothing except Hanuman, and when he was looking on, Baba appeared to his eyes exactly like Hanuman with all the hair and prognathous face. N.G. Chandorkar's relative Binnewalla did not care for anything except Datta, and was anxious to go away from Shirdi, where Baba was worshipped, to some place where Datta could be seen. Suddenly to his eyes, Baba appeared with three heads, that is, as Datta. Baba exercised these marvellous powers to induce faith in persons that approached him. Thus, he was Siva to Megha, Rama to the South African doctor and Madrasi Ramadasini, Krishna or Vittal to Krishna bhaktas, Maruti to Maruti bhaktas,

Ye Yatha Maam Prapadyante

Taams Tathaiva Bhajaami Aham<sup>70</sup>

Shirdi Sai Noon Arati Song says,

Jayaa Manim Jaisaa Bhaava

Tayaa Taisaa Anubhava

Davisi Dayaghana, aisii tujhi hi maava

Which means, According to the feeling or attitude of mind of each person, you give him experience of you. Such is your sport, merciful One. Thus, he really was God, that is, he had not merely God essence, Supreme Power and Love but also every form of God that the devotee wanted to see. As he was completely self-realised he could with perfect truth say Main Allahum, that is, I am Allah or God. When a Deputy Collector was gazing at Lakshminarayana's figure at Bombay and concentrated his mind on that image it disappeared and Baba's form took its place; the Deputy Collector was afraid that his concentration was a failure. But when he came to Shirdi, Baba knew what happened and asked him, "What is the difference between this form and Lakshminarayan's form? I am Lakshminarayan'. He showed in himself the form of Ganapati to others such as B.V. Dev's sister. He was all gods, because according to the *Sastras*, all gods are parts of God *Angani anya devatah*<sup>70</sup>. Baba had the complete realisation of the fullness of God-not merely of God forms, but God essence. He was *Sal Chit Ananda*. He had absolute freedom from attachment to all earthly objects and freedom from all those emotions which take persons away from God. Therefore Baba was best fitted to bring into a common fold all persons who had desires or objects that religion could grant through service at his feet and acceptance of him as the *Gurudeva* or guide. This work which occupied so many decades of Baba's life on earth has greatly developed since he cast off his earthly body. As Justice Mr. MB. Rege remarks in his foreword to Baba's Charters and Sayings. 'Now that the fleshy body is gone, he is to me only God.'<sup>1</sup> The fleshy body repelled many people who came to him because of their sectarian or other prejudices. Now when a person reads about Baba and notes the effect of prayer to him with full faith, the physical body of Baba, the Muslim appearance, is not there to repel him. Thus, his casting off the fleshy body in 1918 leaving thousands or tens of thousands bound to him by love and a system of worship by love, with the fame

of his *lilas* helped to continue his work and was a very useful step in carrying out and in perfecting his mission to unify all faiths by acceptance of him as the common *Guru-deva*, especially because the worship of, or prayer to, tombs of saints is practised by both Hindus and Muslims<sup>71</sup>. Kabir objected to images and image worship. Baba on the other hand allowed people and even directed people to go to particular temples to worship the images there and he presented *lingas*, *padukas*, coins, and pictures to devotees as fit-objects of worship especially his own pictures. These images too are needed to make the minds steady and concentrated in meditation<sup>72</sup>. These steps among others help to bring more into Baba's fold.

It is common knowledge that any one who pins his faith to Baba, regardless of castes or creeds and appeals to him, gets remarkable relief, and therefore, feels convinced that this Sai whatever he might have been by birth, parentage, or training, in his corporeal life, is now nothing but God, that is, the dispenser of desired things to those who want them and make the proper approach. So Baba is the God or the God-man to all Sai devotees. While unifying India on that basis, he is the granter to millions of individual devotees, of all their cherished or most ardently longed for objects.